

Excellence in teaching at Samford University

funded by STINT and Mälardalen University

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Abstract

This report summarizes my and my family's experiences at Samford University and the life in the USA July 27 – December 28, 2004. The purpose of the visit was to study Samford University, where I was stationed, as a teaching environment, as a liberal art school and as a part of the US community.

The report contains experiences in getting abroad, working at a US college, practical issues and how the view of my world changed. The reader can start anywhere but please read the preface that explains the contents and the intentions with this report.

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Preface — About this document

The ambition has been to write a report that can and will be read by many different people. The stay has not only been a study of a small college in Alabama, but a huge experience of education, politics, friendship, traveling, alienation, media, shopping, quality, environment, racism, gender equality, diversity, leadership, social security, war, money, religion, cultural differences among lots of other things. But most of all it ends up with attitudes and values. Any of those topics could easily run into a book, and there are already lots of them. I will not make deep analysis or try to justify my thought and theories with references, but I have tried to give a summary of our experiences and first impression about the US society. This report will contain some hard facts but also describe situations and funny episodes during the stay. I hope that it will be readable for faculty at Samford and Mälardalen University, STINT, previous and future STINT scholars, American and Swedish school staff, other parents, friends and hopefully to my self in the future. Another purpose is to show how a foreigner dropped in another country sees the world. After some time we all get used to the environment and forget how hard everything was at the beginning. But those first experiences will shape the rest of the future and therefore it is important to make the world understandable for all the participants.

This document will describe differences between what we experienced and what we are used to. Some of them are specific to America or just “un-Swedish”, some of them are related to the South and some to a school, store, or institution in Homewood or just a single person. Some of them were quite negative from our point of view. Interesting are those experiences that were positive for weeks and months but became negative. But even more the vice versa; the first negative shock that were discovered as the most positive experiences when we came home to Sweden — it shows how wrong you are only because of your prejudices that are formed by attitudes and initial values. I must stress that we had a very interesting time and we learned a lot from the negative episodes, which always must be viewed as a positive thing. Some of them can easily be changed and solved in the future, others might just be the way Americans wants things. If both sides are aware of these differences the difficulties might be easier to handle and that is why they also are in this report.

Even if nothing can be objective I also hope the report describes everything as fair as possible.

This has been one of my greatest experiences in life and that is why there is so much to tell. I also realize that everybody is not prepared to read everything so the text organization has some special properties. The text is written so those that are just interested in some specific topic should be able to go directly to their section of interest, and that is also why some text in this report is redundant. Each chapter’s first paragraphs summarize the most important stuff

and the rest of the text will go more deep into details and also deal with personal experiences, episodes and reflections. The language and contents of this report is not the regular that is used in the scientific research university world with references and unambiguousness. One reason is because this report simply is not based on research and for me it is hard to describe the differences generally between the USA and Sweden . I hope that the small everyday episodes will give a hint about in the differences since the big picture (if there is any) can be impossible to grasp.

Comments and questions are very welcome.



Figure 1: The Sebek family at the Vulcan Park, Birmingham. Linda, Xerxes, Zacharina, Majken and me, Filip

Acknowledgements

The opportunity to let me and my family have this fantastic experience would never have been possible without the financial support from STINT, Mälardalen University (MdH) and the Department of Computer Science at MdH, and of course Samford University, Alabama that hosted me during the fall 2004.

But most important are the people that were involved directly or indirectly.

I would like to thank all the people that I have had so many interesting conversations and discussions with. I want to give a special thank you to all those that have spent so many hours for my questions like Mary Sue Baldwin, Steve Donaldson, Greg Kawell, Paul Holloway, Emily Hynds, Janie Kennedy, Bill Mathews, Mike Spivey and Roy Swatzell. And with the risk that I will forget someone, I really have to give a thanks to George Atchley, Mark Bateman, Jerri Beck, David Bienvenu, Nancy Biggio, Millicent Bolden, Gary Bumgarner, David Chapman, Laura Davis, Betsy and Allan Dobbins, David Finn, David Foreman, Angela Ferguson, Ashley Gassner, Clara Gerhardt, Jeff Gray, Mattilyn Harless, James MacDonald, Ron Jenkins, Barbara and Bob Mitchell, Chris Metress, Terry Pickett, Morgan Ponder, Ann Shivers, Dan Sandifer-Stech, Alan Spies, Sonya Stanley, Jill Stevensen, Eric Taft, Perry Tompkins, Carol Ann Vaughn, Hunter Weatherly, Heather West and Thomas Woolley that all made my visit to the interesting journey it became.

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Charlotte Elam at STINT, Anders Bengtsson scholar in Skidmore and previous STINT scholars Idor Svensson, Per Lohikoski, Henrik Eriksson and Johan Höglund have inspired and given valuable input before and during our stay. Thank you!

I'm thankful to my neighbors Sussi, Leif, Niklas, Marie, Birger and Maud for taking care of our home in Rasta, Sweden when we were away.

And of all those people I really have to mention Greg (again) and his wife Becky since they really took care of me and my family, invited us home to Thanksgiving and Christmas and gave us more southern hospitality than southern hospitality stands for. We have been fortunate...

Chapter 1

Getting there

1.1 Prelude

It all began at a “breakfast meeting” in the new faculty club room at Mälardalen Univeristy (MdH) a Tuesday in late October 2002. Per Lohikoski from MdH and Ron Jenkins from Samford University (SU) presented their personal experiences from an international teacher exchange program funded by the universities and the Swedish institute STINT. Per had been for a semester at Samford and studied their way of teaching, participated in the Biology department and he also was able to have his family with him since STINT was paying for that. “I would love doing that”, I thought, discussed the thing with my wife and we were very thrilled about the idea to see and experience something completely different. About 10 universities in Sweden could promote one candidate each to STINT and then they would select a couple of those that would finally get a scholarship at a Liberal Art School in the USA. Since I knew there wouldn’t be that many teachers from MdH that would apply for the program (for some reason?!?!?) I didn’t put much effort in my application. We were only two candidates and of course I wasn’t selected since I didn’t explain why I wanted to go and what I expected to accomplish, so Henrik from Eskilstuna got the nomination that year. In 2003 I made a huge effort and was more specific and I was selected as the MdH candidate. STINT sent my CV to all participating colleges in the USA and Samford chose me. It was far from my top choice — at that stage I would have preferred a more technical school and not some Christian school in the narrow-minded south Dixie Alabama. Especially since the computer science department only had three teachers and maybe 20 major students. What could such small activity have in common with what I’m used to and what can be applicable when I come back? was my question. But Charlotte Elam at STINT convinced me that Samford is a great school and that I as a teacher in a small school will get more attention and opportunities than somewhere else. So I thought; “Yeah, why not? If I’m going to do something different why not take the extreme?”, and Charlotte was right and I and my family haven’t regretted that decision.

1.2 The previsit

In April 2004 STINT offered me to visit Samford in advance and make the necessary preparations for the fall semester on site. STINT paid for tickets, car and hotel¹ I got the opportunity to meet some faculty members² at the Math & Computer science department, finding a place to

live and discuss what I would do during that semester. Since I wasn't offered to live at campus I chose to live at a hotel — Drury Inn. Everybody have their own preferences but I can really recommend finding a place where breakfast is included so you won't lose time traveling for something to eat. Internet connection at no extra charge in every room starts to be common and for me it was very valuable so I could communicate easy and cheap with my family in Sweden and also send pictures from my digital camera. With internet I was also able to find places, information, compare prices etc so I saved lots of time with this hotel feature. The first thing I bought was a real good map to be able to easily find things. My first impression of Birmingham was that it was soooooo greeeeen. A hilly scenic landscape, perfect gardens and a church in every corner. I had some beautiful but hectic days where finding somewhere to live was top priority which was both hard and easy.

The family consists of me and my wife Linda, our twins Xerxes and Zacharina that were five years old and Majken that was a year. Since children start school (Kindergarten) at five in the USA, and schools differ a lot depending on where you live, location was a big issue. Everybody at Samford encouraged me to find something in the Homewood city limits since they have the best schools. A lot more about school issues will follow in a separate section of this document. I was also told that I should avoid the northern part of Homewood, so what was left was a few apartment complexes in southern part. I was really trying to find something where you can walk from or use public transportation, but busses and sidewalks are exotic amenities in the suburban USA. The *only* one (in the "right" area) that accepted short term leases was Wildforest apartments, and even if we would just need it for 5 months I would still have to pay for 6 months. And I couldn't get a contract in April since there is only 30 days of notice time³ but the manager Jenny Spears promised me that it shouldn't be any problems to get an apartment during the summer. Since many apartments are rented by students, the big rush comes in August so to be first in line, ask for an apartment from July since you have to pay for an extra month



Figure 1.1: The Wild forest apartment complex surrounded by the Old Montgomery Highway (31). Kudzu in the foreground. . . Observe that there are houses and a complete city under the green trees!



Figure 1.2: How to fill out a check. Notice the left line to the very bottom is for your customer number that is stated on the bill or invoice.

anyway. With this “trick” you’re in the less crowded July-list and you’ll be definitively first in the August-list if there should be any problems.

The apartment cost was \$965 a month, is just minutes drive from Shades Cahaba School and Samford University. Nevertheless the apartment with three bedrooms and two baths was fully equipped with ceiling fans, air conditioner, range, dishwasher, washing machine, dryer and even a micro wave oven. We also had access to a pool which is no luxury in Alabama since it is very hot and humid during the summer and early fall. A drawback if you have children is that there was no playground or field to play ball games on. From most other perspectives it seemed good; clean, safe and a good neighborhood.

However to apply for a lease, an application fee of in this case \$35 has to be paid and in this case they only accepted money orders or checks - no cash or card. I bought a money order at the post office in Vestavia Hill and later I even opened an account at Amsouth bank in Vestavia Hills. Since I didn’t have any phone, permanent US address, Social Security Number (SSN) etc. I thought I would run into problems, but all they really needed was my name. So I opened an account put in \$1000 and got my check book. No cost, no problem, and I was able to pay things, even from Sweden, without having to go through complicated and expensive Swedish bank services. I can really recommend everybody to get a check book at the pre-visit, since it will be much easier to pay deposit fees and other unexpected expenses from abroad. In our case I got an email from Wildforest in June and they asked me to pay for the July rent, the “re-decoration fee” (non-refundable \$175) and a deposit (\$150). Since I had the check book it was just to fill out the check and send it in the mail. And there a problem rose. If you never filled out a check, you are not that sure about how to do that because many of the lines are just blank, and you don’t want to guess because if you do it wrong “anything”⁴ can happen. However once you did it, it is easy as pie. And for all you that never done it before, learn from Figure 1.2 so you don’t have to be treated like coming from Mars when you’re going to ask someone. Most Americans do not realize that we abandoned checks some 30 years ago and have never heard or thought about the concept of “postgirot”.

Besides looking for somewhere to live I was looking at used cars, and I found out that I can get a used minivan from 1996 for \$5000 (make it half price on anything compared with Sweden) or even less. I got the impression that it would probably be cheaper to buy a car and then sell it, instead of renting something. If you on the other hand don’t need a car every day or

just want a small car, renting might not be a bad choice. More about cars in section 2.2.

1.3 Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork

Back in Sweden I accepted my stationing to STINT and waited a couple of weeks for them to get the contract which was necessary to apply for visa. Before I could actually apply for a visa at the US embassy in Stockholm, I had to send copies of the contract to Samford so they could issue a DS2019 form which is necessary in the visa processes. Because of inexperience handling this new form and uncertainty of who has to do what at Samford, the process took over a month. To apply for a visa you actually have to visit the US embassy physically so we booked an appointment a couple of weeks in advance since their process might take some weeks. All the necessary forms took several hours⁵ to fill out for the family. We applied for a J1 visa for me and J2 for the rest of the family. Besides regular stuff as name, birthday and addresses they wanted to know when and which countries each of us had visited during the past ten years and also state all organizations we belong or have belonged to. A Swedish regular passport picture had the wrong size so the easiest way was actually to take a photo with a digital camera, print it out on photo paper and cut it out yourself. Even if we had booked an appointment we had to stand in line a good hour before we actually could come in to the embassy where they would interview us. The “interview” was of course a joke - the only thing they wanted was our fingerprints. They didn’t approve a faxed copy of the DS2019 because the original from Samford didn’t come on time (it takes more than a week with priority mail), but fortunate enough we could supplement our application by mailing in the rest of the paperwork.

A day later the embassy phoned us and said that my wife’s passport was tearing apart (the US officers must have tear it apart themselves only because it was from a bad vintage) so we had to send them a new passport as well. We were quite surprised that it only took a week to get the new visas but then the embassy personnel had made a mistake so my wife’s passport was not valid and the rest of our passports were missing. And phoning to the embassy is almost impossible since they have only limited phone hours, just one line in and no queuing system. The trick is to phone exactly when the phone hours start so you’ll get the first and only position in the “queue”. After all this mess we finally got our passports with printed visas just a few weeks before emigration and we even got an apology from the embassy!

1.4 The final preparations at home

To go somewhere also means that you leave something. This was not a big thing, but for many people it is such a huge thing that they will hesitate and even avoid to go. In Sweden we live in our own house with a big yard⁶ cars and everything else that normal people have. It was just a couple of months so the easiest way was just to lock it and leave the key to the neighbor. To be honest I also bought some extra locks for doors and windows to make it a little bit harder to break into the house — something I should have done earlier but finally got done because of the leave. The cars were locked in the garage and registered as not used at the department of transportation to save some tax and insurance. Three of our neighbors helped us to mow the lawn, remove possible snow, move the kid’s toys now and then and make it feel not completely deserted during our absence. Mail was forwarded to my parents and the mailbox was removed so it wouldn’t get filled with junk mail and hot deals. From our perspective it wasn’t really hard,

a house is just one of all things and it is insured. Renting it out could cause more problems and the generous scholarship covered well the economical part of this. It amazed me how some people around us only saw problems instead of the opportunities of this fantastic adventure. But this kind of journey is of course nothing I would recommend that kind of people to do.

Notes

¹STINT actually just paid for was the flight tickets. But they gave me SEK 20,000 in advance from the total scholarship to pay rental car, hotel and possible deposits, so the less I spent at the previsit the more I would have left for the semester.

²faculty = "undervisande personal"

³In Sweden it is normally 3 months

⁴Well, at least I assume the worst; they will not accept my check and I'll lose the apartment. They are of course not that hard to deal with

⁵It took actually 14 hours to fill out all the forms for five persons

⁶"yard" in American English is "Garden" in British English or "Trädgård" in Swedish

Chapter 2

A family moves abroad

2.1 Getting settled

After a long trip it felt very very well to be received by the computer science faculty members Greg Kawell and Steve Donaldson at the airport and later the same night also Roy Swatzell with his wife Gail. Coming exhausted with three small children you surely need all the help you can get. And it also felt very nice to get such a warm reception. Even if we already had an apartment we booked a hotel and rented a car to make things easier during the first days.

