Learning to Be Late

by Stephanie Malinski

My body has a severe allergy to tardiness. When I’m running behind, a sweaty sheen rises from my skin, my heart begins to have noticeable palpitations, and my left arm is taken over by spasms which cause me to keep flicking my wristwatch toward my face. This aversion is so horrific that I avoid being late at all costs. Instead, I arrive early: ten to fifteen minutes early.

Perhaps I have let this disability control my life, but in my defense, it seems to have worked quite well for me. I have never missed a flight, my papers are always turned in on time, and I have never had to send a “Happy Belated Birthday” card. So you see, my affliction has saved me from the sheer embarrassment that comes with the phrase “happy belated…”

Not only is lateness humiliating, but it is also a sign of weakness. Since my earliest memories, my father taught his children that Malinski’s are not late. (Our mother is another story, often showing up a half-hour after our sport’s practices ended, but then again her maiden name is Selly.) Sunday mornings, the family had to be in the car by 9:30 a.m., even though it is only a five-minute drive to church, and mass does not start until 10:00. My father was adamant that punctuality reflects heavily on character, and this principle was drilled in us from our birth.

I arrived in Sevilla, Spain last January with this notion cemented in my brain. Before leaving to study abroad for the semester, I had spent countless hours in workshops designed to help smooth my transition. We watched skits based on the differences between American culture and culture abroad. The only role-play I remember showed two students who were supposed to meet for coffee and one never came. The boy waiting looked at his watch repeatedly and sighed in exasperation before finally leaving the table. Only minutes later, the actor playing the foreigner arrived and sat down, muttering about being early. I laughed along with the audience, but I laughed because of the ridiculousness of the situation; people don’t act like that, regardless of where they are from.

By the end of my first week in Sevilla, I knew I was wrong. I lived in a homestay and ate my meals with the family during the week. Each morning, I started class at 8:15. My señora also knew this because she had a copy of my class schedule. Additionally, she knew how long it should take me to walk to school. And, I was not allowed to cook my own food. My life ran on her time. This could have worked out fine, but she had an issue similar to my problem with being on time; it dictated her life, and she could not work past it. She did not like waking up.

“Eight fifteen… there must be a misprint here. Classes have never started at eight fifteen,” she whined to me the night before school started. Trying to appease her, I agreed that yes, it was early, but there was nothing I could do. “Ay ay ay. So early; so early,” she lamented, emphasizing her disgust by flicking her right hand (a Spanish trick I soon learned meant “very” and quickly put to use). After calming down a bit, she told me breakfast would be ready at quarter to eight, thus allowing me 15 minutes to eat and another 15 to walk to school. The next morning my coffee and toast were ready as soon as I sat at the table. She was all smiles; it seemed like our conversation from the night before had been forgotten.

This routine continued for about half a second. The following morning, she seemed to move a little slower, and I noticed she was still wearing her pajamas. Another morning came

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and señora still had glasses on. Each day, she was less prepared, and I started wondering when it would end. Perhaps one day she just wouldn’t wake up.

That thought seemed humorous until it happened. One morning, seven forty-five came, and the only light on in the house was in my bedroom. Seven forty-six – I tried turning on the bathroom light, hoping to wake her. No success. Seven forty-eight – I slammed the door a bit harder than usual as I entered the bathroom. She must be sound asleep still if she didn’t hear that. Seven fifty arrived; I counted four beads of sweat on my forehead. How am I going to make it to class on time? At seven fifty-five, I started planning. Perhaps if I sneak into the kitchen, I can grab a chunk of bread and eat that on my way to school. (At this point, you may be thinking that I should have just left or that perhaps I must be quite a large girl if I cannot skip one breakfast. However, you must understand that lunch was not until three o’clock. Those two pieces of toast covered with olive oil and that cup of lukewarm coffee were my only hope in getting through two one and a half hour classes, a workout at the gym, and then another hour and a half class.)

At seven fifty-seven, I stuck my head into the kitchen. Without the light, I could not make much out. Is that a loaf of bread covered in tinfoil? I should just make a run for it. I’m going to try it – uhh… its slimy… UGH! It’s that stupid pig’s leg that always sits on the counter. Gross, I may have just become a vegetarian. I realized that now, there were basically two options, skip class, or spend the period slouched in my chair as my stomach acted as a musical instrument.

