Q: Members of our organization are committed to bridging cultures and sharing languages in and out of the classroom. As a result, most have significant experience living, traveling, and studying abroad and many are no doubt fans of your travel shows and guidebooks.

ACTFL members are often in the position of traveling with students abroad and helping young people experience new cultures for the first time. What advice would you offer to help more easily open up a new world to students when encountering a different culture?

A: When students are fortunate enough to have a foreign study experience and an escorted trip with a teacher, there is huge potential for learning and transformational kinds of experiences for a young person. But, on the other side of the coin, there is possibility for lost opportunity. The success of the whole initiative really hinges on how focused the teachers that accompany the group are.

In Europe, I see a lot of student groups that are sort of unfocused—and it breaks my heart because if they had an engaged and inspirational teacher, those kids would be forever changed. I know that language teachers are passionate about opening their students up to the world and it’s critical for them to expand their teaching skills to be good tour guides. A good tour guide connects people with people. To get students out there and engaged with the culture is quite an exciting thing. It doesn’t need to be going to the fancy museums or taking fancy tours; it could just be walking through a grocery store and observing little intimate differences between cultures.

Q: You often suggest that people get off the beaten path when traveling, so how do we facilitate this for our students?

A: Getting off the beaten path means that you can go to places that are obscure, or you can go to famous places and see intimate, “back door” sides of those places. Realistically, the students probably have an itinerary that takes them to famous places but you don’t need to limit their experiences to just famous things in the famous places. You know, if you are in Wales, you can go to a bingo parlor and have a plate of mushy peas and play bingo with a bunch of pensioners. If you’re in Vienna, you can go to an auction hall and see them auctioning off great art. If you’re in Barcelona, you can go out to the stadium and go to a soccer (“fútbol”) match. There are all sorts of ways that you can do things that locals do—and to me that’s part of the fun challenge. How do we become “temporary locals,” as I call it? I think it’s important to assume that people are just as interested in us as we are in them and so to create an opportunity for them to meet you and your students.

If I take a group to some sort of an outdoor festival where there are a lot of picnic tables and people eating and drinking, sometimes my group will think, “Oh, there aren’t 24 seats in a row for us.” No, I say, you sit at the picnic tables with all different people and you mix it up. That takes leadership from the teacher but there are good ways to really become temporary locals. It’s about not always doing the tourist activities but instead taking a moment to pretend you live there. In Paris, they’ve got wonderful little theaters everywhere. Pick up a local magazine and find one of those theaters to enjoy the cinema scene in Paris. Even if watching an American movie, that’s a very local experience.
In Europe, they have a more dense population and quite a diverse population in many cases—especially in big cities. It's interesting to see how they may be dealing with the same challenges we are.

Many people who travel will only observe the surface differences of another culture and not go deeper to understand the underlying differences in cultural perspectives. Are there strategies you have for connecting with another culture's perspectives?

When you travel, you can set the bar high or low on how much you are going to get out of the trip. For a lot of people, they just want recreation, they just want to work on a tan, or to go to a place where the drinks are cheap. Other people want to get away from their own culture and to be exposed to another culture, to broaden their perspectives. I think to a certain degree, you need to prepare and take a general understanding with you. The more you know about where you are going before you get there, the more you'll be able to learn from your experiences while you're there. So, you should understand the context. Teachers can provide leadership in preparing students.

All over Europe, you have different issues. I was just in Germany and, of course, they've got their heritage of both communism and fascism. I was in Leipzig a couple of weeks ago and it was important to understand what I was observing through the perspective that they have a heritage of communism where they didn't have this aggressive, capitalistic work ethic because people didn't have incentive to work really long hours or anything like that. It even has some residual effect on how the world is today there. They were accustomed to having health care and subsidized public transit, and that has an impact on how people live and their outlook today. When you live with people whose grandparents were the Nazis, you've got a society that is particularly sensitive about issues of immigrants, minorities, and anti-Semitism. They are dealing with neo-Nazis and skinheads; all of that becomes very poignant when you have a little background before you visit.

One thing that I think is really great is when the teacher can provide “reflection time,” where the teacher doesn't actually lead the discussion but he or she facilitates the discussion among the students, who can share what their experiences are and what to make of them. That to me is one of the great ways to let the experiences they are having take on some meaning and become lasting impressions.

It sounds like you are also pointing to how we can gain insights about our own cultural perspectives by learning about others—such as comparing the work ethic in Germany and its relationship to communism, and the American work ethic and its relationship to capitalism.

That's a good example. I think that when you leave our culture and look at it from a distance, from the perspective of another culture, in many cases you better understand our own culture. Here's another example: We've come out of a heritage of the Cold War and the Red Scare and we can't even think of things in terms of class struggle, whereas Europeans are much more adept at thinking of things in terms of class struggle. Europeans can see that whereas we don't. We have a big gap between the rich and poor in our society, but we can't challenge it because that would be class warfare. Europeans are much more comfortable with those kinds of thoughts and terminology because they don't have that McCarthyism/Red Scare/Cold War heritage that we have.

