Dear Watson Foundation,

It’s wonderful to be writing to you now that we’ve finally met. I have to admit that I imagined each of you to be around age 70 based on the wisdom you dispensed to me in response to my quarterly reports. It was surprising, instead, to get to know you as much younger people, wise nonetheless. I’m thrilled I got to meet you, and I hope to cross paths with you many more times in the future.

I’m going to talk about the last three months of the trip, the impact of the Returning Fellows Conference, and my thoughts on the year as a whole.

I spent the last three months of my year in Indonesia. I lived on the island of Bali and planned to search for a deaf village on the island where most people are born deaf or to deaf families, meaning the primary village language is a signed one. In the meantime, as I researched the village, I managed to find a disability center with a deaf resident in the central region. I volunteered there most days, helping out with the garden or with computer classes. I became good friends with the residents, especially Devi, the deaf woman. Her peers didn’t know sign language and ignored her entirely. She seemed to be crushed by her isolation and described how she often went months without any real communication.

I rented a room in a homestay. I lived with a Hindu family who seemed a little scared of me. Dani, the father, offered me a lot of guidance about living in Indonesia but I was never able to fully connect with him or his family. They treated me like a tourist. I rented a motorcycle and spent a lot of my free time going on long joy rides through the country, taking in beautiful landscapes, getting lost and stumbling across underground cock fighting rings, waterfalls, rice farmers and kite fliers. I followed smoke to ritual cremations and temple prayers. I often felt like I was in a dream because of how visually beautiful the place was.

It was hard to summon the motivation to keep pushing my project for the final weeks. I didn’t have any luck in connecting to the deaf village initially and couldn’t seem to reclaim the spark that had ignited my interest in it. With the end of the trip so close, the idea of investing in new communities felt tiresome. Near my house, I made friends with a restaurant owner and artist named Thony. I spent a lot of time helping him redesign the restaurant, prep food for cooking, and accompanying him to the bigger cities in search of interesting ceramics. He and his friends took me to tango classes and sprawling food markets.

Their interest in my project helped me summon the motivation for one last push to make it to the village. With assistance from an interpreter (an Indonesian alum from Carleton) and a driver, I was able to navigate there and spend a day getting to know a few of the families, signing with them about their rituals and traditions. Meeting the villagers wasn’t as impactful as I anticipated, due in large part to my limited time with them, but getting there at all felt like an incredible success in that final week. It was a very happy ending to the year.
I spent my last days saying goodbye to Devi, the disability center residents, Thony, and my host family. On July 28th, I boarded a plane and flew back to the US. I had a handful of days with my parents in Kansas City prior to traveling to Memphis to meet you and the other fellows for the conference. Back home, I was convinced the year had changed me but I was unsettled by how little I had to show for it; my things were still in boxes from college and I was living with my parents again. I was confused by how quickly a year full of transformative experiences had seemingly vanished, and I felt like I was losing the person I’d become in them. The Returning Fellows Conference provided me with a better understanding of how I might go about digesting the trip.

The conference was tremendously powerful. Meeting the other fellows, and so deeply relating to everyone’s experiences despite the diversity of our projects, made me feel like I was getting to know a family who had been invisibly with me throughout the year. There was an immediate understanding of one another’s respective journeys – the excitement, the fear, the ache of solitude, the trust that was built with oneself in the aloneness, the self-confidence that was tested so often it eventually resurfaced as a feeling of invincibility. More than anything, that camaraderie served as evidence that the year had really happened, and we weren’t all crazy.

I was stunned to meet people so extraordinary, and even more stunned to understand them. I thought endlessly about Lindsay using the word “vertigo” to describe her year: uncovering familiarity while exploring vastness, and feeling simultaneously powerful and overpowered because of it. I cried during Maia’s presentation about microfinance, Maia herself crying with defeat, explaining that her year required her to watch something she had studied, something she believed in, fail over and over again. I cracked up during a small group discussion when Noah shyly admitted he impulse-bought a full suit. I knew Lindsay’s vertigo, I knew Maia’s pain in having to let go of something you believe in, and I knew Noah’s thirst for clean, sophisticated clothes not weathered by travel. I was among my tribe, people who had been shaken in the same way I had. Maybe Dustin’s pre-presentation exhalation summed it up best: “This is so much fun – I don’t know why I’m crying.” It was humbling to be in the presence of such passionate, interesting, and warm people.

