

Irish Coffee

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I sat in the middle of a sphere of exhaust, noise, and moist sea air. My pack was reclining next to me like a lounge singer, and I flipped through the pages of a coverless paperback I had picked up at a thrift store for 5p. Like the previous five weeks, words were my only friends. As the patches of sunshine tracked their way across the floor and faded to darkness, fewer and fewer busses pulled into the station in central Dublin. Knowing the last shuttle to Dublin International Airport left at 11:30 p.m., I wasn't worried about being left the last traveler in the station.

At 11:00 p.m., the shuttle doors slid open for the fifth time, and the same question was called out through the darkness and fumes: "Are you sure you don't want to catch this bus, miss?"

His Irish brogue mingled with the mist as I shook my head no. I had a date with an airport bench as my bed for the night, and I wanted to minimize the time I would spend there. I continued reading my book for the next half an hour and finally stepped aboard the bus. I prepared to be ignored, but the driver, a middle-aged man with red, curly hair, struck up a conversation. We passed the next twenty minutes swapping stories. Offering to give me some money to help with the trip home, he noticed I was broke and hungry. Instead we sat down for a chat over a cup of coffee. As we said our good-byes, I asked him why he had been so friendly.

"I have six kids at home, and my son is your age," he said. His ill-fitting bus driver's uniform rumbled from the long day's work. "Pretty soon he'll be travelling just like you, and I just hope that he meets someone like me."

As we parted, he pressed a tiny, green shamrock pin into my hand. "I just thought you needed one. It will always bring you luck and help you remember," he lilted.

So, what does this have to do with being a good citizen? For much of my university career, the only criteria I had for being a good citizen was donating blood at the Red Cross blood drives on campus. Simple, I know, but I did so as frequently as possible and considered myself involved. These ideas are inadequate now, and I want to lead a life where being a citizen, where caring about people, is as natural as breathing – a daily experience, not just a monthly appointment. This small, but crucial, experience changed what I had perceived my goal in life to be and led me straight into my present AmeriCorps position.

I am working as part of a team that seeks to improve literacy, provide health care coverage, and build homes for low-income families in my hometown community. My focus is helping to coordinate the Montana State University America Reads program, and I look forward to the upcoming year. Although everyday it becomes clearer to me that I must strive to become a citizen of a global community, much like my friend the bus driver.

It is amazing how, even four years later, a half an hour with a stranger over strong coffee and shared words completely altered my life's path, making it clear to me what being an active citizen means. An everyday bus driver has indirectly impacted school children in Montana. I still have the shamrock he gave me on that evening four years ago, and it serves as a reminder and provides motivation for the year to come. I wish I could press one into the small hands of every child with whom I place a volunteer.