

Michelle Phan

Crisis of Meaning Interview

Maddie is currently a junior studying at Suffolk University. She is twenty one years old. Last February, Maddie left the United States to study abroad for a semester in New Zealand. At the time, she was only twenty years old and did not know anyone else going. For five months, Maddie explored, made lasting friendships, and discovered more about herself than she could have imagined. When it came time to leave, Maddie realized how attached she had become to New Zealand. Coming back to the United States was painful, and it made Maddie wonder if New Zealand is actually where she belongs.

Q: Maddie, what made you decide to travel abroad? Why New Zealand?

A: I have always been fairly independent, and I wanted to test myself to see if I could handle studying abroad. *chuckles* I guess moving 8,000 miles away is a pretty big test... but I wanted to get out and explore. I have always been adventurous and loved the outdoors, so New Zealand seemed like the perfect fit for me. My mom is very earthy-crunchy too, so I think that played a role in my decision.

Q: That's great. Do you think by choosing New Zealand you were trying to make your mother proud, and keep her close despite the distance?

A: I definitely think some of my decision was influenced by my mom, but not in a dependent kind of way. I love my mom. I aspire to be like her. Being surrounded by nature reminded me of her, kept her close to me in a way. So yeah, New Zealand provided me with that.

Q: What were you feeling before leaving?

A: I think about this question a lot and it's hard for me to say. I was excited, definitely, to go somewhere new and make the most out of this opportunity. I was anxious, and a little bit scared, as it was 8,000 miles away and I wouldn't be seeing my family or friends for five months. I think mostly I was just open. I didn't give any specific emotion to the experience yet because I wanted to feel everything. I was open and ready for what was to come, whatever it was.

Q: Were you hoping to get anything out of the experience?

A: I wanted to explore. I wanted to release that part of me that I've never really been able to pay attention to because of school and work. I wanted to slow down and enjoy living.

Q: I bet New Zealand was the perfect place to fulfill that. Do you think you experienced what you were hoping to?

A: I experienced that and more. I have never felt more truly myself than I did in New Zealand. The combination of the scenery, the people, the pace of life, and studying abroad was enough to make me forget about the stresses of life and enjoy my time to the fullest. Everything was perfect, and I'm not saying that because it's over now. Even during my time there I realized how happy I was.

Q: That's a big realization. How did it feel coming home?

A: It was really, really hard. Before I left New Zealand sometimes I wouldn't even think about it. I didn't want to believe it was true. I got home in June, and until about September I was depressed... actually it was probably until December. I was sad for a while. I missed the friends I made, and my dorm room, and all the experiences that I would never have again. It's sad knowing something will never happen again. Even some of the friends I made I wouldn't be able to see for five or ten years, if that. It was a lot to deal with, and the purpose I felt I achieved in New Zealand was lost. I was back home. I felt ordinary. I went on all these adventures and experienced all these once-in-a-lifetime events, and now it was over and it would never happen again. I tried to go about my ordinary life, the one I had before I left, but I was different. It wasn't enough for me anymore. I wasn't ready to leave, and I definitely wasn't ready to go back to reality.

Q: Were you always aware of the trip's impermanence, or was it something you blocked yourself off from?

A: The last few weeks before leaving I definitely did not think about it, but the beginning wasn't like that. In the beginning, I kept thinking about going home in June, and how five months was a really long time. Then I relaxed. I stopped focusing on that and just took everything as it came. It wasn't so much that I was avoiding thinking about leaving, but my mind just wasn't on it.

Q: In what ways do you remind yourself of that time in your life, if at all?

A: It sounds weird, like I'm in mourning, but I've only just started to remind myself of New Zealand. I actually just bought the deodorant I wore while I was there, but for the

longest time I refused to buy it because I was afraid the smell would make me miss it. *laughs* I'm sensitive. *laughs* And the smell did make me miss it... but I was okay. It made me smile. One of my New Zealand friends recently came to visit, so that was really helpful in making me see that I can integrate New Zealand with my life now. The one thing I have yet to buy is TimTams... my favorite New Zealand candy. I'm working on it though.

Q: You seem pretty close to it to me. Thanks so much for your time, Maddie, and I'm glad that you've realized the depth and optimism in your experience.

A: Thank you. Me too.

Comments:

Maddie's case of realizing that true happiness is impermanent illustrates the Buddhist ideal that everything is temporary, even ourselves. Maddie states that she felt like a different person when she came back from New Zealand, and struggled with balancing her new self with her old life. Her attempt at fitting back into her old lifestyle shows that she did not previously understand the nature of impermanence, whereas now she does and tries to integrate her new perspectives.

Instead of initially trying to put her new life into her old one, the Taoists would say that she should be like water and go with the flow, and learn how to harmonize both within herself and her surroundings, much like she did in New Zealand. The non-action she exhibited in New Zealand with taking everything as it came has since been utilized at home, making her transition easier and more fluent.

In addition, Maddie tasted an Epicurean lifestyle when abroad, a simple life of nature and good company, relaxation and pleasure. She noted that she enjoyed the slow pace of time, and just that was enough to bring her happiness. Maddie's newfound definition of happiness has carried over from New Zealand, as the little things like buying deodorant and seeing old friends makes her smile. Although studying abroad in New Zealand left her lonely and depressed for some time, Maddie has since found ways to rise above it and use her experience to propel and influence her attitudes and perspectives from day to day.