I loved getting to share about my project, because I had loved living it. I met deaf people who, in every culture I encountered, were told they would never amount to much. I loved knowing that these people came together out of the necessity of shared language, functioned as communities of support, and tried to become stronger together, to defy the odds. When these Deaf communities faced barriers, as they always did, they found ways to break through. They were innovative. Every Deaf community I got to know possessed a unique spirit of hope, grounded in unyielding struggle, which I often didn’t sense in the mainstream culture (and which I often couldn’t maintain myself).

I placed my project in five developing countries. It wasn’t just deaf people struggling. So many people I met were facing extraordinary challenges. Some of the most powerful experiences from the year were a result of those circumstances – when we forgot to pay one of our bills at the house in South Africa, in the middle of winter, and my roommates had to choose between heat or food for the week; when I learned my friend in Togo had chemical burns on his hands as a result of indentured servitude; when my religious friend in Ghana told me about having nightmares of tumbling in hellfire for being a sex worker, but not being able to make money any other way;
when I caught the kids in my Togolese host family eating medicine when their mom wasn’t looking, not because they were sick but because they were hungry. I learned how deep suffering can be, how unfairly it’s dispersed, and how I can’t make it disappear.

While a focus of my year was on community specific to deaf people, I learned in a much broader sense how community impacts an individual. The people who appeared to be struggling the most seemed to be the people who didn’t have anyone fighting for them. I saw how people in even the worst situations were able to sense their value when they were recognized as a piece of a larger puzzle. I saw it in soccer teams, church choirs, teacher break rooms, and disability centers. Even when nothing seemed to be right, that sense of community grounded people in something that made them feel like they had the power to make a contribution, and that they mattered too.

Retrospectively, it’s strange to consider that I was exploring a sense of community’s impact on an individual’s perception of self-worth when, unknowingly, I was experiencing that exact impact firsthand in my travels. I arrived to each country with no one. One of the aspects of the fellowship that shook me the deepest was the realization that people were looking out for me. People cared. An older woman invited me to dinner with her family when she saw I was alone at a bus stop in Addis Ababa. Along the dirt roads in my neighborhood in Togo, the calls directed at me slowly changed from “yovo” (“white man”) to “Charlie” during my three-month stay as people got to know me. In Indonesia, a man I’d known for only a few hours gave me some of his temple clothes and took me with his family across Bali for a Hindu pilgrimage. I was carried through the year by the kindness of people who had blind faith that I was a person worth including.

The fact that I was alone transformed the way I operated. I did so many things that I didn’t know I could do, things that I wouldn’t have voluntarily signed myself up for. Flexibility, bravery, and confidence arose out of necessity. I communicated with people who didn’t speak my language. I wore colorful West African church clothes, I wore earplugs to sleep in hostels, I wore a fake wedding band when I needed to. I pushed my way onto crowded trains and buses. I pleaded with a headmaster to stop beating his students. I took bucket showers, ate meals with my hands, rode on the backs of motorcycles, and later, drove one alone. I consoled my grieving host brother after his mother was killed. I toasted champagne with a president after being mistaken for a diplomat, laughing when the other politicians laughed because my French wasn’t strong enough to understand the conversation. I said goodbye to friends and families before I was ready to. I gave myself structure in a year without it.

Halfway through the year, I learned about an interesting remote Ghanaian fishing village from two journalists filming a documentary. I traveled across the country to meet them there. I rode rickety vans to a town where no one spoke English, drew pictures in a notepad to tell strangers I needed help getting to the river, hired an older man to take me downstream in his canoe, and managed to get to my destination, a village of people who very well may have rejected me upon my arrival. It was a white sand beach, hidden among a palm tree forest at the estuary of a freshwater river and the Atlantic Ocean. I ate coconuts and charred tilapia with villagers. I fell asleep in a hammock on the beach to the sound of the ocean, one of the happiest nights of the trip. The reward for doing something so terrifying was the beauty of that night, and the root of that beauty was falling asleep feeling like I did something impossible. I didn’t know I could be so ready to adapt, so trusting of myself to solve problems, and so brave in the face of absolute uncertainty. Again and again during the year, I was able to tackle seemingly impossible tasks
with this newfound self-possession. It’s the closest I’ve ever felt to invincible, seeing that I could land anywhere in the world and be ok.

