

Climbing the Hill: 2 Weeks at the Institut de Français

by Dr. George F. Simons

Welcome to Villefranche-sur-mer, home of the Institut de Français. Villefranche is a town on the outskirts of Nice. It holds on tightly to a hillside that slopes at an acute angle to the sea. The Institut is an intensive language school about 500 steps up the hill where one can study, converse, eat, drink, sleep and dream in French. For its students, the Institut is a hard climb, not only to the classroom, but around the detours of bad habits, over stumbling blocks of grammar and accent, while threading one's way through idiomatic debris. I was one of them.

Eager to work more effectively with my French-speaking clients, I undertook to improve my ability to speak the language that I had loved and read for over 40 years - but had only occasionally spoken. For two weeks, I huffed and puffed my way to the twin peaks of the subjunctive and conditional tenses. I groped for a handhold on the French of homes and street corners.

Another climb took place, however, which, from a cultural perspective, was truly exhilarating. The students at the Institut, all adults, mostly studying French for their work in business or government, came from a wide variety of counties and cultures. Though many spoke some English, no single language connected us all, other than the French we studied. And, the rule of the house was "French only!" An unfamiliar language became the admission ticket to participating in the classroom, in conversations at meals and break times, for making friends and being accepted, and when the day was done for dinner in town and a nightcap at Chez Betty.

The result of this turnabout, of not being able to manage things with one's own native language, provided an excellent intercultural simulation. Power relationships, biases about other groups and cultural misunderstandings could be experienced in ways that most of us would rarely find elsewhere. We were all immigrants. Language was power. One's own language was a liability. Distinctions of nationality, age, gender, class, hierarchy on the job, etc., moved to the background of our interactions with each other.

Though intercultural awareness lies outside the direct objectives of the language school and were rarely discussed, they were constantly at work in the minds and hearts of the students themselves. I was surprised to find old layers of prejudice welling up. People from cultural groups whom we once learned to think of as lesser to our own in some way were managing in the culture better than ourselves or others we expected to be more adept. Though it was at first disheartening to find this sediment of old bias, it was a freeing experience to become conscious of and then let go of yet another layer of old judgements and feelings. Every day meant climbing above one's old patterns of thought and reaching for fresh connections with people different from oneself.

Being an interculturalist and diversity professional did not excuse me from culture shock, the surprise, anger and frustration and eventual coming to terms with needing to survive and succeed in someone else's environment. I found myself making friends with those who had similar learning struggles rather than with those to whom I was customarily drawn because of common ideas, feelings and background. We entered a vivid simulation of poverty, powerlessness, and the lack of connection and belonging.

Years ago in our small consulting organization, we had made the decision that if we were to do diversity training and intercultural work, we would have to "walk the talk." We made the ability to speak a second language a prerequisite for working in our organization. Our assumption was that only by going through the struggle to live in another culture on its own terms would one be ready to assist others in the process of awareness, acculturation and acquiring cultural competence. Learning a language is a sure-fire way to do this. We never backed down from this commitment in our hiring decisions. Climbing the hill once again, I know again and very clearly why.

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