As my final weeks in Copenhagen began drawing to a close, I was surprised to find myself waiting patiently at a red light even though there were no cars or bikes in the near vicinity. As a New York City native, this observation was cause for a significant pause and some serious self-reflection. My thoughts settled on my first month in Copenhagen when I was having a discussion with a fellow DIS student. She was saying she had expected to feel some significant change in who she was from being abroad, but so far she felt like the same person she had always been. This got me thinking about whether or not I had experienced a significant change of self from being abroad in a culture totally different from the one in which I grew up. At that time, I did not have a good response to that question, but as I stood waiting for the green light on a spring night in Copenhagen, I found I had stumbled upon some important insights.

The answer I came to is that the very core of who I am and the things that matter most to me have remained very much the same. But rather than viewing this in a negative light as some kind of stagnation or lack of personal growth, I realized it was exactly the opposite. Study abroad doesn’t change who you are; it helps you discover who you are. By removing the immediate cultural environment in which I was immersed from the day I was born, I was able to discern which values and habits were really central to who I am as a person and which were merely the results of the influences of my family, friends, school, city, country, and cultural surroundings.

Before I came to Denmark, I expected it to be fairly culturally similar to the United States. It is a democratic Western country where English is widely spoken and where American culture pervades television and movies, and the Danish government is very closely aligned with the American government. I was shocked to find out that the Danish way of life couldn’t be more different from what I was expecting. The biggest difference I experienced originates
with the Danish word hygge. This word has no direct translation into English, and when I asked a Danish person to define it for me, it took her five minutes just to begin to touch upon what the word signifies. That is because it is much more than a word; it is a way of life. What she told me was that hygge is most closely translated as the English word cozy and that it is experienced socially. It is a closeness and intimacy between friends, enjoyment of food and wine; it is dinner that lasts for four hours because of good conversation; and it is décor with dim lighting and candles everywhere. While I have experienced hygge during my stay in Denmark both with Danes and my fellow DIS students, it took some time for me to process the true significance of the word.

The turning point, in my understanding of both hygge and myself, was on my program’s short study tour in western Denmark. As I discussed everything from Danish politics to local Danish soccer teams with some natives in the small town of Kolding, the conversation casually turned to differences between the Danish and the American way of life. I was noting that many Danish people I have met view their careers as a way to provide for themselves financially and to engage in fields that interest them intellectually, but their conception of self-worth is not tied up in the prestige of their jobs or the number of hours worked each week or the amount of the paycheck they bring home in comparison to their peers. It was through this observation that I realized the true importance of hygge; it recognizes the humanness of life and the individuality of the person. It is an appreciation of what really matters: friends, family, love, intimacy, and happiness.

Growing up, I lived in a fast-paced city, attended a rigorous high school and college, was surrounded by career-driven highly motivated peers, and was encouraged by my parents to put academics first. Coming to Denmark and experiencing hygge and the Danish way of life and learning served as a jolt to the immediate cultural world that had shaped me. I was forced to consider life from another angle. What I found is that deep down I have always held
the *hygge* values to be of importance, and I have always wanted to be engaged in helping other people find a happy and peaceful way of life. It is just easier now to see how my external cultural environment has impacted and shaped these values and my sense of DIS, Danish, and my international self.

When I arrive home in New York City, it will no doubt take very little time for me to join in with the throngs of jaywalkers marching defiantly across Madison Avenue, but what I have learned from being abroad in Denmark about who I am and what matters most to me will be knowledge that stays with me forever.

Jamie Gullen, “Self-Discovery and the Danish Way of Life.” Reprinted by The Danish Institute for Study Abroad and the author.