To get gas, electricity, telephone and cable TV, I just asked the apartment manager how to get it. She provided me with telephone number to Alagasco, Alabama Power, BellSouth and Charter. Just a couple of phone calls and it was all very easy to get. If you can, start by getting a phone number since everybody else will ask for that. It works but it goes smoother if you have a phone number at that stage. I chose to have highspeed internet through Bell South - an ADSL solution for \$45 per month. Maybe I should have chosen Charter as internet provider since that would be lower month pay, no long contract and possibly also more stable. But Bell South worked at least acceptable with our two laptops. As a matter of fact we could have joyridden on



Figure 2.1: That's all you need for five persons and five months. . .



Figure 2.2: Greg, his son Jesse and Roy helped us to find and get all furniture

our neighbors broadband since many of them had connected their internet to wireless routers and didn't protect their connection with encryption or passwords.

Since the apartment wasn't furnished, our first option was to rent furniture at Aaron. But we figured out that with small children it will probably be safer and much cheaper to buy used furniture at American Thriftstore in Alabaster south of Birmingham. Greg and Roy from Samford helped us to move furniture and they also was generous to lend us their own furniture; kitchen stuff, vacuum cleaner, a TV and much more which was very convenient and generous. Even if almost all initiative came from us we felt very very welcomed and had all the support we were asking for. We never hesitated to ask for help and our hosts never hesitated to help us or give advice. A big thank you to Greg, Steve, Roy, Mary Sue and Ashley. We have been fortunate to have these people around us.

A typical day in the week I ride my bike to Samford and my wife Linda commuted¹ the twins to Kindergarten. The bike gave freedom to both me and my family and I was lucky to have a paved bicycle lane (the only one in Homewood) close to my home and almost all the way to Samford. With a bike I never had any problems finding a parking space either. After school Linda went to a playground or park to play and make home work and in the evening we all joined in the apartment. Linda was home with our 16 month old daughter Majken and made small trips during the day to discover things around but also took care of many of the guests we had during our stay. She also met people she got to know through internet and organizations. In the weekends we made trips to see the Birmingham surroundings and the countryside of Alabama. We were invited home to faculty members and have invited people for dinner in our apartment as well. Our kids was invited to birthday parties and made friends — in other words we had full days all of us.

2.2 Cars and transportation

Even if the distance to public transportation and stores in many cases are on walking distance, there are no side walks. The few paved side walks that exists can end all of a sudden. If the sidewalk intersects a road with a cross over, there might not be a side walk on the other side of the road. Walking on the road shoulder is not comfortable since the traffic is dense and fast, and the road shoulder is full with demolished tires, glass and other kinds of hassle garbage. This is the US pedestrian situation in a nutshell. At least one car per family is a must.

We would just live here for a limited time, but since renting a mini-van would cost \$1145 a month excluding taxes and insurance, buying a car made good sense. We wanted the bigger vehicle for the main reason that we want to travel convenient especially since we planned to sometimes travel several hours a day. We also expected lots of visitors during our stay and it is more fun to travel together than separated in different cars.

We bought a 2000 Dodge Grand Caravan SE at Tameron Automotive in Hoover with 93k miles for \$7800 including taxes and an extra \$1000 for a three month warranty. A very convenient car that was big enough for the family. We although discovered that a “warranty” over there isn’t the same as in Sweden – we will still have to pay substantially if anything breaks on the car. A warranty may just cover the cost of the parts, not the labour to diagnose the error or repair the problem. Most insurance companies doesn’t accept foreign driver’s license, but “Progressive” did — even though to the highest price; about \$1200 for six months.

Car seats for our children were integrated in the passenger seats which was very convenient, but buying such item is really cheap. A good rear faced seat for toddlers is \$60 and a boost seat is \$16 at Walmart. There is no reason to “save” on safety with so low prices.

In Alabama you can drive and own a vehicle for a shorter period of time with a Swedish driver’s license which was the case for us. The law says 30 days, but 150 was obviously close enough. You need a Social Security Number to obtain an Alabama driver’s license and the only advantage is that you might lower your insurance cost a little. Getting an SSN was not easy - at least not in Jefferson county, Alabama. When you have bought your car and insured it you have to get license plates! No, it is not like in Sweden where the license plate follows the car. You have to obtain new plates from your local (not any) court house every time you get a new car. If you live in Homewood it is at Greensprings Avenue and if you don’t have a Alabama driver’s license you must take your Swedish driver’s license and a utility bill (electricity or gas) with you to verify your residency. Avoid the hour long lines by going there early in the morning in the middle of the month. You can drive for ten days without plates so there is no rush. You also need license tags² and if you’re unlucky, as we were, your tag is just valid for a part of the visit and you have to renew it for a full year. The tag fee is not refundable and renewal date depends on the owners birthday, so you just pay some \$100 with a happy face. All papers about ownership, insurance and taxes must be accessible when the car is in use so have them in the car at all time.

Instead of buying a used car, you might think about buying a brand new car instead and after the visit ship it to Sweden. Car prices are almost half what we are used to. You have to pay Swedish VAT³ and a few percent custom tax. Shipping is about \$2000 to Gothenburg, so you can save as much as 100000 SEK if you buy a more expensive car. The drawback is you have to fix some lamps (orange indicators), rust protection for the Swedish salty winter, you’ll have no or very limited warranty and maybe even problems to get spare parts when something



Figure 2.3: A car, a home and kudzu

breaks. Swedish insurance companies have higher premiums on imported vehicles. Even with these circumstances we were still considering importing, but since we didn't actually need to change or "upgrade" our car in Sweden at that point, the savings would be very limited and not worth the trouble.

Renting is in the big perspective not that much more expensive than it first might look like. You don't have to think about paperwork, maintenance or how to sell the car and most important you don't have to worry about a car break. If it breaks all the savings compared to renting are gone. Remember also that if you *rent* a car the major insurances are paid since you're employed at a Swedish University. If you buy and own the car you also have to add the cost of insurance.

To get the car valued we went to Carmax that priced it to \$4200. Since they will sell it for probably \$7000 the value on the private market was about \$5500 which was verified in private ads. We never really advertised the car well so we had to sell it to CarMax at the last day, and then it had gone over the magical 100k so they only offered 3700. We lost money compared to renting/leasing. In a sense we were lucky to be able to sell it at all because that can be hard — especially since you have a very hard deadline and the buyer might not be willing to make an agreement and then wait and you would certainly not want to stand at the airport without selling the car. We also lost some money because of a 15% decreasing value of the dollar currency against the Swedish crown — which on the other hand made other things cheaper at the end of our stay. There is no way to defend yourself against this but it has to be in the budget. So bottom line price for the van including insurance became \$1400 a month. And buying the low quality Dodge also meant that I was at the car shop four times to fix different malfunctions which cost a couple of hundreds but also the time spent at Don Drennen's lobby.

Gas cost is almost a third compared to Sweden and a car wash is just 4 or 5 bucks so the actual use of the car is much cheaper than in Sweden. A funny thing is that the recommendation

is to change oil and filter every 3000 miles which is three times as often as recommended in Sweden — for the same car. Don't haggle with safety which means driving an old or very small car. The traffic is very intensive and we witnessed road accidents *every* day — luckily almost always bumps and fender benders, but it explains the high insurance costs. But even if I live in a very small community in Sweden and used to that low traffic pace, I never felt stressed when driving since people generally are generous and help each other. What sometimes although annoyed us was the very long switch times in road intersections. For instance at the intersection Lakeshore and Greenspring in Homewood I once missed the green light so I stop watched how long it actually took before it went back to green. It was 2 minutes and 47 seconds. In Sweden the same size and type of intersection the stop is somewhere between 35 and 45 seconds. I never got an answer why the granularity is so rough in the US but I guess that's just something people are used to and nobody reflects over it.

2.2.1 Conclusion

If you plan to import a car to Sweden, buy a new one at the beginning of your stay. In all other cases rent or lease a car! Avoid airport rentals (since they are heavily taxed) and check if there are agreements between the school and any rental firm. You might also get a discount for long term renting or leasing. Insurance is a huge cost; check out before you leave Sweden if your university already have car insurances for employees abroad and if they also count in additional drivers like your spouse. Have all your insurance papers (including you personal health insurance card) accessible in your car if the accident becomes a fact.

2.3 Social Security Number

The social security number (SSN) works very much as the Swedish personal identification number and it is very convenient to have one. When we were applying for telephone, gas or electricity the representative or officer always asked twice and why I didn't have any SSN. Since I didn't had one or from their perspective didn't want to state it to them, there was probably something fishy going on, so if I didn't want to feel like being treated like an alien it made much sense to apply for an SSN.

Getting an SSN is free but you have to be eligible to apply and since it wasn't totally clear if I could or could not qualify for getting an SSN it became an interesting task. So even if I really didn't need the SSN I was more interested if it is possible to get one at all . . . and I really spent quite some time to get one. The bureaucracy at the Social Security Office (SSO) in Birmingham showed at its best (read worst), but after visited the SSO the third time with two additional letters from Samford's foreign affairs office I finally got my nine digit magical number. The crucial part was that I didn't have a US employer, but since one of the Samford letters stated that I'm a fully supported faculty member that work on Samford Campus, the bureaucracy was defeated!

After getting my SSN I could for instance access my bank account through internet, getting an Alabama driver's license and be treated like a real American. The number will be mine as long as I live, so I do not have to redo this process ever in my life. I guess it wasn't really worth all the work and trouble but it was however quite interesting.

Never try to make up an SSN or use your Swedish personal identification number as an SSN⁴. That is to be considered as identity forgery or identity theft and is a serious crime. It is better to just state that you do not have any SSN and let the person behind the counter deal with

that. Even if you're not put into jail or kicked out of the US you might run into such problems as I did with my Samford e-mail account. Someone at the Samford administration made up an SSN to get around the system with the result that my name became "Ken Brox" and this hunted me for a couple of days before someone figured out what was wrong.

2.4 Money, money, money

The biggest expense was the car and the apartment rent. Monthly we paid \$120 for phone and broadband internet, \$37 for cable TV, \$35 for gas and about \$70 for electricity. Food is just a little bit more expensive than Sweden, clothing is cheaper and gas for the car is very cheap compared to Sweden.

As mentioned I had a bank account at AmSouth in Vestavia Hills⁵, so I paid bills with my check account and everything else with my Swedish Master Card. My wife paid with her VISA debet card, but since it is "VISA" it is treated as a credit card, so don't claim it is a debet card because in the US eye it isn't.

The bills in Sweden were mostly paid through "autogiro" and the few bills I got was noticed by my parents that dropped me an e-mail and I paid it through my internet bank in Sweden. With the scholarship money⁶ from STINT and salary from my employer Mälardalen University, money was almost never an issue to do thing as much as limited time. As a matter of fact, even if my wife had Swedish parental benefit⁷ from Försäkringskassan, we really didn't need that money in the way we lived. *Money* was never an issue or problem to do things as much as *time* was. The best things in my life have been priceless . . . and for free.

2.5 Leaving

Leaving and restoring everything to a state as we were never there takes more time than we first thought. In most cases when you move somewhere you have the possibility to take everything in steps and come back and forward. We had to do everything in one shot! In that kind of sense it was easier to leave Sweden where we left some wet cleaned clothes on the drying rack (and they were still there when we came home — only a little bit dusty). In this case we had to leave the apartment completely empty. Our first plan was to have everything done a day in advance and then live the last night at a hotel and rent a car in the same way as we did when we came. It turned out that Greg and his family once again helped us with this. So I and Linda cleaned the apartment and the Kawells took care of our kids. It is amazing that every single of all those blue bags from Walmart that we have dragged home were filled with junk and useless rubbish and thrown in the dumpster. Everything that has been carried in for five months must of course be carried out — except for food. I sold the bed (\$50) and the VCR (\$25) by announcing at the Samford Classifieds list, probably too cheap since it didn't take ten minutes from when I sent my e-mail till the items were sold. At the post office I filled out a form so the mail was forwarded home to Greg. All service like gas, electricity and phone was cancelled. One small problem was all the deposit fees (together more than \$500) that would be sent as checks to me. I decided to keep my bank account at Amsouth a couple of months more so I could deposit those checks for free⁸ and then transfer all the money back to Sweden in one big chunk.

And suddenly it was the 28:th and since we sold the car the night before, Greg transported us to the airport in his van. Actually it was his van and a car since we had maximum luggage

(10 big cases and five carry-ons). Everything was in a hurry — we almost forgot Majken’s doll and we left the dryer on with some clothes that we wanted to leave . . . Yes, as a matter of fact we left furniture and all the stuff that we didn’t want or couldn’t take with us. Some days later Greg phoned a non-profit organization that came with a truck and took everything to sell it for a good cause.

Notes

¹commute = "pendla"

²license tag = "skattemärke"

³VAT is Value Added Tax or "moms" which is 25%

⁴you can do that by just skipping the last control digit

⁵Thanks to Heather Barton for excellent personal service

⁶STINT gave me 189,000 SEK to cover the extra expenses during our 5 month of stay.

⁷"föräldrapenning"

⁸Swedish banks will charge \$10-\$20 for *each* check. And I was expecting lots of small ones so there would be nothing left

Chapter 3

Samford University

Samford is located in Homewood which is a community in the Birmingham metropolitan area, Alabama. It is a liberal art school with some 4000 students.

From a Swedish perspective the three most striking issues are that the university is private, has a Christian perspective on all issues and sports compete with the academic agenda.

3.1 About Samford

A university in the USA is normally a collection of schools and colleges whereas the oldest is Howard College founded in 1841. Samford has relocated a few times since then and finally moved to its current site in Homewood in 1957. The campus is one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. A stylish park is framed by red brick buildings with old fashioned columns and ornaments and you can and want spend time walking or sitting in this magnificent garden. And even if some of the buildings are just a couple of years old, and even if one^d might claim that the architecture is a fake, it impresses visitors and potential students to such an extent that it might be the first, best and maybe only reason to choose Samford. A nice and peaceful environment has a very positive impact on people's mood and in the long term will affect positive results.

Tuition and a small room at campus cost about US\$ 17000 a year which is quite com-



Figure 3.1: Samford University from Shades Mountain in Vestavia Hills



Figure 3.2: Samford campus park

petitive compared with other private schools in the same division² that might cost more than twice as much. And a state university cost maybe a little more than half of Samford so that is the range we are talking about. Parents save for their children from their birth, it is possible to get loans that has to be paid within 10 years³ or getting a scholarship for at least a part of your fees is quite common. Some very generous donations to Samford during the years have made it possible to subvention the fee with about 40% compared with the true cost. Former students, alumni, are expected to donate money — especially if they become economically wealthy. From a Swedish perspective this is all odd since university is free (tax paid) and have no tradition in alumni donations since all this is fixed by the state — which render other issues and perspectives (see section 4 and 3.5).

