

INTRODUCTION

By James Clowes, Ph.D.

director, Comparative History of Ideas Program

Letters Home is a product of its time. Even as our world becomes increasingly interlinked through information technologies, travel and globalization, it is seemingly marked by increased tensions and misunderstandings. The events of the past year and a half have underscored the need for greater understanding. While the desire to simply fortify one's borders (whether politically, culturally or personally) is understandable, our long-term hope is to find ways to communicate across those same borders. To do this, we must dare to rethink why we have those separations to begin with. The students who have contributed the pieces in this journal have taken the effort to both travel and to seriously reflect on that travel in an effort to reexamine their own assumptions and biases.

Our era, although marked by great promise, also seems to have brought humanity to the edge of a great number of precipices. The following pieces demonstrate a willingness to face these issues as well as the way in which so many of these problems and concerns are also bound up in one's own perceptions and fears. Having stepped outside their zones of comfort and security, the contributors of these reflections chronicle that the people and issues of the world are both much more complex than expected, as well as strangely accessible. Having been able to make meaningful connections with people and places in a way they did not expect, they were also struck with how little they truly had understood.

For this reason, the volume underscores the educational vitality of such travel. One can connect deeply with people from radically different cultural contexts and yet, paradoxically, become aware of how little one really understands — of how much one could understand if only one could learn to listen. In this, then, one of the primary benefits of reflective travel is the realization of the limitation of vision; it is this accurate appraisal of one's understanding (sometimes called humility) that allows one to remain open to other voices and new positions.

This anthology records both the struggles and joys of this personal transformation. It highlights a vital possibility within higher education in this era of American dominance and growing fear in the aftermath of the events of

September 11, 2001. When students have a chance to interact with the people and the issues of the world (and then to reflect on that interaction), they can develop new structures for meaningful dialogue, as well as learn to make space for promising and competing world views.

In this first edition and in its goal to publish annual compilations, this project demonstrates a commitment to rethink, to engage with the issues of the world and with one's own perceptions, and to make space for new understandings. As *Letters Home* demonstrates, travel transforms through the wonder and disequilibrium of difference.