Back when I was applying for the Watson, after I’d been selected as one of Carleton’s nominees, I started working closely with Carleton’s Watson liaison, Professor Roy Grow. A few mornings every week leading up to the deadline, I would walk to Roy’s house and hand him a new draft of my proposal and essays. I’d chat with his wife Mary Lewis, drink tea and eat cookies while Roy read for a while. He gave me the same feedback at almost every meeting: “This is good. Now push.” It became the mantra that guided me through the application process. I carried those simple words with me throughout the year too. *This is good. Now push.* It was an affirmation that what I was doing was worthwhile, and a reminder that there was something even more meaningful waiting to be uncovered if I could just go deeper.

That attitude was what made me feel like I came alive this year. I stopped trying to calculate what actions would put me in the best position for an experience worth my time and instead just pushed. It sounds impulsive, maybe reckless, but the feeling was complicated and deliberate. It so often meant I needed to allow myself distance from my project, or distance from what I believed to be right. Like in Togo, I started skipping days at the deaf school to instead paint with watercolors and talk with my friend Fousseni. It strengthened the bond between us and I can say, sincerely, he is now one of my best friends. Or in Ghana, I spent time with Portia, a teenage sex worker, who led me into the Muslim slums where other sex workers taught me how to make delicious local foods like red-red beans, spicy jollof rice with crab, and fried yams with chilies, all soulful comfort food that made me gain a friendly gut.

I learned the most when I let go of the way I wanted things to be, and instead pushed and let things push back on me, transform me. I learned so much. And there’s still more to get out of this year. I’m often reminded, vividly and unexpectedly, of moments from the trip: the taste of rich coffee in Ethiopia, the aggressive smell of burning trash in West Africa, the sensation of my sweaty shirt cooling on my chest while flying down dirt roads in Indonesia. The year is still very much with me. I know it will fade. But I think meaning will continue to emerge from it and that I won’t have to lure it out. It will reveal itself when I need it, just as it did throughout the year.

At the Returning Fellows Conference, in one of the small group sessions, we discussed a topic that very positively changed how I was processing the trip. We talked about how the year was about questions rather than answers. So many of my experiences stirred me more than I could have ever anticipated, revealing questions that don’t have clear answers. It provided me with a sense of intense, almost painful, companionship with the other fellows to learn so many of them were asking the same questions as me. What does real help look like? How do I measure success when there are no metrics? Does suffering serve a purpose? How do I accept unconditional kindness? And why does my contribution matter? Those questions can guide me for the rest of my life. It’s a reassurance that the Watson will always be with me.

I have to admit that writing this final report was difficult, unlike the other quarterly reports. I was scared to accept the fact that writing this meant the year was finished, but even more, I was scared I wouldn’t be able to adequately say everything I wanted to say to you. I didn’t know how to express my gratitude. You gave me access to experiences that so few people get to have in their lifetimes, supported me in your feedback throughout the year, and trusted me with more money and freedom than most people are ever granted. As a result of the trip, I’m more
interested in and inspired by the people around me, happier with myself, and amazed by the world. It’s made me want to be a better son and brother, a more present friend, a loving husband and father some day. More than anything, I have such confidence that I can build an impassioned and grateful life for myself, anywhere. How do you thank someone for that?

Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I wish I could tell you that there will be a clear or traditional return on the investment you made in me, that I’ve decided to become a diplomat, or a lawyer, or an international journalist. I wish I could end this letter, or this year, by telling you that I figured out where I’m headed. But I didn’t.

Maybe ending the year with more questions than answers, but still seeing how much the year mattered to me, serves as evidence that I don’t need to have things figured out. Meaning will unfold as long as I’m open to it. I’ll try to be compassionate, I’ll try to be adventurous, I’ll try to foster a sense of community whenever I can. I’ll try to make things better than they were before.

I don’t know where the lessons from this year will take me, but I know I’ll get somewhere good, and then push.

Thank you for everything,
Charlie