Samford is driven by the Baptist church; their motto is *For God, for nurturing, forever...* and on campus is a small church and a chapel. Half of the student body is affiliated with Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian churches⁴. Faculty meetings, lectures and meals in the big cafeteria is often initiated with a prayer. Students might refer to the Bible as an argument during lectures. All these issues are exotic for a secular Swede. But I must stress that I was never “harassed” in the way I sometimes am by Pentecostal movement⁵ or Jehovah’s Witness in Sweden. If someone asked me about my religious standpoint I was always treated with respect. As long as you do not work actively against the Christian foundations of Samford, nobody will have a problem with you. If you however want to discuss or debate any religious aspects – which most are more than happy to do – never assume that you will ever come close to a winning situation, because these people really know their Bible and have heard ALL arguments you could even possibly imagine. And it is of course not the purpose to convince those people into another belief, but the best way to understand them is to ask lots of questions.

3.2 My work at Samford

At Samford I got my own room, keys, telephone, letter box and a brand new computer from the day that I begun. There were of courses misses, but it never took more than a day to fix things. One of them was my login and e-mail account that was mention in the section 2.3 about SSN. Another miss that took me a few days to figure out was that I didn’t get important information through my email. After mentioning that to Mattilyn, the department secretary, she subscribed me on the Faculty, Classified and Employee-list the very same afternoon.

As I have read from other and previous STINT scholars that they have either had their



Figure 3.3: My office at Samford. Notice my bike. . .

own course, or being a guest lecturer and resource to the department and the rest of the school. There are opportunities and risks with both approaches: Having an own course is a good way to come close to the students and really test without short cuts your skills as a teacher in a foreign environment. If the course is in your own field and maybe not normally be available at the university you may add substantial to the schools knowledge curriculum. Such cross breeding is great chance and benefit for the students and participating faculty and is maybe the “classic” argument for academic exchange programs. A risk to have the total responsibility of a course in a new environment, in a foreign language and with limited experience of the students can make you drown in work and you’ll do nothing else but having that course. The risk with the pan-campus approach is that you might get to little work and will just float around without a real task or responsibility. I think it is very hard to calculate how the situation will be or evolve since it depends on so many parameters such as personal characteristics and the chemistry between the scholar and the regular faculty. I think that it is important that as much as possible is cleared out exactly what you want and are expected to do as early as possibly — preferably at the pre-visit.

For my own part I didn’t have much of a choice. I came in late in the process and the students had already applied for the fall courses when I was assigned to Samford. During the pre-visit I and the faculty discussed the outline of the visit and in what courses and degree I would participate. It was more difficult to talk about that I had imagined, since we didn’t know each other and was not always sure that we understood each other on a “cultural” level. But we found each other quite fast and the most “risky obstacles” like language and relations were radically diminished to a very comfortable level. So everything felt quite well but even if I didn’t know it then, my “tasks” were still quite undefined. During the actual stay it became very obvious that no-one really knew what the contents of the visit should be. “Study liberal art schools”, right! But what does that mean, and how? And no-one could really answer, previous scholar reports didn’t tell, STINT never gave a clear mission, Samford didn’t know and me neither and during a couple of weeks it was very frustrating. With the support of my colleagues at the Computer Science department I started to invent my own work since I really wasn’t needed anywhere. I was following some courses, had a couple of lectures and talks, participated in faculty courses and meetings, remade the department’s webpage (Figure 3.4) and visited



Figure 3.4: The Math and CS departments new webpage.

University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) twice. My objective became to get the big picture, see as much as possible and not get stuck into some ordinary work at just one department. Right or wrong, but this was what it became. And it was sure not easy to sell your ideas in a nice way in the middle of the semester. No-one was against, but the interest and support was for understandable reasons not top priority.

I had very mixed feelings about the “task” during the stay and I changed my mind several times about it. It annoyed me that so few took the opportunity to use me and my expertise, but how could I and anyone else know in advance that I could have had lectures in cultural perspectives and parenting, besides the more obvious computer science? Actually I think I added more and developed myself more in all the less apparent topics, than in the obvious. I came to learn and observe Liberal art, but it became a very personal liberal art education for myself. And with the current perspective (a good month after coming back to Sweden again) I do not regret that I got very free hands to discover the world and my hidden interests and attributes. It was surely not the most efficient way to do it, but maybe it really was the only way. Knowing all I have learned and all the people that I do today; I would of course have done lots of things differently or at least more purposefully. But I guess this was finally what my mission was about. . .

3.3 Episodes at Samford

The following subsections will describe some episodes during my visit since I think that a regular list of my experiences and duties would be to boring to read.

3.3.1 The Way to Eden (The CS department)

I had my office at the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science that has 11 full time employed and a couple of adjuncts. Three out of those work with computer science and about four students graduate with computer science as a major from Samford. This is of course a small activity, it is not Samford’s core business and a very little hacker⁶ mentality is present. If you’d like to be a really good computer engineer or scientist, Samford is certainly not the first

university that pops into your mind. A couple of years ago computer science was considered by students as a simple major at Samford. The computer science lives from this perspective a very up-hill existence. Never the less, the faculty has a vision to grow, increase the status, to attract a new student body and brand Samford as a strong computer science institution. They work very hard to increase the level on their courses, are very available to the students and Steve wrote, from my perspective, a very strong application for an NSF-grant to build a robotics lab. I don't think Steve slept at all the week before deadline and I guess his family missed him at home – even at Thanksgiving. In a way I'm very impressed of the determination and their positive picture of the future. Most people would never even try to start from the point where they are standing and I wish them all luck because they really deserve a chance to show how good they can be if they get the financial resources. I guess the faculty from this perspective reflects the part of the American dream that everything is possible.

3.3.2 And The Children Shall Lead (Family studies)

In late August there was a Czech group of teachers from Liberec in a trans-national course in special education visiting Samford that didn't know much English so I participated in some of their activities and translated since I have a Czech background. As a matter of fact the other participating University was from Växjö, Sweden and I had the opportunity to meet Ildor Svensson that was a STINT scholar at Samford in 2001. This course is a direct fruit from that visit. The school of Education at Samford was involved in this project which was why I met Clara Gerhardt that work in the field of family studies. She wanted to have small party in her home with all the participants from Växjö and Liberec but got a bit uneasy since I told her that my family and three small kids will come as well since we didn't have and wanted any babysitter. Her home was maybe not the best place for small kids, but I was persistent and said that it will be no problems. I hope that Clara will not feel too embarrassed when i publish this (otherwise forgive me). She gave me the home address in Iverness as number 3509, but since that road starts with 3901 we got a bit confused. We found out the numbers are jumping but still no luck. After 45 minutes and a couple of cell phone calls we came to the conclusion that it was 5309 and when I said to Clara that she had mixed up the numbers she denied that.

C: *No no, This is 3509. Look at the address of this letter!*

F: *Clara, it says 5309. . .*

C: *No, it... [pause] Filip, I'm so sorry. [pause] My ... dyslexia. I'm ...*

F: *It's okay. No problem. Clara, we're here now, and that's the most important. And now you also know where you live!*

I felt so sorry for her. It was so tragi-comic. She blushed as a teenager caught at the worst moment. The rest of the evening went of course well. The kids didn't put the house on fire, destroy anything or hurt themselves and after that Clara wanted me to speak about being a parent from a Swedish perspective in her class. This was something completely new and totally unexpected but I accepted the challenge. I had my talk with lots of interaction with the mainly female class. I talked about why I wanted children, how you address them, punish them and why it is important to spend time and love the children. I read the poem "Welcome to Holland" and how that changed my life. Lots of cultural differences came to surface and many students became quite dizzy after they realized I was an atheist. It struggled their mind that a person can have good intentions and values without being a believing Christian. Or as a student wrote in

the evaluation

I learned . . . How there are great moral people out there with different and no religious beliefs.

Another student wrote:

I also learned that he thinks extremely different than I do.

Now, *those* sentences will from a Swedish perspective make you gape and roll the eyes. But I was very glad when I read it. At that point I realized that many of the Samford students have been very sheltered and never been exposed to anything but “traditional conservative family values”. They have been more or less taught during their life time that everything that is not Christian must be taken into consideration to be evil. If I was the first person that opened their eyes and viewed the world from my perspective, and they realized what happened during that lecture, I have made a (from my perspective a good) difference in their life. The feeling to have touched the students in that way, I can’t say anything but that I have fulfilled my work as a teacher. This was one of my best moments in my career as a teacher. I challenged their world in the most successful way I have ever done. I guess this is as close that I have come to a religious experience. And even if many of the students wrote that they didn’t share my values, they still thought it was a useful experience to get exposed to the Swedish way of thinking, viewing the world and solve different issues. I had a similar talk with Kristie Chandler’s class in marriage, but the sensation wasn’t the same the second time even it went very well. Marriage by the way, how and why can you have a course in marriage might be a valid question. Well, I guess if you are about to be a counselor it can be very good knowledge - especially since most of the students are very young and inexperienced. On the other hand I got the impression that most of the students (majority female), took the course because they were about to marry. I had also a lecture about raising a child with Down’s syndrome in David Finn’s class and I had that lecture together with my wife Linda. A complete new experience that we both felt a little bit anxious about, but we were really a good team, and I think we performed well.

From both Clara and Kristie I got thank-you letters for my guest lectures. The purpose is, besides the obvious, also a way for teachers to collect them in their teaching portfolio which will be a part of the documentation in for instance a tenure process. I really think this is something we all would benefit from if we adopted. The hard part is to start these kinds of traditions — especially in Sweden.

In all of these three talks we got some (from a Swedish perspective) funny questions. One of them was about discipline. Our answer was that spanking is against the law since 1973, the next question was “but how do you do it then?”, as if they didn’t believe us. “There are other ways to show what is right and wrong; Sweden hasn’t become an anarchy state, every 5th cell phone is developed in Sweden, we still sell 20% of all heavy trucks in the world and take a look at our children!” and we pointed as Majken that sat silent in the stroller in the back of the class room. Some of them still didn’t believe us. . .

3.3.3 The Ultimate Computer (Current topics)

I followed Steve Donaldsons course in “Current topics” that deals with different and more odd computing paradigms like neural networks, generic algorithms, quantum computing, cellular automata. I might take parts from this course and integrate in my own courses back in Sweden. I believe that the maybe most important issue in this course was to think differently about what computing and computers can be about. Unfortunately very few students took opportunity to

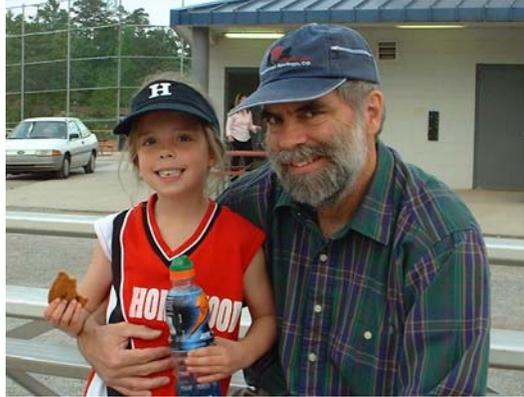


Figure 3.5: Rachel Donaldson and her daddy Steve.

discuss the topics from that perspective, but maybe such a course should be aimed towards more computer-science-mature students than juniors. Anyway a very interesting course.

At one occasion we talked about “swarm computing” where ants are commonly used as an analogy of the concept. After the class I asked Steve what he thinks of when he sees ants in the woods. “I stomp on them!”, was the smiling answer. “Bad karma for you”, I replied. Almost no-one got the joke. Religion is prohibited in public schools by law and I guess very few parents will discuss Hinduism if they are homeschooling.

3.3.4 That which survives (A basic CS course)

I also had a couple of lectures in “Data structures and algorithms” like queues, stacks, recursion and sorting that I have taught in Sweden. This course had only four students and one of the most striking thing was that only one did have the prerequisites in practice. One student was struggling and trying hard but the two others were either lazy or just not interested enough.

I was quite surprised once when the students didn’t follow me when I used hexadecimal numbers, and then I realized that they were quite uncomfortable with binary as well. I do not blame anyone (more than maybe some of the students) but most of the students in this class really didn’t had **it** to become a skilled computer scientist or engineer.

3.3.5 It’s only a paper moon (The teachers)

Before arriving to Alabama I thought much about what to do and what to expect from the liberal art school where teaching is primary and research is secondary (if ever mentioned). I thought that the pedagogical discussion was common and intense since Samford is focused on learning and in a e-mail brainstorm with Mary Sue Baldwin I wrote;

I want to try everything! My own experiences are very diversified. I have had courses for classes anything between 5 and 150 students, worked "traditionally", case based, a bit problem based. Together with other teachers and alone. Worked with simple web pages since 96 and last year I started with WebCT. I'm especially interested in co-working and teacher teams since it is so rare. I know that $1+1=1$ but I believe that $1+1$ also can be 3. I think it is good to not have too specialized teachers; it makes the organization vulnerable. How can cours evaluation make

courses better? How can course examination support learning instead of just being a test? As a director of undergraduate studies I'm also interested in how to make a course program with not only courses in different areas but to sew them together and have a "red thread" through 3 or 4 years of education. Classic pedagogics interests me but also how to implement those ideas into courses like programming, computer architecture, automata theory etc. (In Swedish the word is "didaktik", but I believe that's not the correct translation into English). At my department we have major economic problems; less students than ever, combined with a financial system that only gives us about 20% of what you at Samford may spend on each student makes it interesting to give courses cheaper but without compromising with quality. That's also a very interesting question...

Enthusiastic, huh? And sad to say I was a bit disappointed after a few months that the Samford teachers worked alone and that the ongoing discussion was so lame. As a matter of fact the debate is more intense at Mälardalen University with courses for teachers etc. and we think it is if not weak so at least not strong enough. Very few departments at Samford had a coffee break room (Family studies had one!) and at least in Sweden this is the most important room where all the informal meetings, casual conversations and discussions are held several times a day. The teaching was very traditional and with very few exceptions I saw nothing more than a talking teacher in the front, silent students, home work till next week, tests and most questions from the students was how to get a higher grade.

BUT. I must confess that I was impressed by the faculty at Samford anyway. They are very skilled in both their subjects and the teaching. The average teacher at Samford is better than our average teacher. And always available — there was never a problem to knock on the door and sit and talk about pedagogics (or anything else). On the question why so traditional and not something new more modern I once got the answer "Don't fix it if it ain't broken". And I guess that's true. If the students are making their courses, why spending effort and time to change something if it just seems to be a change for the sake of change? But what if it is just a little broken; the few students that doesn't fit into the system, shouldn't that be fixed or adjusted?

A couple of years ago Samford got a grant to develop and adopt "Problem Based Learning" — PBL and on their website and other kind of advertisement they claim that over 80% of their courses use PBL. During my five months stay I saw no PBL, or anything close to that, practiced or even mentioned by the faculty in the class room or in their written course curricu-



Figure 3.6: Nancy Biggio describes "democracy export" in the course "US Foreign relations".

lum. Of course there is a statistic chance that I missed it since I didn't attend at all classes and didn't meet all teachers at Samford. But I read in two previous STINT reports that those scholars didn't see any PBL either — and they searched as well. Is it just a hoax? When I asked about PBL, one faculty member responded;

“But how do you define PBL? I get this form every year if I use PBL in my courses, and if I don't put a cross I guess the Dean of school will knock on my door and question my work. So if I have something that reminds of PBL at least once in a course I don't feel that I have answered dishonestly.”

