

Transition Summer
Thoughts after Alumni comments
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I would really encourage you to focus this experience on something that really matters to you, that you're curious about, and that is unique. (Tierney Maray, 2017)

The more forethought you can put into how/when/where/why you would like to spend your time during the trip, the better. (Erin Convery, 2012)

I appreciate the time and care our Alumni took while reading and commenting on your proposals. They understand the possibilities in the Transition Summer more than we do on staff! Their own experiences gave them such helpful perspective, especially when they could specifically point to strategies that had worked (or did not work!) for them. Their feedback echoes many of the comments I shared on your proposals—only they said these things more articulately.

A few guiding principles as you look toward your final draft:

The Transition Summer is based on curiosity, commitments, integrity, and transformation—these are elements of Robertson leadership development.

- Be intentional. Have a plan/framework/structure/discipline well before you leave. Be clear.
 - Why are you doing this?
 - When (or how often or where) will you paint, write poetry, journal or take photos? We will expect you to set this out ahead of time.
 - If you're with others, how will you learn together?
 - Develop a reflection plan—reflection will take place throughout, not only at the end with an essay for the Program.
- Spend enough time to experience deeply and reflect.
 - This is not the summer to bounce around to lots of locations. If you go someplace far away, we'll expect you to spend a significant chunk of time.
 - Don't try to squeeze too many activities into the timeframe. Don't fill every minute. Don't rush to finish the hike or whatever so you can get on to the next thing.
- Prepare. Read about where you're going and what you'll be doing. If you're going to try something new (e.g., meditation), pursue some training ahead of time so you have tools ready.
- Work with your Coach! This is an opportunity for transformation for her/him/them, too.

It's hard to do this while you're finishing senior year. The Transition Summer is optional—you are the only one who can decide if you can commit to the necessary steps.

Below, I've shared selections from the Alumni feedback. The highlights are mine. They're loosely organized into two categories, but there's significant overlap with all the points I made above. There's a lot of text—just skim and see what speaks to you. --Vicki

Be intentional/Have a plan/framework/structure

A summer without a plan will prove infinitely less valuable than one in which you pursue activities that bring you joy and create that feeling of rejuvenation. Having time and funding to really reflect on what matters to you is incredibly rare; therefore, taking full advantage of the opportunity by developing a skeletal, yet well thought-out plan, is absolutely paramount. Even if your proposal offers some flexibility and room for traditional rest, I'd encourage you to think a bit more carefully about how you can combine your interests of relaxation, travel and art into something that could prove valuable for years to come.

While I understand the interest and desire to relax, ironically, I've always found that such an ambition has to be more structured. Otherwise, and as I've heard from a number of peers, they've felt as if they wasted their time and don't come away feeling nearly as rejuvenated as they'd hoped. As a result, I'm wondering if there are specific and more dynamic ways you find energy. For example, spending time outdoors has always been an important outlet for me. If I were thinking of a restful summer, I'd plan a number of hiking/backpacking/kayaking trips because I know that even if my body is tired at the end, my spirit will be rested and I'll be able to tackle the more familiar responsibilities of life. Is there something like that for you? Are poetry or other forms of art how you find new energy after a long day? If so, is there a program/seminar you could attend that would help refine these skills so that, as the stresses of graduate school emerge, you're able to stay more balanced and not become burnt out?

It's so easy for time to slip by when traveling – make sure you have specific goals for yourself or a plan for how you'll stay committed to the artistic expression you want to be practicing. Art is inherently creative, but artists also must practice discipline! For example, you could commit to bringing your camera when you leave your hostel every day, and commit to photographing at least two different scenes each day... something like that! I think it'll be easier to stay committed to the artistic expression piece when you're in nature, because there will be fewer distractions.

You might also want to make a commitment for yourself to spend at least an hour each day working on poetry, something like that! Not an externally imposed structure but an internally imposed accountability for prioritizing something that you already know is important to you and good for you.

It sounds like creating visual art (and journaling) is very important to you. Perhaps there is an opportunity to dedicate some of your travel time to this outlet - sketching buildings you encounter that highlight sustainable practices you are excited about, the view out of your train window, etc, which could act as a visual journal of your time in Europe.

I hiked to Machu Picchu as part of my movements through South America and that was the most meaningful part of my summer for me – I felt like it was less 'brave' at the time because it was a guided hike, something that theoretically 'anyone' could do – but in reality the structure of it helped me deepen my reflections. Some suggestions would be looking up routes that other travellers have done, framing your trip around a piece of writing, art, a question etc.

I'm seeing less about your last goal (some combination of spiritual/physical challenge, self-improvement, and connection with your heritage). Is there a guiding question rising to the surface around these things for you? What do you want to learn about yourself and why? Some ideas I have for getting a powerful experience out of this vaguer exploration:

- Build yourself a syllabus; read widely pre-summer, and with specificity during your travels. Consider choosing one essay, poem, or article to return to throughout the summer as a way of making new connections. I've been working through a personal research project on my Jewish identity and whiteness

and have returned many times to an Aurora Levins Morales poem and an Adrienne Rich essay on Judaism and freedom. Each time I reread them, I have new context from my own history to apply to them.