Wandering back to my room dejected, I slammed the door in frustration. I no longer had any hope of getting to class on time. After two years at Marquette, I knew how professors reacted to tardiness. The majority act as if they do not mind, but it’s a mental checkmark against the student each time he or she is late. Pretty soon, you’re known as the “late kid” and when the semester ends, your grade is the only one the professor does not round up.

As I was reflecting on how I was about to fail out of school, I heard another noise. Subtle, yet unmistakable. Someone was getting out of bed! Relief and success coursed through my body; I felt as though I had just finished a ten-page term paper. Even though it was already 8:02, I hesitated to leave my room, trying not to appear too eager. At 8:03, I settled into my chair in the dining room, as my señora came out with a cup of coffee. “Hmm, it’s a little late,” she murmured, “I was wondering if you were awake.”

That was not the only time that she seemed to imply that her oversleeping was not an issue. With each day that I arrived late to class, I began to realize that no one really cared when I showed up. My professors never looked up from their lecture, and my Spanish friends never appeared even a bit apologetic when they were tardy. Additionally, I started understanding Sevilla more.

Located in the southernmost region of Andalusia, Sevilla is the fourth largest city in Spain. It boasts quite a reputation. Known for its religious-like adherence to the siesta, a three-hour period each afternoon during which every business shuts down, and most inhabitants can be found napping around a table under which a heater is placed, Sevilla is called the laziest city in Spain. The Northerners believe that the further south one travels, the more laziness he will encounter, and this lack of work ethic climaxes in Sevilla.

However, speak to a local and they will tell you that this assumption is ridiculous. I cannot count the number of rebuttals I was subjected to, but the most common goes something like this: “Sevillanos work the most and sleep the least out of any other city in Spain; this is a
fact that has been studied and proven.” After living in the culture for a couple weeks, I came to my own conclusion. I believed that a scientist had indeed conducted a study regarding the habits of Sevillanos, but most likely, he himself was a Sevillano and was distracted before he could finish the study.

Starting at ten am, and continuing well past midnight, the streets and cafes of Sevilla are filled. When my parents visited, my father’s first question was, “Don’t these people work?” His observation may not have been entirely correct, but it was close enough. If a Sevillano does not absolutely have to work, he or she will not. The city’s unofficial slogan reflects this notion perfectly. “While the much of the world lives to work, Sevilla works to live.”

The longer I lived in Sevilla, the more I understood this phrase. After much reflection on the way of life in Sevilla, I found my own question. Why should one spend his or her whole life working toward something in the future when each moment provides something new to be enjoyed? My señora and Spanish friends were constantly commanding me to “¡Relaja!” or relax because I was always concerned about what was next, where I had to be, or what I should be doing. They found my constant need to be occupied entertaining but also frustrating. One evening I had met friends for a drink before dinner. After only about a half-hour, I started gathering my things in a rush, muttering about being late for dinner. My friend José threw up his hands in frustration and exclaimed, “Why can’t you Americans realize that what is important is now?”

I did not have time to answer him that evening, but if I could go back to that moment, I would explain to José what I now believe to be the reason. From the moment American children are able to form their own ideas, they are repeatedly asked what they want to do when they grow up. Parents and relatives provide examples that if one does not find success at work, one does not find success in life. To achieve these American ideals, children learn to constantly think about the future. Kindergarten now has a full day option because kids can never be too prepared. All of high school is spent working toward college, and even the universities encourage students to finish in four years. It is as though we must always think of what is next; we cannot relax because then we are wasting time. My issues with timeliness are considered a tool for success in this version of society. However, in Sevilla, where life focuses on enjoying the moment and fully being where you are, being early is not always a good thing.

Since my return from Sevilla, I find myself back into my old patterns. If I am running late, I may find my left wrist spastically jerking toward my face. Generally, my pace quickens when this happens, but every so often, I find myself pausing to chat with a friend I encounter, or slowing down just slightly to admire the brilliant autumn leaves overhead. Those are the moments when I realize that I am fully present in the now. Those are also the times when I most appreciate how Sevilla showed me how to be late.