The definition part is maybe crucial, since I didn't think of that the faculty, the management and I could have very different views of what PBL stands for. Another teacher claimed that PBL has successfully been used in practical education, but in his theoretical field it was inefficient. A third teacher said that a colleague tried PBL in a math course one year but the results became poor, the students actually learned less and worse, so they switched back to traditional teaching the next year.

At the very end of my stay I heard about some teachers that practiced PBL successfully in their courses but it was too late for me to see it with my own eyes in those classes since the semester was over. The only conclusion I can make is that Samford is not the PBL university it claims to be since I really had to search for it. A possible explanation is that the order to convert to PBL came from the above direction without educating or convincing the faculty the good or need for PBL. If the attitude among the faculty is that nothing is wrong with my teaching and as a tenured professor no-one has the right to control me or my academic freedom, some seminars will not make a huge change – it requires years of determined work. If you really mean business — don't hire people that don't agree with the PBL concept. Still I must stress again that I was impressed by the faculty teaching skills even if the pedagogics were very traditional.

The Samford teacher works alone. Teamwork is rare and that is maybe one reason why the pedagogic discussion is so quiet. It is more important to talk about the Samford mission and values. Samford teachers, and I believe this is common for the US teachers at all stages, follow the book. More or less the book defines the course and teachers spends lots of time to find good course literature since it will be read and followed from the first to the last chapter. My experience in Sweden is that you define what kind of a course you'd like to have, and then choose the book that will help you most and then you'll develop the rest yourself. In courses that are held several times with many different teachers courses in Sweden will contain and emphasize on different things. At Samford there was less variety and if the student question why some literature was used in such a course, the most frequent answer was an escaping, *“I'm not the teacher to decide the literature at this course.”* (which was true). It was although an eye-opener to me to see how much time you will save by taking the whole package that a book might offer you; literature, QA:s, power point slides and a discussion with others that use the same book. It is really not cost efficient when all our teachers develop their own wheel — especially since they do it from scratch and the difference might just end with a color change.

Samford offered at least once every second week some kind of seminar, discussion or course for the faculty to support, develop or inspire to better teaching. I attended at some of them which was (again) very interesting. Information literacy, speech and rethoric, academic dishonesty, library knowledge, student engagement were some of the topics and they were mostly very well prepared, but sometimes the attendance was “unfairly” poor. But here I could see an attitude difference. If someone at my University would have a seminar and only three or four

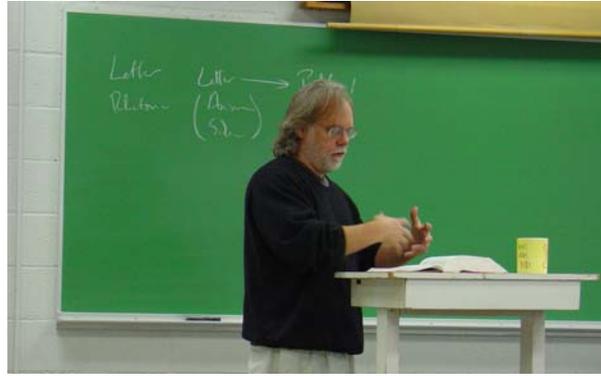


Figure 3.7: Paul Holloway talks about the letter format some thousand years ago.

teachers would show up, in many cases the sponsor or organizer would complain loudly. Here, they put on a smiling face just and let the show go on. I really don't know what the Americans really thought, but it doesn't help to whine over the people that actually showed up, and I really like the positive atmosphere. Again it was interesting to see how classical subjects were presented. Even if the facts doesn't change the perspective and what is emphasized might differ from the Scandinavian way.

3.3.6 For the world is hollow and I have touched the sky (Biblical perspectives)

Being a computer engineer also means that people will more or less kindly ask or expect you to fix their malfunctioning home computers. And since I had fixed Clara's computer⁷ she invited me for a lunch as a token of appreciations an ordinary day in October at the cafeteria. At the lunch table I was introduced to a number of people but one of them I had seen more or less every day at the caf which for some reason is not that common. His name was Paul Holloway — a professor in religion and had four children Clara said. I talked with him and I asked if I could attend at any of his courses. It could be interesting how religion is taught at a Baptist university in a country where religion classes are prohibited by the constitution in public schools. And I was of course welcome to one of the compulsory liberal art core courses at Samford which is "Biblical perspectives".

From my personal perspective it was very interesting to follow this course since I never read anything from the Bible before and not heard much about the myths behind the stories either so it was very educational. It must however be very difficult to have a course in the history behind Christianity and the Bible on a place like Samford. Lots of the students already "knows" that the Bible is more or less God's words and the approach that the Bible is an anthology based on pre-Christian and pre-Jewish stories and myths can be if not impossible at least very hard to grasp. "Oddly" I found Paul and the other religion teachers very liberal — almost secular, but that was maybe why I found them so great. They at least understood that religion can be taught without practicing it, which was the most common view among people we talked with about this, of how a course in religion could/should look like.

In this course I was just an ordinary student that enjoyed Paul's vivid narrative teaching techniques. Well I guess I was the one that enjoyed most and also asked the oddest questions, so

I wasn't the ordinary student but nevertheless. At one class Paul discussed how to use the Bible in situations that are not mentioned in the Bible; how to date, movies, SUV:s, shopping malls and socks. He also spent quite some time to explain how the two creation stories in the Bible can be viewed as contradictional, how letters were written and the creation of the Bible was put in a historical context.

From the beginning I just intended to attend at a few of Paul's classes to see what it was like (as I did with most of my visits), but I think we found each other quite interesting so it became more than that. Besides Steve, Greg, Roy and Emily at the Math department that I met daily, I came quite close to Paul and Clara that came from a complete different field and I really enjoyed their company and our whole families came to know each other.

A fun episode was when Paul (the teacher) was describing the situation where Paul (the apostle) in Philippians 3 says "I count all things refuse for the knowledge of Christ" where "refuse" was translated as "a slang Greek word for solid waste". In the Galatians Paul says "let them be anathema" which translates "let them be eternally damned". Paul (the apostle) had obviously a rather rough vocabulary. Paul (the teacher) wasn't less rough and explained that in today's language it would be said more like "*You can go to hell, and all that is all bullshit — but you can skip the 'bull'*". After this animated description the students looked a bit smiling on each other in insecurity obviously affected by the language. Well, he sure got their attention and hopefully understood what kind of an apostle they were dealing with.

As a matter of fact this was the closest I came to a bad language during my five months stay and nothing else came even close to that. All the four-letter words that we're exposed to in the movies were really not there. I spoke about this with Mary Sue;

MS: *No-one talks like that*

F: *But don't movies mirror the real world? Is it the movies that have adopted the language or is it the society that have adopted the bad language from the movies?*

MS: *The latter!*

She was pretty sure, but I guess there is no consensus about the view of this "evolution". But it wasn't taken from nowhere since as I mentioned we never heard any swearing during our five months stay. The funny part is that we Swedes have adopted many of those four-letter words in the Swedish language. But saying a "new" dirty word in a foreign language, feels (?) more harmless than saying the same word in Swedish! It doesn't sound as bad, but I guess that's because it has less meaning to us. I think that Americans visiting Sweden are amazed and surprised when they hear Swedes talk; it's like listening to the Swedish chef Muppet with every second sentence spiced with a s**t. My hint is to use nice language when you're over there!

3.3.7 The Trouble with Tribbles (ACM)

With Steve's initiative and sponsorship, some students started a local ACM⁸ chapter at Samford. It was really not easy for a few students to build an identity, a need and activities for a student organization like that. I offered them some help and had a couple of talks about Linux, some gnu-software and about my research. Very few students attended but I could on the other hand offer personal tutoring and have practical exercise during these seminars. Even if the students were a little bit unorganized and unsure about the purpose of their activities, the main reason from Steve was to have ACM as a part to build a stronger computer science identity at Samford. Besides some meetings and talks that I attended at, I also participated in their Quake III



Figure 3.8: The less, compared to Samford, picturesque Computer Science building at UAB

tournament. I lost big time. . .

Another fun episode was when I read a simple advertisement in the corridor to make students to apply for membership “SU ACM — because I’m smarter”. I actually thought it was VERY funny. For the students SU means “Samford University”, but I read the UNIX command “Switch User” (which default means Super User — a person that should be above than the average). But it was never the intention to give that double message so I guess I’m nerdier than I realize.

3.3.8 The City on the Edge of Forever (UAB)

At one occasion I mentioned that I was interested in space travel and astronomy to Steve and one day he asked me if I wanted to go at a seminar at University of Alabama, Birmingham (UAB) where people from NASA was having a talk about software development for space products. UAB is the big university in town and is not private so besides the topic I thought it would be interesting and didn’t hesitate a second to go even if that meant that my wife had to commute me there (which means that it could interfere with her other duties, plans and commuting — it was however never a problem). The talk was very very interesting, especially what kind of programming languages that was used (mostly C and never Java) and how verification was performed. Afterwards the organizer Jeff Gray (a former colleague to Steve that was aware of that I would show up), asked me if I could have a talk a month later. Very flattering, and I was glad to do so. That guy must either be desperate or an excellent judge of character since he knew nothing about me or my research about cache memories and real-time systems. I accepted of course and a couple of weeks later I gave a talk for a good thirty people — students, faculty and also representatives from businesses. The talk was more or less my licentiate thesis defense, and I got lots of questions during and after the talk. Well, most of the questions could easily be answered by reading the first chapter in any computer architecture book, but nevertheless it felt good to be an expert. Some of the questions were on the other quite tricky and intricate. After that session I also met PhD students to get a glimpse of their research in software engineering and under what premises they were at UAB. A striking difference compared to Samford was

the diversity of students, ethnical and national difference was huge especially compared to the mono-cultural Samford. Actually not a single PhD student that I met was American; they all came from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China and the one I thought was American came from Bosnia. It was very refreshing to see another university and I regret a bit that I didn't take the opportunity to visit any more.

3.3.9 Behind the lines (about Sweden)

I was asked to have talks about Sweden by a few teachers and among them was Roy Swartzell. At the first talk I presented and compared the USA and Sweden, but the problem with that is that you also will tell some, in the US perspective, negative parts and in my case the students in this class only remembered that. One part was for instance about taxes; that they are comparably high, but that we also get a lot for it. A student in the back row then said:

That sounds like communism to me

... and I was totally unprepared to that reaction. I forgot at that moment to say that we have elections, that we chose this system democratically and that the absolute majority are proud that the definition of poverty in Sweden is way high over other countries measure. I even forgot to mention that the party that promised higher taxes won last election mainly because of that promise and that our "communism" has nothing to do with the dictatorship in the USSR that claimed it was communistic. The next time I had the same talk I was better prepared and focused on what Americans generally would consider as positive and it went and felt much better. On the other hand the episode shows how shaped the students are by the values around them (in this case young, white, healthy, Christian, upper class) since very few of the students have paid any tax or been close to any use for a public social security net.

So even if you describe Sweden only positive and as the paradise on earth, don't be too sure that the American will value or share the definition of "fair", "good life" or "better than" with you. At several occasions I was surprised by the reactions, and these were really not stupid, ignorant people. They were just surrounded and nurtured in other values. And I must confess that I also realized how nurtured I am in the Swedish way of thinking — a way that blocks me to see other possibilities and opportunities to do things.

3.3.10 Live fast and prosper (The students)

The stereotype of the Samford student is white, Baptist, 18-22 year old female student with a new SUV, constantly babbling in her cell phone and pays with daddy's credit card. And even if this is of course a very extreme and bantering description it is a common view outside Samford that it is an extreme mono-culture even for being in the USA. The stereotype is not even close to a majority but well overrepresented compared to the population outside the Samford fence. When I spoke with faculty and management representatives about this, they also confirmed it and said that they really wanted to recruit a more diverse student body. Even students said that they wanted more diversity, but as Samford president Thomas Courts said in his convocation speech;

The students whine for more diverse and mixed student body, but when I see in the cafeteria, the [few] black football players are sitting at one table, the other athletes at another and the rest somewhere else, I really cannot take these complaints too seriously.

When I talked with students (and I did that a lot) I often asked why they chose Samford hoping for learning more about their view of Liberal art. The most common answers were “close to home”, “got a scholarship”, “Liked the environment”, “easy accessed faculty”, “my parents wanted to”, “recommendation by others” and of course “Christian environment”.

F: *“What do you think the fact that Samford a liberal art school?”*

S: *“I guess if you don’t know it might help but I have already made up my plans.”*

F: *“But as I understood things they Liberal art idea is to broaden your education. Don’t you feel that the compulsory liberal art courses give you that or at least something?”*

S: *“Not really, it is just something I have to do. . . ”*

I got this answer so many times, that I realized that “liberal art” is really not the primary university selection reason for the students at Samford⁹. Maybe they appreciate the core courses later on, but at this stage in their life it was just an obstacle standing in their way. And I recognize this attitude especially with Swedish students, but the major difference is that we do not have liberal art schools (the students do that in their upper secondary school) and the students are on average 25 when they enroll the university, so they have really made up their mind on what to do, or why going at the University at the first place at all.

One male student confessed that he chose Samford because of the excellent boy-girl ratio. And that they were good looking was not their disadvantage either. But after a year he came to the conclusion that three quarters of the girls were nuts. It was fine going to class and have bible studies with them, but hanging in bar or having “fun” was out of the question. They were not that kind of people. “Religious fanatics” or “screwed perspective of the world” was his description. Disappointed would be mine. So after that he skipped the chase and started very successfully to focus on his studies instead which he did well above the average. And he was obviously not the typical Samford student in many ways. He wasn’t Christian, had some own life experience, had opinions closer to mine¹⁰ than other students and very outspoken.

Normally I would be very careful to generalize over a student body, but Samford is very homogenous and even if someone from the management claimed that they try very hard to get more diversity I think it is very hard if you want to keep some of the Samford traditions. First I thought that the biggest advantage of having a mono culture is that the identity can grow very strong and it must be easier to go in one direction. But now afterwards I realize that Christianity is a very wide and personal thing and it is not always true that students and faculty understand each other better only because they are Christians.

