

June 4, 2010

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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As part of a four-month Sabbatical leave, Jeffrey Frantz is currently living in Aix-en-Provence, France (140,000 people, thirty miles west of Marseilles), along with his wife, Yvette, and their five-year old chitz-a-poo dog, Niko. While in France, *Echoes of the Heart* will be comprised of his reflections and musings on a *Summer en Provence*. If you wish, you can follow his blog at <http://summerinprovence.blotspot.com>.

The popularity of *Petanque*. We have begun our fourth week here in Aix-en-Provence. Little by little, we are finding our way. We have discovered a number of wonderful city parks where the people come—mostly the young (college age, or thereabouts) or the retired—for respite, play and friendly conversation.

In *Le Parc Jourdan*, a group of mostly older men gather every day—from 1:30 p.m. on—to play a game called *Petanque*. It turns out that *Petanque* is *tres populaire* in the *Provence* region of France where we live. It’s played on a flat, mostly hard dirt-sand surface.

Similar to what we call *bocce ball*, play is initiated by throwing a small target-ball (the size of a golf ball) six to ten meters away. The players then throw the *Petanque* balls (about the size of a tennis ball), trying to locate them as close to the target ball as possible. The balls are fairly heavy with a smooth, silver surface. The best players are expert at launching the balls high in the air (ten feet or so) with back spin to aid the positioning, and at knocking the opponent’s balls out of position with accurate throws. You can apparently play with multiple players on a team and with multiple balls per person as well.

At the *Petanque* site we visited, most of the players were retired men (Word has it that the *Petanque* games get them out of the house). Like everything else in sports and games, the competition can become fiery and, clearly, there are pecking orders of talented and winning players. Being, historically, a competitive person myself, my son-in-law commented to my daughter, *This game would be great for your dad. He’d fit right in here.* We’ll have to see how things play out on that one.

Mussels anyone? About a week ago, on a tour offered by the owner of our flat (an interesting, entrepreneurial young man from Ireland), we lunched at a scenic, water front restaurant at the port city of Cassis, near Marseilles (more on Cassis in a later *Echoes*). Our guide recommended that we try a local, seafood favorite called *mussels*. I didn’t think anything about it when I placed my order with the waiter.

However, a short time later, when the *mussels* arrived (it comes in small, opened shells, resting in a delicious sauce), I was sure it must have been some appetizer someone had

ordered. Not usually a big fan of shelled delicacies, I was caught totally off guard. Much to the delight of my palate, it turned out to be a very tasty lunch, albeit an adventure of sorts with French cuisine.

In our preparation for our time in France, we had read much of the French passion for cuisine and wine. Thus far, we have not been disappointed. Eating seems akin to an art form here. People take it very seriously, and it is not to be rushed or reduced to an after thought. Meal time, of course, is the context for so much of the social discourse of a family or of a people. Clearly, the French seem to have this figured out and do well in this domain.

More days off? Who wouldn't want that, right? We all cherish our vacation and time off. Well, check this out!

The French have this *aspect* of French life called *faire le pont* (literally, *make the bridge*). *Making the bridge* means when you have a Thursday off (which apparently is fairly often, particularly given that in France there are reportedly some thirty-five national holidays), you simply *faire le pont* from Thursday to Saturday, taking Friday off as well.

What a deal, eh? A four day weekend that seems built into the fabric of French life. *Faire le pont* is actually in the *French-English* dictionary I've been using in France. To the French mind set, we Americans are *over the top* in our exhausting work schedules and routines. They may have something there. It would be interesting to consult with some of the local psychologists here to hear their reflections on stress levels in French society.

In any event, as the world turns in Aix-en-Provence. In the next *Echoes*, some musings on experiences with my French conversation *partenaires*, one of whom will be ringing my door bell sometime in the next half hour. A bientot from Provence!