- What an incredible opportunity to return to ____, and I admire your decision to re-explore a place that matters to you rather than go somewhere totally new. How will you experience it differently this time? **Ask the questions before you go that will help you travel with purpose!** (I'm thinking of a trip I took to Philadelphia, where my dad and grandparents are from. Before I went, I asked my dad to help me build a map of places that meant something for their religious, class, and racial identities [their old rowhome, workplaces, etc.] and did a self-guided tour.)
- "Process" is the most important (will you have a journaling ritual? A set of questions you'll ask people on your travels?), but "product" helps transform process into meaning. Will you end up with a full journal? A zine? A map? A conversation with your family? Whether or not you plan on sharing your product, **it's important to have a structure and a goal for your reflection.** Another way to get at it is: how will you know when this particular sliver of exploration is "done"?
- **How can your collaboration with other scholars enhance this exploration? What questions are they bringing about their identities, connections to homeland/place?** Claire, Sydney, and I participated in each other's projects; I interviewed each of them, and we shared a lot of what we were learning informally. Being able to watch their explorations unfold was so meaningful for my own project – and, I wish we did this more deliberately! Along the trail, could each member of your group host a Dinner for 8-style conversation around your guiding question? What else could encourage this cross-pollination? If I could do it again, **I'd recommend going in with more structure rather than less; then you can keep what works and lose what doesn't.**

I think your instinct is a fantastic one, to use this opportunity to carve out time to reflect (and potentially write). For my exploration summer, I hiked el Camino with 3 friends and it was an incredible way to reflect. For me, **the secret to that reflection was structure (roughly pre-setting the pace, timing, etc.) to give me the mental space to not get wrapped in the logistics (where were we going next? how were we going to get there? were we running behind schedule?).** Giving myself structure and the freedom to let my mind wander was what allowed me to really make the most of the summer. **That said, my hope for you is that you find a way to give yourself a bit more structure so that you can take advantage of the mental space and clarity this time could offer you.** If you only have a few weeks, I would suggest thinking about what structure would give you the most space to reflect and recharge, as well as what could fire you up to bring you the most energy for the year ahead. **Could you do the trail and then settle in one space and take a writing class to reflect on the adventure and carve out time to build on your short story collection? Or could you identify 2-3 writers that you'd like to share ideas with for some mentorship?** In thinking about these options, how might your coach be useful? What perspective might he have on how you could spend your time? Full disclosure, I completely underutilized my summer coaches most of my 3 summers and regret it. They are such helpful people to bounce ideas off of and take cues from.

I was drawn to your comment about the meditative elements this kind of trip could offer. **Could you build upon a different element of meditation, or personal reflection on each stage of the trip?** Is there a specific way you could tie this to nature or animals? What would it look like to do this trip tech free? All questions for your consideration. Travel – admittedly with caveats – will be there at different phases of your life – what would this particular trip offer you at this moment in time?

Spend enough time

In my experience, **it takes at least a few days in each place before you're able to adjust or absorb the culture in any meaningful way.** If you're hoping to get a taste of all of these places in a way that gives you a real -- if not fast-tracked -- understanding of the culture, I would encourage you to at least spend 4 to 5 days in each location. If you embrace more of a sporadic, bouncy travel style -- especially at the start of the trip -- I've found I often am able to stay in my shell or comfort zone more easily because I'll only be in that place for a short time.

Being in a place for a bit longer challenges you to speak with locals to get information about the best places to visit/best coffee shops, find unexpected live music events, make friends at the hostel you're staying at, etc. I'd be a bit concerned that the amount of things you're proposing to do wouldn't allow for any sort of delay or missed train. That would definitely be something to think about with such a jam-packed schedule. One of the most effective ways to force yourself out of your comfort zone or "break your shell" is to successfully navigate those unplanned train delays, missed flights, etc. If you overload your itinerary, you won't have any time to explore or take advantage of spontaneous situations/opportunities as they arrive. What if, as happened to me numerous times during my exploration/launch summer, you want to spend an extra day somewhere? If you've packed your itinerary, you won't have that chance. Especially given your enthusiasm and interest in rediscovering adventure, that could be a huge missed opportunity. Plus, when else in your life will you have the chance to be completely autonomous in where you go and when? That was one of the things I enjoyed most about my own solo adventure in Europe years ago.

I think there is excellent value and opportunity for personal growth in a fast-moving, adventure filled summer. That said, an experience such as this is significantly less transformative if everything goes according to plan, you stick to a rigid travel schedule and you constantly bounce around from one place to another. So as to take full advantage of this last summer with Robertson support, I think it would be incredibly beneficial if you sat down and came up with a list of two to three places you'd like to visit and why. If you spent a week in each place before heading to _____, the proposal would likely be significantly stronger and the experience much more meaningful.

I'll offer that the single most meaningful attribute of my summer on the Camino was the length of immersion; I got to be doing just that for 35 days, an opportunity I may never have again in my working life! This immersion (and sometimes monotony) created the conditions for creativity, new approaches to the same questions, and new questions. Travel doesn't always leave room for the quiet mind it takes to reflect, process, integrate your learning. Find or construct this kind of time if at all possible (if not an extended trek, daily ritual is a good place to find it); it is so rare and so worthwhile.

As I mentioned in my comments to another Robertson, hiking is truly a great opportunity to reflect and hiking alongside fellow Robertsons is the best (I did the Camino with 2 other Robertsons in 2016!). Liv, Syd and I had very different approaches to the hike and what we wanted to get out of it (some more structured than others), but what was most important to me is that we were honest about how we were doing and were vulnerable about what we needed help with. I think the best advice I have to give here is just take the time seriously (in whatever way your instinct is telling you to). Be open about what is coming to the surface, and talk about it with friends that you care about and trust. That summer was a remarkable lesson for me in vulnerability and compassion, and I hope that it binds you together in the way it bound us!