3.3.11 The Menagerie (Student rights)

An interesting aspect is student influence. In Sweden all student must (by law) be a member of the student union and the student have representatives in all boards and decision instances — far from a majority but at least a voice and some votes. I saw nothing of this at Samford. But Samford is private, top managed and democratic processes rare. I guess that students and faculty that chose Samford liked what they saw aware of that if they do not like something they can go somewhere else — they bought the full concept so to say. Another aspect close to this realm is if a student have a problem with for instance a teacher he have no union to go to so he has to go by himself to the department chair or dean of school to make his proposal or complaint. A few times a year parents to students in “trouble”¹¹ will go in with lawyers to defend their child and even threaten with legal charges. The situation is of course unpleasant and from this

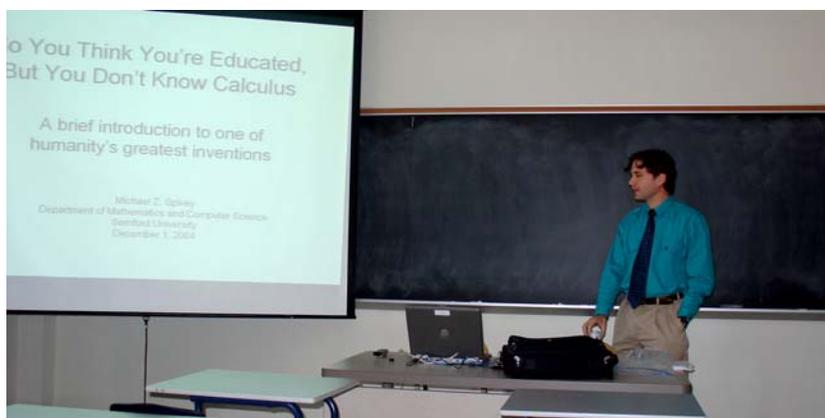


Figure 3.9: Mike Spivey’s great seminar.

point Samford’s own sharp lawyer Bill Matthews will take over. Very few situations actually ends in court and Samford will in all cases where the teacher obviously hasn’t done anything wrong defend the teacher. The whole legal-suing-court-business fits perfectly in the stereotype and exotic picture Swedes have on the USA.

3.3.12 The Undiscovered Country (Liberal art)

One of the few clear missions I got from Sweden was to study Liberal art. And some readers will think that I barely touched it in this report. I really didn’t try to avoid it. But read and think what I have done in the perspective of my background I really made my own liberal art journey. But I will not avoid it again. I had two very good liberal art experiences. One was among the faculty and one was from a student.

Mike Spivey, a math teacher had a talk for the faculty about calculus in a historical perspective. His talk had the provocative title “So You Think You’re Educated, But You Don’t Know Calculus”¹². The talk was about Newton, his new math tool and how his explanation of the world answered all the current questions in that field in one single strike. All of a sudden God was not necessary to move the planets around the sun. Mike had to go a few minutes after his talk, but his colleagues from all kinds of disciplines at Samford stayed in the class room and talked enthusiastic about this historical moment for more than half an hour after Mike had left. What I liked most was that Mike didn’t hesitate to show and use some real Calculus during his talk. Real math you know, with annotations beyond plus and minus that feels so . . . scientific and beyond comprehension for all those that had decided not and never to learn math. I know that most people would hesitate when they knew the background of the audience. But Mike did, and with both grace and firmness that even the most math agnostic couldn’t miss the beauty of the science.

The second experience was a project presentation in Betsy Dobbins course in biology. The course was aimed for minors, which means that most of the students was taking this course to broaden their view of the world. Most of the students had regular presentations with power point and a talk about an ape brain, small pox or other subject in the big field of biology. Some of the students spiced up their presentation with a practical demonstration or a small exhibition

with oil or watercolor illustrations they made themselves instead of copying them from books or the net. But Ann Shivers, an English major, really stood out by writing poems about moments and experiences during the course; for instance a field trip or evolution mixed with her past experiences. If someone would ask me if they could write poems as a project in a biology course before I heard Ann, I would probably take that as a joke. Today I wouldn't hesitate to give it a try even in computer operating systems. Because she showed that it was possible and if you read the poems you realize that she had understood and learned new stuff in the course — the presentation form was just different. Needless to say, but I was impressed the boldness of this student and of the result. I'm also impressed by Betsy that allowed the form. And I think this is an excellent example of how liberal art education can be, what I feel like, at its best. Bravo! I don't know much about art, but I know what I like, and I give a special thank you to Ann for letting me publish two of her works in this report.



Figure 3.10: Ann Shivers reading her poems in biology.

Geological Journey through Time

(or in other words, a field trip)

traffic unrelenting, *insensitive*
to our new-found shrine,
shrine to billions of years: Earth's stark history
up-heaved and rent by tectonics,
laid bare and soot-ed by modern progress

mostly-inquisitive eyes watch
(ears full of traffic noise)
scientist cradle rocks in
knowing hands,
ears hear fragmented bits—
“Seluvian period” and “iron-ore”—
like the ancient rock-shards
at our feet

walking back through history?
it's just rocks—how can we really *know*?
scientist sounds so assured—how can he be?
no one was there, after all. . .
or was there Someone there?
did it happen that way?
faith and religion made obsolete?
can religion and science kiss
like the roots of struggling saplings
kiss ancient water-supplying rock-rifts?

walk back to van in pensive silence

Why

(did Africa fall behind)?

Why

(we ask,
in comfortable chairs
and expensive clothing,
devoting four years
to the expansion of our minds)

Why

did Africa fall behind?

Darwin's un-pithy
formula for success
in the battle called
"Survival of the Fittest"—
variety
and Africa had it
(more so than any
other continent);

Why

did Africa fall behind?

The animals in
Africa
—*not* Eurasia—
discovered medical plants,
and the humans there
learned from them. . .
but Americans and Europeans
—*not* Africans—
study zoopharmacognosy,
search for and find cures.

Why

did Africa fall behind?

Was it really a failure
to naturally produce food
(at least in the epic proportions
achieved by Eurasia)?
Was it their
primitive
weapons?

Can we

(in our comfortable chairs
and expensive clothing,
at the prestine university)
be held at fault?

[anathema!]

Consider: the simplicity
of Darwin's natural selection,
survival of the fittest—
is it possible,
instead,
that humnas have manipulated
the impartial course?

With exploitation
and cruelty,
hatred and
subjugation,
has one race
cheated another
in the struggle for survival
and success?

Is nature, or history,
or mere fate,
to blame?
Or is there a more
insidious
perpetrator?

Why

did Africa fall behind?

3.4 Annoyances

There were very few systematic annoyances at Samford that was Samford related, but nevertheless I will mention them.

Samford is a gated community that protects itself and the students from the dangers outside the fence. Except for having an own security department that is larger than any Swedish city with less than 30000 citizens, it can also be viewed from the perspective how the dangerous Internet is handled — A proxy server is installed to examine and stop in and outgoing traffic to banned sites. In addition to obvious porn sites also other sites were considered as not appropriate like for instance www.aftonbladet.se which is Sweden's biggest newspaper with some million hits a day. Complete sites that host private persons' homepages like flashback.se, telia.com³ are banned only because maybe less than 0.1% of those sites may host pages with "unmoral contents". There are simple ways to cheat the proxy but I think a university should have more academic freedom and trust their faculty and students to deal with the whole internet. Filters like these will either be too firm or too loose. A close related issue regards email. Lots of emails that was sent from me to Samford faculty members but also to my friends and colleagues in Sweden, never reached the destination. One reason was that the spam-filter is by default set to be very aggressive and consider my email as spam. After a couple of months we track one part of the problem to a quote that I had in my signature of my emails. The quote was "*Never ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country*" by Kennedy (!?) This is considered as spam, and many Samford faculty members don't take care of their junk-bin in GroupWise, so they will miss (my) possibly "important" emails. The campus network had lots of drop outs and lost almost daily its connection with the rest of the world⁴, and I believe that some of my emails just vanished during those occasions. After a while I realized that important messages always had to be confirmed by a phone call.

My personal Samford ID card had to be a temporary one since I was only here for one semester. A temporary card was issued by the "Mouse pad". Since they do not have photo equipment, my ID card was without the picture of my face⁵ which made the card useless as an ID. To have a picture on it I had to go to the security office, but they only issue ordinary ID cards — not temporary like mine that expires after 1,5 year (which might be more than a student with a regular ID will go on Samford). The issue didn't cause any problems for me, but the situation seems odd. To me a person that is just here for a limited time and will not be well known should from my perspective have a stronger ID card (with a picture) than those that are ordinary staff and faculty.

Now, this is really not much. I experience more (but other) systematic annoyances at Mälardalen University, but I work on the other hand more deep in that organization.

3.5 Conclusion

It is of course not possible to make a few simple general conclusions about Samford University and even more impossible to do so with "Liberal Art" or "the American" higher education. In five months you will only be able to see a fraction. And the scene is dynamic and in constant change. And on top of that I'm just a teacher in computer science, so I must stress, especially for the Swedish readers, to remember that the conclusions are not scientific but strictly personal opinions.

An important question connected to the scholarship is that if the Liberal art idea can be incorporated into the Swedish higher education. Very much is written about this in previous STINT reports and I don't believe I have more to add, so I summarize my opinion in one sentence. Because of the big differences in the systems and the age of the average student makes it in my opinion very hard to implement the idea in Sweden.

Samford is a university with good reputation in many perspectives, but I wouldn't say that liberal art or new pedagogic (such as PBL) is the strongest reason to choose Samford. Really good, available teachers in a Christian environment to a reasonable price might be the strongest argument. For parents with traditional values that realize that they won't be able to control their children for the rest of their life, might think that Samford is a good gateway to the big world. All this makes the student body and situation special. A secular sharp student that wants to be an engineer, researcher or physician, will rather aim for Stanford, Harvard, MIT or Yale, and I don't think that Samford really compete for those students either. Many of these arguments are however not on the list at all for a Swedish student; Christian environment and price is not a parameter since it doesn't exist, and status of school is not a big thing for most students. The students are as mentioned earlier older and more mature, so comparison is in many ways feasible. But one thing can really be compared from a student's point of view and that is teaching excellence where Samford on average would win over any Swedish university and there are two reasons for this; first, the Samford teacher can concentrate on teaching and doesn't have to switch focus on their own research, and second, the teaching skills are weighted very high in the hiring process of new faculty. This is good for the student.

I like the Swedish idea that education is free⁶ and available for the absolute majority, but the drawback for free education is that it naturally becomes underrated in many perspectives. The most common argument in Sweden is that education doesn't pay as in other countries; you will make less after your graduation compared to other countries, which have been shown in



Figure 3.11: Samford Campus. Russell Hall with Computer Science and Math, and the Science Center from 2001 in the background.

international studies. I can really live with that so my personal view has a different perspective; since the student doesn't have any money, he or she can be neglected to a higher extent than those¹⁷ that pay for it. And they are. And I see no solution to this ignorance without changing all Swedish values and attitudes.

It was also very refreshing to sit at a table with faculty members from three or four different subjects and disciplines — a liberal art situation in it self. And when teachers at this table talk about individual students I realize how the specialization at a large school leads to isolation fromk the big picture and the student's over-all situation. Without formal groups or teams that I never experienced worked it came naturally at Samford. I'll miss that.

It has been very inspiring to meet all these excellent teachers in a for me new environment, and I can really recommend Samford to anyone with an open mind that wants to see something different compared to Sweden.

Notes

¹well, the Swedish more jealous approach

²size, ranking, status, curriculum etc.

³in Sweden it is 25 years with current system

⁴There is actually a (one) Muslim student in the statistics.

⁵“Pingstkyrkan”

⁶A hacker shouldn't be mixed up with the criminal cracker. And as Guy Steele says: “*A hacker doesn't have to be a nerd (but it helps). More important, it is certainly not true that all nerds are hackers! Too many nerds are just nerds.*” I view “hacker” as a very positive word; more like a wizard or a honorary title

⁷It was actually I that insisted to fix her computer

⁸Association for Computing Machinery

⁹also described in section 3.3.1

¹⁰call them “European” even if it doesn't say much for Europeans

¹¹for instance getting wrong (low) grade, charged for academic dishonesty, complaining having a bad teacher

¹²I really liked the title. It annoys me when I am viewed as a pagan savage only because I haven't read “Moby Dick”. It is true but I don't brag about it. But when an English major coquet about his or her math void or zero competence in technology it is almost viewed as cultivated.

¹³Sweden's largest telephone company

¹⁴even if the intranet worked

¹⁵I had the picture of the Library tower instead which very few people associate with me.

¹⁶as you know “free” means tax paid

¹⁷for instance companies

Chapter 4

The Experiences

This chapter contains all those experiences that were not work related such as children's school, common values and attitudes in the south USA and other things that surprised or amazed us. Many preconceived and stereotypes over Americans showed to be false and others were even worse. Even if it never was stated as the main reason to the journey the experiences became a very important part of the stay. So it would be wrong to omit or reduce this chapter. But instead of trying to write down everything I want to recommend Staffan Ekendahl's book "Amerikanerna" that helped me a lot understand why things are like they are. But it is written from a Washington perspective and there are some things that he didn't or couldn't cover.

4.1 Traveling and Sightseeing

We drove a lot to see the country side during the weekends. In early September we drove through Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio; a 1521 mile drive during a week. We took the opportunity to meet Dr MacDonald in Columbus that for three years has been our son's speech therapist (well, we didn't find any good in Sweden so we have been corresponding with him). Of course we took the opportunity to see a lot of cities and things during the drive like the aquarium in Chattanooga, the Wright Brother's museum in Dayton, several Indian mounds, Lost Sea in Sweetwater and



Figure 4.1: James MacDonald in his beautiful yard in Columbus, Ohio.

other caves, zoo and just the country side with its white houses, corn fields and tobacco barns.

In late October we drove to the beach in Panama City and had a wonderful time. The beach season is over in early September for the Americans (even if the temperature might be well over 28C in the sea) so we could enjoy an almost empty beach to a “very well discounted price” if the word cheap sounds too cheap.



Figure 4.2: Beaches after season is as fun as top season, but less people and much cheaper.

But there are several things to see just an hour drive away like the Space and rocket centre in Huntsville, or Indian mounds in Moundville, and add another hour and you will access the beautiful nature in Natural bridge, Little river canyon and Rickwood caverns. In Birmingham there are some natural places to start with like the Vulcan Park where the largest iron cast statue in the world looks over the skyline. The Vulcan is the God of forge and is the protector of the old “Steel city” — now also called the “Magic city”. The zoo is of enough size and well worth a visit. The huge (free) botanical garden is a obvious places to visit, but we preferred a smaller garden in Hoover called Aldridge park. But also very small simple places in Birmingham are well worth seeing, that most people never heard of. There is a nice vista point in Bluff Park with a hot dog restaurant called TipTop, you can see Hitler’s typewriter in Bessemer and don’t miss Oak Mountain State Park’s wild animal hospital and barn with animals for kids to pet. The Tinglewood park in Montevallo is really a hidden secret: a local artist have carved dozens of faces in the trees — very spectacular and exciting even for small kids. It felt like visit the woods of Bamse or Dr. Snuggles. Even if Alabama might not have USA’s largest tourist attractions, there is more to see and experience than you will have time for.

Traveling with small children is not difficult — just different. Therefore we skipped places like New Orleans, Savannah and Graceland because they would just be too boring and night life is anyway excluded. We focused on parks, play grounds, zoos and active museums like the McWayne center. We even went to the Visionland amusement park in Bessemer twice.

