

August 6, 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 has been living in Aix-en-Provence, France (population 140,000, thirty miles from Marseilles), along with his wife, Yvette, and their five-year old chitz-a-poo dog, Niko. While in France, *Echoes of the Heart* has been comprised of his reflections and musings on a *Summer en Provence*. Dr. Frantz returns to Miami Lakes the second week of August.

Final reflections. With our days in France winding down, some final reflections on our fourteen weeks here in Aix-en-Provence.

To begin with, the beauty in the *Provence* region of France is spectacular—nothing like I have ever seen. From the beaches along the Cote D’Azur, to the hovering mountains, and up and down the rolling hillsides, the beauty draws you in. Historic, quaint and adorable towns and villages built on hilltops; and below, rolling valleys and rich, verdant farm lands and vineyards.

Wherever you turn, there is an unmistakable sense of antiquity. *Roman ruins*, for example, are everywhere. Castle-like structures, fortresses, churches, amphitheatres, and endless walls for protection; all of these scattered elements greet you as you enter a new village—usually built, if possible, on a hillside or hilltop (for protection, no doubt, against possible invaders).

When you find your way to the town center, there are cobbled, narrow streets (sometimes eight to ten feet wide), steps, alleys and archways; and all built out of stone. The sense of history seeps through the mortar of these hand-crafted pathways.

In the valleys and lower areas, numerous times, we saw splendid fields of sunflowers and lavender plants, many of which have captured the imagination of famous artists and painters over centuries (Vincent Van Gogh comes to mind). The beauty and the aura of the region—of *Provence*—is truly *magnifique*.

The alluring *esprit de la France*. The spirit of the French finds modern expression in many forms—in the wine, the cheese and the bread. For the French, *cuisine* is a way of life. *Les Francaises* take their time when they eat. Although there is an occasional MacDonaldis or other fast-food place, they are the exception.

In France, they seldom rush you out of restaurants. Dining is a relational experience. The whole process takes time and to rush it would be unconscionable. And not only that, they are virtually all dog-friendly.

In many ways, the French approach to food and *rendez-vous* at the cafes slows the pace of life. It gives the human spirit a chance to breathe and stretch. It is at these gatherings, around food and drink, that life happens.

It is around many of these gatherings that we have enjoyed some our most fun and meaningful times during our special days here in Aix. These wonderful experiences with family and friends are a reminder of the importance of time—time to be together and to enjoy *l'esprit de vie*. The importance of having enough time to be drawn in to the moment, to not be forever “clock watching,” on the edge of rushing off to whatever commitment.

Parlez-vous Francais? Although French is not widely spoken in our country, it's incredible how much the French language has in common with both English and Spanish. Spanish, for obvious reasons; they're both romance languages. But English, as well.

To begin with there is an endless list of English-French cognates, words—stemming from the same root—many of which are spelled exactly the same. For example, the words *exact, passage, original, cause, force, excuse, capable, intelligence, fruit, visible, satisfaction*, to name only a few, are all French words. Only the pronunciation is different (and at times, almost unrecognizably so). Still, the list of cognates is a long one.

Moreover, almost without blinking, all kinds of French words and phrases fill our common discourse. At a concert, eager for another rendition, we say *encore, encore*. At the dining table, we say *bon appetite*. In the classroom, we're likely to hear *raison d'etre*.

When a government is overthrown by force, we say *coup d'etat*. In the celebration of daily living, we hear *joie de vivre*, and *je ne sais quoi*, or *esprit de corps*.

I still have a long way to go as a French speaker. But my special time in Provence has accelerated me to where, everyday, I'm more conversational. And along the way, new worlds open up, new friendships are made, and all of life is enriched. *C'est la vie!*