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“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 Marseille), 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.blogspot.com>.

Conversation partenaires. With our goal of becoming conversational in French, early on we began to seek out conversation partners. By now (we’ve been here around six weeks), we’ve settled into a weekly routine of sessions with three very different French persons. They are all interesting and helpful to us in different ways.

The goal of the conversation sessions is for us to help them with their English while, in turn, they help us with our French. Even though the French—understandably—have great pride in their country, their history and their language (*l’esprit Francais* is legendary), still, fluency in English has great appeal to them. This is mostly because—increasingly—English is the international language. Hopefully, as Americans, this inspires a humble reaction in us while, at the same time, prompting us to learn other languages ourselves, as we are able.

Learning to speak French, for example (and it could be Spanish, German or Chinese), not only sends a positive message to the native speakers of the language but, more importantly, it opens up a whole new world to us. It expands our sensitivities, informs our cultural/historical awareness, and enables us to better navigate on a planet which, every day, becomes smaller and smaller.

Fabienne, a determined, professional woman in her early fifties, has a son, married to an American, and will soon be moving from San Diego to North Carolina. She’s very motivated to be able to carry on conversations with her *new* daughter-in-law and, in general, wants to feel competent in English when she comes to the United States for a visit.

Multiple times, now, she has picked us up in her compact, French car and driven us to her home—some ten minutes towards the outskirts of Aix—for three-hour conversation sessions. Like me, she tends to be intense and focused and I love her dedication and eagerness to learn. Her husband, who always greets us with a smile with his limited English, is for some reason a huge fan of Brazil and, every year—along with Fabienne—spends two months on the beaches of *Rio de Janeiro*, taking in the *joie de vivre* of the Brazilian people.

Nicole, a woman in her late fifties, has been teaching English in the public school system here for decades. Clearly, she knows a lot of English. However, as is often the case in the international world, she hasn't spent that much time around native English speakers and, therefore, wants to work on her accent and her *way* of speaking. Already, she's making lots of progress.

She has a nineteen year-old daughter who lives to the north, near the border with Germany. Nicole is particularly helpful to us because, given her knowledge of English, we can easily ask her for the French translation of virtually anything.

One of the keys to our conversation sessions is to do some prep work ahead of time—writing things out, for example, in French for them to review and correct and making a list of French words and phrases for them to explain and help us learn how to use.

Fabien, a young man in his late twenties, has met with us four or five times—for conversation, to be sure, but also to help us network with the local tennis world. In fact, when he took us in his car to the municipal club we recently joined (to meet an older friend who supposedly knows the local tennis scene), later, he joined the club himself (apparently, he used to play a few years back).

Fabien can say a fair amount in English but needs practice with his accent and with fluency. He has dreams of moving to the United States in the near future to work in the area of computers and high-tech.

Life goes on in Aix-en-Provence and now, with summer here, summer students and both French and international tourists will be filling the boulevards and plazas. A bientot from France!