Before going anywhere; plan it! It might sound boring but casual sightseeing in the new world is not as easy as in the old one. In Europe you can pick any larger old city, head towards the city center and always find something interesting to see. In the US there is no such thing. Anything can be anywhere. You have to know where it is, preferably an address, otherwise

you'll have no clue. After my sister-in-law had been to the Florida beach, they decided to go to Atlanta just like that. They drove around for some hours there, but since they didn't plan and didn't know the city, they didn't find anything of interest so that was just wasted time. Use internet sites like tripadvisor.com, but another good way is to look in the shelf in the lobby of local hotels or stop at the (few) rest areas there are along the interstate highways where tourist information is available. Finding somewhere to live is always easy so you really do not have to reserve except during the big holidays like Labor Day and Thanksgiving ... or when the hurricanes forced people to abandon their homes. I guess we reserved less than half of our stays in advance. There is on the other hand another good reason to book a room through internet sites like lowestfare.com and that is price; you save 10-30% but our best reason was to get something that we wanted without searching (with kids in the car) and spend time on that. You lose some flexibility but that's the trade-off. We want breakfast (which is really not always included or maybe even available) so we don't spend time on making an extra hop in the morning, and if there is internet (for travel planning) in the rooms and pool it is worth paying some extra. We got all that for our family at Comfort Inn or Best Western for \$50-80 including tax.



Figure 4.3: Faces carved in trees in Tingelwood park, Montevallo

4.2 Shades Cahaba Elementary School

Our twins Xerxes and Zacharina started Kindergarten at Shades Cahaba Elementary School in Homewood. There are few public schools that are considered as better in Alabama, so we parents were quite comfortable to send our children to Shades Cahaba. We have really nothing to compare with and I wish we could take the opportunity to have some own experiences from the notorious Birmingham schools, but we never took any effort into that since there were some battles we had to fight with Shades Cahaba and not to forget with our own values.

4.2.1 Registration and paperwork

During my pre-visit in April I was promised by the representative from the School board that the twins would go in the same class since our visit really was so short but also to feel comfortable



Figure 4.4: Xerxes in his class room.

due to their lack of knowledge in English. When we came in August we discovered that we had to register the kids and we didn't have all the needed papers available at that time. The most important was the Blue Card and a certification of our residency. The blue card is a paper that states that you are vaccinated and is normally issued at a hospital. In our case we brought papers from Sweden issued from our children health department¹ and hoped they could be translated to this Blue Card. Another important issue was to certify that you really were a resident in Homewood which was done by a utility bill from the electricity or gas company since there is no registration for census purposes like in the Swedish "Mantalskrivning". If it was discovered that you lived somewhere else, you would be kicked out and had to pay thousands of dollars in fees. There were lots of papers to sign. By my signature I obeyed I as a parent to pay for destroyed books, if the children could be published on public lists etc. In Sweden parents do not sign a single paper — school *is* compulsory by law so there is really nothing to approve. After the introduction to the teachers we went to the school's gym where PTO² organized everything that you have to have as a student; pencils, lunch account, nap-mat, crayons, year book and loads of other stuff. The wallet became \$150 emptier for our two kids. In Sweden everything in this respect is free — it's actually against the law to charge for anything that is necessary for your elementary education.

The class went to field trips about once a month and besides the lunch bag we had to pay about five dollars for bus. Whatever that wasn't considered as "normal" or "ordinary" we had to approve it by signing a paper. After a few months the teacher thought that Zacharina should have additional English, which we had to approve. One Friday they were having a circus theme at school ...and the parents had to sign a paper to approve that the teachers would paint the kids' nose red.

Now, on the enrolment day we discovered that our children wouldn't go in the same class, and when I asked the receptionist she said that I had to talk with the principal Sue Porter but she was unavailable at that time. She could call me up. And she did and said that they had their policy so split siblings. It was quite uncomfortable to take this discussion on the phone so we met her at the school. She came out to the hall and said that they had split siblings for

28 years successfully and that was it. We ask if she could make an exception because of the short time, but no exceptions were possible. When we told her that we had been promised by the representative of Homewood city school board, she just said that she was sorry, but that decision is hers to make, and hers only. Obviously there was nothing to talk about and maybe that was why she thought that the hall was the perfect place to have this conversation. For us it was very humiliating to get this kind of power language smashed in our face. Talk about cultural shock. We said that we wanted to think about this, but we really didn't had any other options more than not letting our children to school at all, which was alright since they didn't have to start Kindergarten by law. We gave it a try and for the first three weeks Zacharina was very uncomfortable in the mornings — she didn't want to go, and she gave lots of reasons, but it was obvious that she didn't understand what they said in school.

Besides the traumatic start the only bureaucracy that turned up later on was the children's blue card. The difference between the US and Swedish program is when the shots actually are taken, and in this case US children gets one type of shot (IPV, MMR and DTP) a few years shot earlier than Swedish and this was announced as a problem after a few months. According to their rules our children were not safe enough. From our point of view this was unnecessary since Sweden follows a program that is approved by the UN organization WHO. We were also afraid that our children would be "over vaccinated" which also could be a risk. After had corresponded with the Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control (SMI) they said that in our case an earlier shot would not harm our children but we had to be aware of this when the next shot was taken back in Sweden. That felt a bit comfortable but actually doing it would be lots of work so we simply ignored it until someone actually would threaten us to kick out the children from school. And nothing happened. I know that a former STINT scholars family at Samford run into the same problem at 2001 and they did the same as we "successfully".

4.2.2 Carrot and whip

From a Swedish perspective the punishment/reward-system really stood out since that has evolved from not politically correct to completely wrong. Collective punishment is against the law. And even if some teachers just use positive rewards, they will still control the children in the same way. The absence or withdrawal of a carrot may give the same feeling to the children as showing the whip. The second aspect of this is what the reward was; either small plastic toys which will nurture the children into materialism or candy that will give dental caries and is besides that completely forbidden by policy in Swedish schools. As an example of collective punishment could at Kindergarten be that a table of kids had to go last since one of the children behave badly. One common episode was in the schools lunch room where the principal turned off the lights when she felt that the sound level was to high. At the first time she turned off the light to warn the students, and the second time she turned it off for the rest of the lunch. The problem was that 20 minutes had elapsed since the first time and those students that had been warned had left and new students unaware of the current status got punished. But this is the system where the boss or guy above you is all-in-one prosecutor, judge and jury — hence no-one complained either from the students or the teachers. If you ask a Swede, the response can be everything from shocking to good. From our perspective it was more of an annoyance which evolve to anecdotes since we would just be there for a limited time. It is however a value that I never would like my children to have and a system that they never should get used to.

And there is of course more... Kindergarten is at Shades Cahaba a full blown school;



Figure 4.5: Encouragement to perform well at school was almost unlimited. But you will only get this chance in life, so you'd better take it and as much as possible — if you can.

Kindergarten starts at 8AM and ends at 3PM and there is only 20 minutes free recess and 25 minutes lunch. At the first day the parents were encouraged to leave the children at 7:30 so they could read for themselves for half an hour. It was crucial for their academic development! Alabama law requires also (to the principal's annoyance) 40 minutes nap-time during the day, but the rest is a teacher, 16 small chairs and benches, ABC-123, reading, writing, math, Spanish, art and so on. Homework, grades and behavior. Incomprehensible and completely wrong from a Swedish point of view, but in this case we had to adapt. And when I say we, I mean the parents since our children didn't have any reference point. I should also mention that this strong academic approach is quite new and teachers we met talked about Kindergarten as playing all day some 15 years ago.

4.2.3 Our special child

The content of this very subsection is maybe the most exciting and rewarding during our five month stay. Our son Xerxes has Down syndrome which in Sweden normally means that he would be offered special school which most Swedish teachers, school leaders and parents think is the best way. We on the other hand believe that inclusion would be the best for our son and since special school is only an offer we can decline. The problem is that teachers in regular schools have little experience with children with mental disabilities and this uncertainty is very likely to evolve into anxiousness, doubt in own competence and finally into repulsion. The situation is then not easy for any part. Our greatest reason to include Xerxes into the regular school is we believe that he learns from role models. If everybody around him performs less, he will also make less. That is at least our theory. We had heard that inclusion is the common way in the USA and now we had the opportunity to have a first hand experience. Xerxes was one out of fifteen students in a regular class room with the regular teacher Kyra Rowland. To her help she had a team of special teachers that helped her and Xerxes to find ways to do the same things as the other children. In the beginning of the semester we were called to a meeting with the teachers to write a individualized education program (IEP) that all children with special needs

have the right to have by law. The IEP became quite extensive and all goals were measurable; he would successfully sign “potty, more, open, help, I want” 4/5 times or match 75% of the letters in his name without assistance, identify colors 4/5 when verbalized etc. after the fall semester and so on. We parents were quite skeptical to some of the bullets where the goal was in our opinion way to high for Xerxes. But what did we have to loose? Let them do it their way and see what kind of wizards they are! The only objection we had was use US sign language so they had to learn some Swedish sign language since we thought that would be a dead end. And after five months we were astonished. Well, we were amazed after just two months, but we had a dream how Xerxes’ school could look like — and we found it in Homewood, Alabama! After five months he could hold a pen and form letters by him self, he could understand and talk in English, count, use scissors, take advanced instructions in English and he was one among the others in the class. Actually Xerxes psychologist in Sweden said before we went to the USA that mixing in a new language in his life would be devastating for his language development. Boy he was so wrong. And when we reviewed the plan before leaving he actually performed even better in many aspects than we and the teachers had planned. This was so amazing. And what was the trick? What sensational secret method did they use? Actually only one thing; they believed in him, they knew he could do it, they expected a lot and gave him lots of encouragement — both the teachers and his student peers. And the extra resources he got was assistance during 20% of the school day³. A major difference is also that the teachers in Alabama have 20 years of experience of inclusion. They have seen that they can do it. And we now know that the Swedish teachers can do it as well — if they “only” believe that Xerxes belongs in the regular school. Among all people around him I think that Maggie, his peer next to him, was the most invaluable resource, teacher, cheerleader and friend. We miss you so much.

And in a way we’re ashamed that we have expected so little from Xerxes and that our dream wasn’t bigger than this. We “knew” it before, but now we really know that there is no ceiling to his development. But we are so happy that we were wrong and so proud of him. A problem is that many people around us in Sweden thinks that we expect too much and that we haven’t accepted his disabilities. What can we say? In this aspect it is two different worlds and it feels that Sweden is 20 years behind. There is however a strong movement towards inclusion but lots of parents hesitates and the major organizations haven’t taken side because their members are divided which means that the politicians don’t want to touch that ball either. Recent investigations initiated by the government⁴ have although come to the conclusion that special schools today in Sweden do not give enough academic stimulation and that inclusion of children with special needs should be included in regular school to much higher extent than today. This will of course take time to change. But we are there now, we’re ready and hopefully Xerxes teacher will take this opportunity to learn from him.

4.2.4 Cultural differences

Of course you have to drive your child to and from school — it is called car pooling, but the common thing is one car, one parent, one child. When you leave your child you drive to the front door where a student from grade five will open the passenger door and pull out the child, close the door and off you go. You can call that excellent quality service, but I can see flaws in the foundation of this system which becomes obvious when you will pick up your child when school ends. At least three quarter of an hour in advance parents starts to line up in front of the school, and the engine is of course turned on so the air conditioner works. 70% of the cars are

vans and SUVs. For the Swedish reader I do not have to mention environmental aspects and the American reader doesn't understand what I want to say anyway so writing more is just wasted time.

Parents were welcome to come and visit the children on Wednesday lunch — something we did several times. But you have to register at the reception and then carry a 10x7cm yellow sticker on your clothes with the text “Shades Cahaba Elementary VISITOR PASS”.

F: *Why so many surveillance cameras?*

R: *For safety reasons.*

F: *How?*

R: *To feel safe and being able to protect our self.*

F: *Against what?*

R: *There has been so many incidents with kidnapped children and you know those horrible events like in Columbine. . .*

In my opinion you can only protect yourself against that with a police or soldier standing with a drawn gun all day aiming at the door. A camera can never protect you against a gun — it didn't at least in Columbine, but I guess I'm just a naïve European. Horrible things happen in Sweden as well, but we refuse to live in fear behind fences, cameras and guns.

A third difference is the school principal's situation and duties. As we mentioned he or she has absolute power but she is also participating in the education, greets all the students at the front door several mornings in the week, knows the name of not only the staff but also the students. She selects and approves school books and material, divide students to classes, writes schedules and takes control and is the unquestionable leader. No student, staff or even parents will ever say something negative about the principal — some people call that respect and others call it fear. At Shades Cahaba she had a receptionist, two secretaries, school nurse and even others to help her administration. In Sweden a similar school would have besides the principal, a half time secretary. The principal has in this situation no opportunity to lead and take care of all details so very much of the leadership is empowered to the teachers. The teachers will take care of the budget and can make their own decisions if they want to buy books or a computer. If there are few problems the students will see or hear the principal two or three times during a semester.

. . . and there is of course lots more.

4.2.5 Conclusion

It really didn't start funny. But it became the best experience. Xerxes showed what he really is capable of doing. Zacharina learned English fluently — she actually talks better English than most Swedes that have studied the language for several years. She got a language for free. The hard part is to maintain it for several years before she expose herself more naturally to the English. And of course we all were very proud when her teacher said that she was one of the best readers in class.

We really didn't like everything in the Shades Cahaba school system, but have changed our opinion radically anyway; We can expect more from our children and use this unique learning window of theirs more efficient in Sweden. Instead of free playing all day long we could

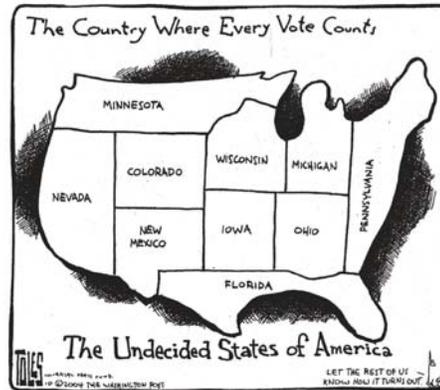


Figure 4.6: From *Birmingham News* October 21st

insert one or two hours of academics when they are 5 years old. At least when they like it. I will not say that *all* children can cope with this, but ours could and I do not think that they are especially gifted. But it takes also interested, committed parents and dedicated teachers!

