

To the members of the Brown Travel Fund Board:

My name is Ziyang Huang and I was one of the Summer 2017 Recipients of the Brown Fund. I am writing to thank you for allowing me to experience a life-changing event.

As you may recall, I used my funds to take a theatre class in Athens. I wanted to go because I was passionate about theatre, but my parents stood in my way. They opposed me with the classic “art is useless and will only cause you to starve argument.” Still, I was determined to learn; at one point I was working two jobs in order to take acting classes off of campus.

When I received word of my award, I was relieved. Finally I could escape my parents (escape our entire continent, for that matter), and learn about theatre in a completely new environment. It would be fun, for sure, but what I cared about most was the prospect of traveling and being far away from anything that could hurt me. What I didn’t anticipate was just how much my view of theatre and life itself changed.

On my first day in Athens, I visited the Parthenon – a classic tourist destination – and everyone in my group was enchanted by its age and architecture. What struck me the most, however, is just how integral the theatre was to life in Greece. The Parthenon is a temple built on a mountain, but beneath it, there lies a theatre and then a bath. The purpose of this was simple: purify the mind through education (by watching the theatre), purify the body by cleansing it, and then one was worthy to ascend and worship the goddess. Theatre allowed the masses to understand and commit to the public good, while also providing an emotional cleansing through its highly elaborate stories.

I was floored. Today, most people (including myself) see theatre as only a form of storytelling, but its legacy is something that is less common knowledge. In Athens, I saw the theatre as a way of life, and through my studies, I discovered how it still influenced life in Greece today.

But beyond theatre, my mindset was also radically altered. I came from a highly competitive, STEM-oriented high school where every student was under pressure to “be doing something”: starting a company, getting a state or national award, scoring perfect on standardized tests, or even taking 10,000 advanced classes. Though I learned how to “play the game” – get good grades, brag about my achievements, make friends on superficial terms – I suffocated inside. I cried every day and felt very lonely.

When I came to college, I learned how to breathe all over again. Here, I could slow down and really think about why I wanted to do something. Our culture has this funny way of double-thinking all of us: though we’re told that we ought to study something out of love or passion, the reality is that we’re expected to study something marketable. We’re expected to look good on paper, not feel good inside.

To understand what it means to do something for its own sake: that was my mission. The Residential College has helped immensely in allowing me to complete my mission (though I’ve found that doing something for its own sake is less like a mission and more like an endless path, full of surprises both good and bad). Teachers and administrators have been incredibly generous in sharing their wisdom, time and energy, patiently encouraging me to break the mindset that I had lived for the first eighteen years of my life. Here I’ve found a way to explore theatre simply because I *enjoy it* – which is perhaps my greatest achievement in college.

However, the majority of my other experiences on campus involves watching a sea of students all engage in rushed meals, last-minute studying, attempting to juggle as many extra-curricular activities as possible, all while trying to get four to five hours of sleep a night. It is incredibly easy to get lost in this high-stress, achievement-oriented culture. Many students don't pause to consider their own purpose in life, their values, or even *their own happiness*. Being surrounded by such people creates the illusion that this is the only way of life. In my rational mind, I understood that the world is bigger and that purposeful people exist, but in my daily life, I was constantly bombarded by the opposing message.

Greece changed all of this. In fact, it was downright disturbing at first (my college contained a full-service, sit-down restaurant, which was the first clue that something was amiss). Meals could go for two, three, four hours. Classes had thirty minute long coffee breaks. Teachers didn't care for the curriculum; at first, it seemed like they were more into ranting than actually teaching.

But as the weeks flew by, I began to see the reality of what was being offered. This was an education system that developed individuality and students' minds rather than their ability to rote-memorized. We had to really consider our own purposes and know ourselves deeply in order to be successful students. We were actively encouraged to explore ourselves, both by the instructors and by the culture as a whole. People I met could readily (and passionately) speak about their success and failures as human beings!

Class participation was vital to one's success; debating one's teachers was actively encouraged. On the second to last day, I almost got into a fight with my teacher over the merits of collective punishment and he loved it! It was groundbreaking to learn in this new way.

In addition to that, the long meals and breaks meant that students were given time to naturally socialize with one another. I am very frustrated with classes at the university because they don't permit students to bond effectively and naturally with one another. Class-related social engagements are typically in the context of studying together or reviewing something. In Greece, the many breaks and meals allowed for spontaneous social interactions to occur. Bonds that I would have never formed in an American class flourished, and I really felt connected to my class as a whole. Slowing down also had another benefit: I could no longer overwork myself. I once scheduled my days into fifteen minute blocks, ensuring that each block was filled with something productive. I allotted ten minutes for breakfast, thirty for lunch, and thirty for dinner. I felt guilty if I took more time. Upon returning, I realized that I was the very definition of the workaholic, and I began to see the wonder in truly letting go of everything and relaxing.

My current goal is to return to Greece for a semester. Three weeks is just too short of a time, and there are many things that I left unfinished. I want to take theatre history in Athens. I want to understand more about Greek culture. But most importantly, I want to return because there's more that I can unearth about both myself in a humanistic culture that encourages individuality in learning.

Thank you for your support, but most importantly, thank you for changing my life.

Best regards,

Ziyang Huang

PS: below is a picture of me at the Theatre of Dionysus (beneath the Parthenon). It is the oldest theatre in all of Greece!