Although language ability should not hold anyone back from travel and exploration of the world, no doubt you would agree that learning the language spoken in a country is an obvious advantage for those who want to truly experience another culture.

What have you personally observed about the power of language in your many years of extensive traveling?

When you go through a country and you don’t speak the language, everything is coming to you through a translation or secondhand. People are telling you what’s happening rather than you understanding what’s happening directly. I do say that you don’t need to speak the language to go somewhere and have a good and meaningful time, but I’m the first one to admit that you’ll have a more vivid and intimate experience—especially when it comes to connecting with people—if you can speak the language.
If you just speak English, you're likely to encounter people who are in the tourist industry and speaking English because it is part of their jobs. But if you speak the local language then you can talk to the bus driver, the cabbie, the people you meet on the streets, and you will get a much more direct connection with people who are not talking with tourists as part of their livelihood. That's a really important thing—to break out of that circle and get to the point where it's people to people. If you talk to a tour guide, you are part of the economy. If you can talk to a person sitting next to you at a café, then you are part of the party.

I think it's also a matter of respect, to have enough interest in the country to learn the language. People respect that and I think that they treat you a little differently.

**Q:** How can we best leverage what we already know about languages and cultures when encountering an unfamiliar culture? What would you say to a French teacher or student, for example, who may be interacting with someone from an Arabic-speaking country? Or to someone bilingual in Spanish and English who may encounter a Chinese speaker?

**A:** I think you have a more humble approach to the world when you are less ethnocentric. You hear the term “ugly Americans” a lot. Well, it's not an evil thing. It's just that when you are a big country and you have a big culture, a lot of people speak your language and you can get by thinking that you are the center of the world, that your way is the normal way. That's just ethnocentrism and a lot of Americans are ethnocentric because we're so darn big.

So if you are a monoglot, you are inclined to think you are the norm. When you learn another language you gain respect for the fact that smart people see things differently. That is something that is fundamental. Smart people find different truths to be self-evident. People from different cultures and different cultural contexts think of things differently. I was struck when I was in Egypt recently how people couldn't imagine me scouting a TV show one year, filming it the next year, and producing it the next year so it would air the following year. That's a 4-year project. Their society is so chaotic right now that no one could see investing a year for something that wouldn't bear fruit for 4 more years. We have that stability in our culture and that's a blessing a lot of us don't always appreciate.

When you get outside our borders, for example if you go to India, you might recognize that people have all the time in the world. It's kind of shared poverty. Time is not money there but in our society, time is money. Our language treats time like money—you waste it, you invest it, you spend it. In India, they don't have those concepts associated with time. Time is just there; there is lots of it. That can be a source of frustration when you are traveling. But when you learn another language, you learn an appreciation that this culture is valid and different. The bottom line is it makes you less likely to simply think your culture is the norm. It makes your life more interesting, it allows you to be more welcoming to different ways of living, and it's also good for our peaceful coexistence on this planet.

**Q:** You will be speaking to us in November on the topic of “Developing a Global Perspective Through Travel.” What do you see is an advantage for those young people who wish to pursue a life and career guided by a global perspective today? What should they (and we) do to better understand travel as a “political act” and what are implications for our and other countries in this age of globalization?

**A:** Well, I was just in the Holy Land, traveling in Israel and Palestine. There’s this big wall that was built by the Israelis for security to protect them from the incursions by terrorists. An unintended consequence of that wall is keeping young people from getting to know each other in those two communities, which is tragic. That is a huge negative for both communities. There’s a wall but there’s also a new generation, people that could learn to live together but who are saddled with their parents’ perspectives and their parents’ baggage. There’s no opportunity for them to talk to each other. They don’t realize it but they are all fans of the same soccer team. In the Holy Land, many people root for the Barcelona football team because they don’t have their own big league soccer team. If they knew that they were all rooting for the same team, they’d have something in common. But because of this wall, they don’t even know that.

That’s a very small example of the downside of people not connecting in a world that requires connecting in order for everyone to get along. To take it in a bigger sense, you have a lot of American students who are blessed to live in this country with our freedom and opportunity. But if they are not able to spread their wings within the growing global community—whether that be culture or business, or dealing with international problems that don’t know particular borders—that puts us at a huge disadvantage. When you travel, you become a better citizen of the planet. You probably also become more thankful that you are an American, but I like the thought that we also become more empathetic with other people. It’s not us versus them, but instead it’s about how we are going to handle this together, how we are going to get the most out of our lives, how we are going to tolerate each other and celebrate our differences and put ourselves in the mindset where we’re more likely to build bridges and less likely to build walls. That all comes when we become open to the rest of the world. You can’t do that without traveling—and if you travel with language ability, you have a huge advantage.