4.3 The (presidential) election 2004

2004 was a presidential election year and this episode's title was *George W Bush versus John Kerry*. In the preamble of this chapter I recommended Ekendahl's book that very well describes the system. I was personally a bit disappointed of the campaign because I never saw it more than on TV. No balloons, pins or bumper stickers were available for the common public in Alabama. Those that wanted it had to call for it (somewhere) and get it by mail. One reason is that the candidate don't go to any public square like in Sweden and just talk. They are more or less always inside a stadium and just for the party members. Others have to watch it on TV. The biggest reason is however that spending time in states where the outcome is more or less predicted is just wasted time. Most states give the winner all the electoral votes — not like in Sweden a more proportional system (but there are many more big differences). So the candidates just toured in those “swing” states where they had a chance to make a change like Ohio and Florida. Boring. And there was these three TV broadcasted debates between the candidates. I asked Greg:

F: *On what channel is the debate?*

G: *On all of them!*

F: *All?*

G: *Yeap!*

And the debate really was on about 25% of all the 200 cable channels we had. But the rules (that had to be approved by both the candidates) made it impossible to ask questions or have a real discussion. So they just smiled and used the same catchy phrases that their speech consultants had banged into their heads. And sounding like you just chewed carbon copy paper is as well boring. Following the political discussion in the local magazine was however very interesting. And they focused on the local elections as well which is maybe a bigger issue. This year the

citizens of Alabama had to select not only the president, but candidates for supreme court, local judges, sheriff, district attorney, eight different amendments and some other stuff as well. The ballot contained more than 20 different elections! And to make this clear; you only have to register for voting if you have moved. If you live at the same district for your whole life you'll only have to register once. "America has spoken" and the wrong guy won. Something that really didn't show up in Swedish media was why Bush won. The common Swedish approach is "stupid Americans", but it really was not about the war in Iraq. It was about gay marriage, abortion and other "moral values". I won't go deeper into that. . .

And even if I didn't had the right to vote, I guess it wouldn't be too hard to register if I'd like to since I think I had all the proper documentations . . . but I didn't try.

At first I got confused since the colors associated to the parties was wrong; red for conservative and blue for democrates. To the best of my knowledge, red has always stand for revolution, communism and socialism. The blue party in Sweden are the conservatives. And the term "liberal" is in Europe considered as right or middle — never left as in the US. But it works in the big context; anything righter to the European right will start in the US left.

A funny thing that had missed outside the USA is the symbols for the parties; the republicans have an elephant and the democratic party has a donkey. This is nothing new, but it really amazes me⁵ that they chose animals that symbolize clumsiness and stupidity. . .

4.4 Climate and weather

The climate in Birmingham differs a lot from what we are used to. In August the temperature was almost always well over 30°C and then it slowly dropped in December when it was -2°C in the morning that raised up to +5°C and sometimes as high as 15°C. We were told that they have never experienced such a cold August and December in many years. The humidity in August was over 85% during the day so air condition in the car is really no luxury. At one occasion it started to rain in the afternoon which we thought would it would cool down a bit but it was like the opposite in the winter in Sweden. When you came out, your glasses immediately went misty⁶. And getting damp mist on the *outside* of your cars windshield (so you can just use the wipers) felt also a bit odd — in Sweden you'll always get the mist on the *inside*.

But the big thing was all the hurricanes that stroke Florida four times this season which was some kind of a all-time-high. One of them (Ivan) also hit Alabama, but when it reached Birmingham it had calmed down to a regular tropical storm. It was then pretty much as a regular Swedish fall storm, but since it is not that common it had a huge impact on trees that cracked and fell. And no-one knew how bad it would go, so to play it safe, Samford University, the children's school, and most businesses were closed for two days to ride out the storm. And people took this very seriously so it became very difficult and even impossible to buy water, bread and batteries the days before the hit. Actually the south Alabama was evacuated and the south bound interstate highway 65 to Montgomery was redirected to the north for the first time in history to double the capacity of all vehicles. So we sat at home and waited, watching TV, and when the storm left in the evening our feeling was "this was it?". But hundred of thousands of Alabamians were without power for days afterwards. The beach in Mobile had vanished and it was hard to drive a car in Birmingham because of all the fallen trees. What would have happened if it was a full hurricane one could just imagine. In Homewood the road from Vestavia Hill next to our apartment complex was unusable because of all the mud, and Shades Creek had



Figure 4.7: The tree outside our apartment almost hit the parked cars. We calculated with that risk and parked on a safer spot. . . but forgot to close the rear window.



Figure 4.8: Fire go out! Tornado go in!

flooded a good 2 meters so the apartment complex at Lakeshore (the one under the interstate highway) was completely flooded and evacuated. Lucky for us that we didn't live there.

The last funny relationship between the Alabamian and the weather concerns snow. From the first of advent the big holiday/shopping season starts. Most businesses do not call it Christmas or use the C-word at all since Jews and other ethnic groups might take offence. The C-tree is brought in and some radio stations will not play anything but holiday music 24/7. So one can understand why the C-tree will be carried out on the 26:th and no-one wants to hear anything about C***** anymore after Christmas day. The best songs are of course those that doesn't mention C at all, for instance "let it snow!". It feels however very funny when you realize that they sing let it snow, but if it actually did, everything will shut down and people will hide inside until it had melted — otherwise they would die! The situation would be close to what we experienced when Ivan came. And to be honest, there is no infrastructure to handle snow, winter tires doesn't exist and nobody knows how to drive when it is slippery so I think they'd better stay at home the few times snow falls in Birmingham.

4.5 Food

The USA is the country with low-fat-food and high-fat-citizens and as I mentioned the children are nurtured into crap food in school but it is also a class issue. If you have a low income it is more likely that you're overweighted than if you have a high income. My guess is that poor people are 90% of MacDonal'd's and Burger King's costumers. Also what is considered as food differs a lot from Sweden; Chips is food but in my opinion it is something between a snack and candy, and sodas and chocolate milk are regular drinks for children at school. Besides attitude, availability is also an issue. I heard that if you go along the walls in a store ("the outer ring") you will buy much healthier food than if you go in the alleys in the middle. Everybody are so aware and focused on fat so they completely forgot the sugar in carbohydrate. And the American portions are huge. Combine this with a life where you have drive-through banks and other facilities where you do not have to leave the car, a serious health problem has already become a fact. And since everybody are commuting their children to all activities (see section2.2) you'll nurture generations into this habit.

I found it a problem to know what actually a product contained. The regulations only says how much fat, sugar and a few other properties each serving contains compared to a normal daily need in percent. So to actually calculate how much sugar the cereal contains to be able to do a comparison of which brand is healthiest, you have to divide the amount of for instance sugar with that brands definition of how big a serving is. Lucky for me there is a calculator in the cell phone.

But it was of course not hard to make good food. You cannot make Swedish food since the ingredients either are unavailable or just not right. But if you buy a cookbook and look what others are buying in th store it is possible to make interesting food. Once we although found Felix lingon berries from the Swedish forests to a very high price, but we wanted to cook Swedish meatballs to our friends. . .

At one occasion I bought whipping cream in a tetra carton for our pancakes. The cashier at the check out asked with some interest;

C: *What do you use that for?*

F: *Huh, sorry?*

C: *What do you use the whipping cream to? Do you drink it?*

F: *No I whip it . . . for pancakes.*

C: *Oh yeah? . . . (obviously not understanding)*

On the other hand we once bought what she would consider her way to do whipping cream — in a high pressure can. And I and Linda couldn't find out how to get the cream out. We pressed it on the top without result. Started to use silverware as tools and ripping the bottle from each other;

F: *Give me, I know*

L: *No, let me try this first*

F: *Hey, you must press there*

L: *I've already done that, I want to. . .*

F: *Give me that now. . .*

, then after experimenting for a good five minutes we realized that the top shouldn't be pressed towards the bottle but just slant it. And we didn't end up with fighting, hurt ourself or loose to

much of the cream when we all of a sudden found out how to use it. . .

4.6 Volunteers and non-profit organizations

It is expected that you help and participate in the society if you can. There was this grandpa that directed the traffic at Shades Cahaba school twice a day and Jerri Beck that came to a bookstore and read books for children every Saturday. A remarkable little woman that I easily could have as an ideal for myself. Linda was at Shades Cahaba at least every second week as gray labor for the art teacher. I myself was twice reading books in the morning for Xerxes and Zacharina's class and all this makes you participating and involved in a way that you really do not see in Sweden (anymore). The attitude is more or less that "I pay tax, so now someone has to fix it for me".



Figure 4.9: Jerri Beck reading books for children at a bookstore. She had a pen pal in Västervik, Sweden during the 50's, and learned us about her indian background.

We also became members of PADS (Parent Advocates of Down Syndrome) and it amazed us that there was no membership fee. They got all their money from a yearly "Buddywalk"⁷ where they raised and collected money to the organization. And members, people and businesses are quite generous so it works. Besides a walk on zoo we also went to some seminars arranged by PADS. One of them was with pastor Bill Decker that had a teenager son with DS. Two things stroke us at that meeting; one was about differences and the other was about similarities. The other parents first thought when they got to know that their child had DS was "how does this affect my relation to God" which is quite odd in Sweden⁸. The other part was however more interesting. Have a peek at Figure 4.10. Normally you have some facts and a problem that you define and then person A (Kerry) comes to a solution and then another person (Bush) might come to complete different solution. From my Swedish perspective I really didn't want to describe the problem that way which lead to another starting point and a solution into another dimension that A and B will never understand. That's how it is being from another country or culture! But what amazed me was that our view of the world was so completely different from

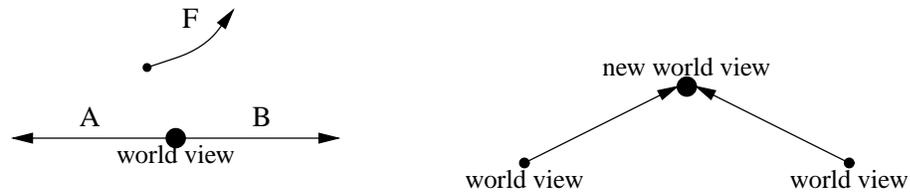


Figure 4.10: Same fact can lead to different views of solutions. But different values and standpoints in life can lead to the same conclusion.



Figure 4.11: Give some guidance if you have a barn roof left.

pastor Deckers, and still we came both to the same conclusion of how to view the problems around our special children. That felt very promising.

4.7 Religion

Alabama is a part of what is described as the Bible belt or in other words the most religious part of the USA and a great contrast to Sweden that is one of the most secular nations in the world. And the church has a great impact on the society and not like in Sweden a ceremonial museum, but a vital force that takes care of lots of other things than just divinity. I once got the question from Greg if we had a church in our village Ransta, and I said no with the explanation that Ransta is just a hundred years old. Think about that — it really says a lot. Most churches that we saw were less than 30 years old, and they were building new ones every day. Even people that do not believe in God or are agnostic go to church every Sunday. It is expected and, as mentioned, the church have more roles than just the divine. One of the first questions you might get is what church you belong to, and if you are searching for the right one you will be invited. Actually all my colleagues knew my atheistic belief so when I asked my colleague Steve if we could come and visit *his* church (as an educational visit) he looked at me in a very blessed glance. And visiting the Dawson church in Homewood was certainly something different than a service in Kumla Kyrkby that is our closest church. Only the logistics was impressive; parking decks, staff handing out and collecting in umbrellas when people passed the street, babysitters, Sunday school the works. I would guess that in two hours a thousand people came, participated in the service and left.



Figure 4.12: There is an explanation for everything. In the south it is more likely to come from the Bible.

Another amazing experience was when Greg asked me if we wanted to see “the drive through nativity” at a Presbyterian church. We drove to that church a Wednesday night, and waited in a loooooong line of cars waiting for their turn. After not even half an hour a woman from the organization handed over a small battery driven tape recorder through the window. She shouted “now” to two others, pressed “play” and off we went in this small caravan of three cars. The tape recorder’s voice started to talk about Christmas and after a few hundred yards there was a split house that you could look into where there were actors that was quite synchronized with the tape in the car. After 30 seconds we drover further on this immense parking lot to the next “station” where other actors played another part from Christmas life or stories from the Bible. So after 10 minutes of driving and stopping we had seen angels, Jesus, Joseph & Maria, Roman soldiers, living animals like cows, horses, goats, donkeys and even a camel. Very impressive and very exciting experience. There must have been a hundred actors and hundreds of people in the organization behind the scenes. And all for free. The Swedish translation would be “drive-through living Christmas crib” which would make the Swedish environmental movement go bananas, but I guess this kind of activity is possible only in America. . .

I might get out on slippery ice with this but I have a theory. The Americans and a good number of other western countries don’t understand each other. There is a deep rift in the view of death penalty, the role of the world police and the way to spread freedom and democracy to the rest of the world. When most Swedes hear the last sentence of each presidential speech “God bless America”, they normally think it is some kind of necessary catchy phrase. Most Swedes finds it disturbing ignorant and question the mental state of the country when they attack Iraq of all countries because of their WMD or their support to terrorists when there would be more legitimacy to go for other countries. Few Americans are aware of that they are the only western democracy that still has the death penalty. I spoke about this with Millicent Bolden, a teacher in Spanish;

*F: But how can you as civilized people and Christians still support death penalty. I don’t get it.
M: Because it feels right and fair for the family that suffered for others’ crime.*

F: Payback? I still don't get it. Death penalty doesn't act as a deterrent against crime. And wouldn't it be better if you could change people before they do crime or if they do it try to change them afterwards. Give them a chance?

M: Oh, there is huge difference in our views, you know we believe in evil and evil has to be stopped!

At last! I didn't got an answer I liked or accepted, but for once in my life I understood how they, or at least some of them, think. They believe in God and they believe in the evil devil. If the evil is a Arabic dictator or a serial killer from Nevada, they must be stopped, and the best way is to eliminate them. It is not a choice, it is your duty to fight evil. Saddam was evil and even if he didn't have WMD or supported those that crashed planes on 9/11, he belongs to the axis of evil in the world. Mixing religion and politics is obviously not only occurring in Iran. This reasoning doesn't work all the way of course, and I won't try to convince any one anything more since it is not the purpose of this report. But what I wanted to say is that I finally understood a tiny part of how some people reason around those topics. Before that they were just idiots to me. So many, maybe most American doesn't just say "God bless you". They actually believe it! And that is hard to understand when you're from the most secular country in the world⁹. I should also mention as a remark that I and Millicent shared more political values than I did with most Alabamians, but she was on the other hand from Georgia.

4.8 Some small words

Not enough for a subsection, but nevertheless worth mentioning

- If you're in the USA skip TV and listen to radio. If you want to get upset, listen to some Christian right wing at any AM station. If you want to get amused, listen to NPR (in Birmingham it is on 90.3 WBHM) and the show "Cartalk" with Tom and Ray Magliozzi. The show is describe on the website as "Imagine the Marx Brothers answering questions about automobiles. Picture Monty Python trying to imitate car noises. Think of A.J. Foyt telling someone how to open the car hood. Mix it all up, throw in a little Dr. Ruth and a little Smothers Brothers, and you've got Car Talk". Actually you can listen to NPR throught the web since it is broadcasted on internet as well which I frequently do even from Sweden.
- The playground in Wald Park, Vestavia Hill is great!
- Philadelphia cheese with blue berry taste is also great!
- Even if you are not interested in sports (like me) see some football, and see it with someone that knows the rules. They are not hard but you will not really be able to figure out them by yourself. The yellow line that shows the 10 yards the team has to gain in four attempts is although only visible on TV. At Samford they had a "Fun zone" for children where they have inflated jump castles which is a real Eldorado for kids. But even if you're not that interested in the sports, stay at least to the half time when the marching band is performing on the field. I saw a high school game where the actual game was miserable, but the "Patriots" - the orchestra's show was in my opinion as good as any Olympic game's opening scene. It is hard to explain since it differs a lot from what we Swedes would call a marching band. Just see it!

- You pay for incoming calls as well as outgoing on your cell phone! Smart to charge the users twice for one call!
- Everything sounds a lot in the USA, and I guess because quite costs. Air conditioners, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, dish washer anything with a motor sounds at least three or four times as loud as we're used to in Sweden. When an American claims it is quiet, it is substantial noise left for the Swedish ear.
- The washing machine's normal program took about 30 minutes compared to the 2,5 hour in Sweden. The secret is they use five time as much water as we use in hours. But in the country where availability is more important than high tax on energy it is possible.
- Tip 15% on restaurants — always and not only if you thought it was exceptionally good. If you do it the Swedish way; round up to the closest dollar or two, you have really insulted the waitress. If you do not know if you should or how much you should tip for taxi, a hair cut or a guided tour — ask! I did and I never felt that someone tried to rip me off or make fun of me.
- When someone will speak to fast or not open the mouth enough to get a good pronunciation (especially on the phone), just say; "Please, much slower. I'm from Sweden and English is not my first language". It is not unlikely that you will have better pronunciation or more correct grammar than the Americans, but the Oxford English we learned in school is quite far from a deep black southern accent.
- In Shelby and Walker counties in Alabama (among others) you cannot buy beer in stores or get it in restaurants on a Sunday. When we were invited home to Samford faculty members we were sometimes offered beer or wine, and when we declined the answer was in 9 out 10 "But this is perfectly alright, it is not Samford now". It's maybe amazing that pagans like us choose not not to drink alcohol.
- Linda got a real pain in her back so she went to a chiropractor in Homewood. She showed her insurance card from Kammarkollegium and they started to treat her. After almost two months of treatment the chiropractor said that he didn't get paid so we had to pay the \$580. We phoned to Sweden and asked what the problem was and there was of course several. First we had to make a notification of damage to Sweden and then they would maybe pay for two or three treatments since Kammarkollegiet normally do not pay for chiropractors. But to our pleasure they paid for everything after a few weeks.
- Americans do only care about price. Quality is not secondary — it is not an issue at all. That means that enviromental issues, child labor or if it produced in a country that doesn't respect human rights is just ignored.
- I and Linda were invited to Shades Cahaba to perform a small Lucia "train". Well we sang a couple of songs to Xerxes and Zacharina's classes. The children had prepared by making Staffan cones for the boys and paper candle crowns for the girls. Well a small miss; the teachers had probably read that the cones was black, but I guess that was more than a hundred years ago. Anyway — it was a very nice and fun experience for us, the children and the teachers.



Figure 4.13: Saint Lucia — a small cultural exchange.

- Travelling to something also means that you left something. Home, work, food, culture, some habits and friends. We gave the risk of home sickness a thought - especially Linda gets homesick after two or three weeks when we are away normally. And to our surprise and joy none of us felt home sick during our stay. Of course we felt for going home when that day came closer but we really enjoyed our stay and in some respects we also knew that we would long back for Alabama back home again. But there were of course periods when we didn't know what to do. Always taking the initiative to anything can also be bothersome. It wasn't like at home; always someone will call and ask if you want to come or someone of our friends will gatecrash unannounced to our big pleasure. Starting more or less a new life and building a new network with friends take time. And you cannot expect that all the people you meet or get introduced to will be your friends. But every time we got invited or successfully got someone home to our apartment, we lived on that for days. What I really learned from this was that I must be much better to take care of guests at my department — especially those that are there for some months. I have been lousy on that before since I never saw that as my task or duty to entertain foreigners. I promise to be better on this because now I know how important it can be.
- Diversity is considered as an important property to make a society grow. The “melting pot” in the USA is however in my opinion much of a myth. On average they have all different races, cultures and ways to do things, but since society is so clustered they will never meet and make the exchanges. Or as Allan Dobbins explained it; *“Our politicians really loves the diversity and they are making everything to make this country even more diverse; the poor poorer, the rich richer the smart smarter and the stupid even more stupid.”*
- I also learned how hopeless bureaucracy can be. You stand there in front of the counter and the person behind asks you to fill out a form. You realize that you will not be able to fill out some of the boxes or you do not have the paper they ask for. But you have something close to that. So you ask friendly if that paper could do. And they explain that they want it their way. And you realize that your paper is as good... no even better than



Figure 4.14: The Hynds family visited us one evening.

what they are asking for. But it is not good enough and you will maybe never be able to get what you want. As a director of undergraduate studies I meet lots of students and some of them are from other countries. And now I understand how they feel. I hope I will be more gentle and give them more help when I deny them something. Because now I really understand how they feel.

Notes

¹Barnavårdcentralen

²“Hem & Skola”

³in Sweden it is not uncommon to get 100%

⁴for instance Carlbecks-kommittén

⁵but maybe not ;-)

⁶in cold climate your glasses will become misty when you come in

⁷could best described as “riksmarschen”

⁸see also section 4.7 about religion

⁹See for instance the Inglehart Values map at World Values Survey (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>) where Sweden is in the upper right corner

Chapter 5

Conclusions

When I came to this last chapter I really didn't know what to conclude. It is all in the previous chapters and it is hard to summarize five months great adventure in a few catchy sentences that hasn't been already said. But I try anyway. . .

It has been great fun! And I can recommend it to anyone that wants to do something different and open to the idea to change your way of doing things and some of your old values. But I also know that this is not easy — maybe the hardest we can do so it is really not for anyone.

I don't regret much. If I would do it again, I would of course do it differently, and I really hope I will have more opportunities in life to experience a new world and culture in the way we did. It has been a big eye opener and we have all learned so much.

A few thing about the institutions around this journey amazed me. Or at least I didn't catch from the beginning what they could help me with. Both Samford and STINT had very little experience to share that could help me or the people that I worked with at Samford. And it surprise especially since this program has been around for several years, so some kind of knowledge could have been expected. But nevertheless it was starting from square one with pioneering and breaking new ground as the major task. I do really not mind — I think I learned lots from that, but if you would consider efficiency this might not be the best way to use money to gain new knowledge in a scientific way — we are after all scientists.

Was it worth it? Well it depends on who you ask and how much that entity sponsored this journey. Obviously I and my family think we didn't sacrifice anything. So on a personal level of course. We are better and more competent people today than we were before we left Sweden. Did Sweden get something back? I guess we were good enough ambassadors and we showed our values and ways by describing the world. Our municipal Sala kommun will save money since our son will not require the more expensive special school. Mälardalen University will get a more experienced director of undergraduate studies but I guess that my home institution department of computer science will not get any new courses, working methods or research so they might be those that paid most and got out least. But experience from previous STINT scholars has shown that the scholarship had an impact on their work for several years in directions they didn't expected, so it is maybe to early to give a final evaluation.

What also I really will miss besides my friends and the climate, is all those friendly smiles and greetings that I got all the time from friends and strangers. It was like even if someone had

a bad day, they put on a smile anyway so they wouldn't destroy someone else's good mood. That's what I call respect and I wish we could have more of that in Sweden :-). And Xerxes school with his ... there is no adjective big enough describing my feelings ... class. It meant so much for us. Maybe more than you ever can imagine. From my own perspective it was really the best of everything. The last question I asked Steve Donaldson before I left him also say a lot;

F: So what has been the best?

S: The friendship!



Figure 5.1: Daniel, Maggie, Xerxes and Paige waiting for their parents after school.

Appendix A

The VISA process

Getting a VISA has become a much harder process post 9/11. These things change and what we experienced in Sweden might not be applicable anywhere and anytime else. To help other scholars at that time (and since I got some questions) I wrote down my experiences on a webpage and then I decided to put a copy in this report as well. At that time I wrote it in Swedish and since this is information for Swedes only I see no reason to translate it.

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1. Om du börjar med amerikanska ambassaden så står allt där
<http://stockholm.usembassy.gov/>
Men eftersom du är ute efter non-immigrant-visa så landar du till slut på deras checklista
<http://stockholm.usembassy.gov/Consulate/book.html>
2. Du och din flickvän/familj kommer behöva 4 blanketter vardera, nämligen DS-156, DS-157, DS-158 och DS-2019.
157 och 158 är bara att tanka hem och fylla i - det går dessutom att fylla i dem direkt i acrobat och sedan skriva ut på skrivare.
156 måste du fylla i på webben (länk finns på ovanstående webbsida) som ett formulär och när du sedan har skickat iväg det så kommer datorn i andra ändan generera en pdf som du skriver ut (3 sidor)
3. 2019 är den krångligaste för där är du dessutom i händerna på ditt universitet i USA. Det är nämligen dom som måste skapa detta formulär åt dig (för att det ska bli ett J1-visum) och din flickvän/familj (som får J2-status) och sedan skicka till dig. För att dom ska kunna göra det så vill dom att du fyller i blankett DS-2019B och skickar till dem. De kommer sedan likt DS156 fylla i det i någon databas (som heter SEVIS) och sedan få ut en pdf som dom skriver ut och skriver under. Dessutom så måste dom skriva ett inbjudningsbrev till dig personligen.
4. När dessa fyra blanketter är klara så är det bara att fixa en bild på sig själv, och ta med giltiga pass, frankerat kuvert för varje ansökan samt betalt 800 spänn per skalle för ansökan till amerikanska ambassaden.

5. Observera att man måste boka tid vilket man också gör på webben (på samma ovanstående sida finns en länk). Gränssnittet är lite dåligt men fyll i ditt namn som vanligt och lägg till namnet på din flickvän/familj i stora textrutan.

That's it! Några tips:

- Boka tid på ambassaden bums. Du kan alltid avboka och boka en ny tid senare, men eftersom väntelistan just nu är en hel månad så är det ingen vits att vänta tills alla dina papper är klara för då är det nog för sent.
- Börja med DS2019! Dom andra blanketterna kan du alltid fixa dagen innan. Om du inte vet vem som sköter internationella frågor så fråga någon stintare som var på ditt lärosäte förra året (blanketten är ganska ny så frågar du någon från 2000 eller 2001 så vet dom inte för då fanns inte DS2019) eller din kontaktperson på universitet. Se till att dom jobbar med din ansökan hela tiden (ställ frågor varje vecka om hur det går och vem som gör vad så att du kan pusha på - jag var (och är) i alla fall tvungen att göra det). Förvånas inte om de är väldigt osäkra på hur de ska göra, för blanketten och hela detta förfarande kring DS2019 är tämligen nytt. Till DS2019 kommer ditt USA-universitet att behöva följande dokument
 - Försäkringsbrev eller en beskrivning
 - Kontrakt/brevet från STINT
 - Löneuppgift från din arbetsplats
 - Blankett DS2019B
- Du kan hitta det jag skickade (+ 2 andra sidor som var specifika för Samford) på min webbsida (stor fil)
- Om banken inte ger dig en kopia på din inbetalning utan bara ett kvitto så be dem kopiera din inbetalning och stämpla den. Kvitto + inbetalningskopia dög när vi skulle in.
- Fotografiet till DS156 är av udda format (5x5cm och i Sverige används 4x5cm) och kan inte erhållas hur som helst. Ett svenska passfoto duger inte! (Bilderna ska t.ex. vara tagen rakt framifrån.) Jag tog min egen bild själv med en digitalkamera (1,3 megapixel duger bra). Se till att ha en vit vägg bakom. Trimma in bilden i t.ex. Word där du kan ta hjälp av linjalerna. Skriv ut på fotopapper med en bläckstråleskrivare. Kolla in alla mått och krav på fotot på ambassadens webbsida så att ansiktet på bilden är rättplacerad och är av rätt storlek.
- Om du har ett pass från 1998 eller 1999 så BYT även om det ser bra ut. Min frus pass som är från 1998 och var i bra skick sa ambassaden att framsidan hade trillat ur! Min hypotes är att de automatiskt underkänner pass från dessa årgångar.
- Kontakta personalavdelningen på din högskola och be dem försäkra dig och eventuell familj via kammarkollegiums reseförsäkring. Hos oss var det lite krångel med betalningen, men vi löste det så att personalavdelningen fakturerar min institution och så får jag i min tur betala den fakturan. Du behöver dessutom denna försäkring för att DS2019 ska

kunna skrivas ut, men även om du inte har något försäkringsbrev i handen så kan du göra som jag, skriva vad den innehåller;

About the insurance;

My (Filip Sebek) insurance is covered by the Swedish state group insurance and personal insurance (GIF). <http://www.kammarkollegiet.se/forsakr/villkor/UKGIF9.pdf>

*I and my family will also have a travel insurance
<http://www.kammarkollegiet.se/forsakr/villkor/resfors010701.htm>*

The coverage is stated as a number of "statutory base amount" which is an index stated by the Swedish government and that is used in many occasions in Sweden. Today (2004) one base amount is SEK 39300 which is approx. USD 5170.

As an example you can for instance see in GIF section C1 that it covers 20 base amount times 5170, which is more than USD 100000 per accident.

I believe that these insurances cover your requirements well.

- Om du av någon anledning ska ringa till ambassaden så är inte det enkelt eftersom de har begränsade telefontider (13-15, Mån-Tors) och de har ingen bra telefonkö. Är det fullt på alla telefoner så blir du bara utslängd och måste prova ringa igen. Jag gjorde så här; Ställde in klockan efter fröken ur och slog numret 08-7835469 och därefter tryckte på 4 13:00 PRICK. Då blev det tyst i fem minuter och sedan fick jag prata med en tjänsteman. Alternativet är fax, men det har inte varit framgångsrikt. Prova båda om du måste. Epost funkar inte (står även på ambassadens webbsida).
- Kolla gärna på <http://www.idt.mdh.se/fsk/alabama/> där jag kontinuerligt lägger upp material.
- Post som har skickats till mig från Alabama har tagit 12 dagar (8 arbetsdagar) att komma fram och har den skickats med FedEx så har det tagit 5 arbetsdagar. Fördelen med t.ex. FedEx är att man kan följa sitt brev med deras trackingnumber och kan därför göra en bedömning om brevet har en chans att komma i tid om man lever på marginalerna.

Appendix B

More documentation

I wrote a public diary where I wrote all my first impressions and late thoughts so it would be easier to write the final report. Another reason to do this was to inform friends and family in Sweden what's going on but also a way to discuss things with other STINT scholars. Unfortunately the other STINT scholars were not much of communicators (with me at least) which I found as a big loss of opportunities. So with some 70 pages of dense written text and over 4500 (4GB) digital pictures I felt like I had lots of documentation about the stay.

The diary and the pictures have been my greatest help to write this report and also a way to work with my impressions. I would encourage everyone to do this – especially during an adventure like this.

This document is available in a high-resolution picture format and a smaller portable format. Those and additional documentation like pictures and the diary, are available at my personal webpage at <http://www.idt.mdh.se/fsk/>