

Eternal

*There is no life
beyond ourselves
yet we can be
Eternal.*

Picture those words, scrawled on a wall in the middle of Rome, with an incomprehensible signature scribbled beneath it: written by a person you will never meet and never know. Someone, at some point in time, decided to write this message on a wall, just blocks from the Colosseum, in a city tripping over itself with history and culture. There are probably thousands of people who walk by it every day without a second thought, looking for Rome's next Great Attraction. They don't stop to see these words. But I saw them. And I've thought about them every day since.

Those ten words, simple as they may be, are etched into my brain. It was fate, maybe, that I came across them in the first place; I know I couldn't find that wall again, even if I tried. And nearly every day since then, I have pondered their meaning. Why did *I* find this message? Why has it stuck with me so relentlessly? And how can we, as the wall says, be "eternal?"

There were countless things I saw in Rome that took my breath away. I could have stayed in the Sistine Chapel for hours, staring up at the ceiling, or wandered the Vatican Museum for days. But I am not sure I could say these particular experiences changed my life the same way that wall did. At first, I found it ironic: *a city with history in every brick of its cobbled streets, and this is the thing that impacted me most.* But there is something about words scribbled on the side of a building that cannot be found in a world-renowned museum, gallery, or monument.

In a city with centuries of documented culture, I still managed, completely by chance, to find something unique. Something that was not memorialized, or advertised as an attraction. It was a sign of Rome - the *real* Rome. A place outside of tourist traps and guided tours. The *real* Rome lived in the writing on that wall, just as it lived in an artist, painting on Ponte Sant'Angelo, or the musician singing on the bridge over the Tiber, or the flower vendor and his cat at Piazzale Garibaldi during sunset. It was evidence of life outside of my visit there. It was proof that they were eternal. And with my witness of this culture, this *life*, I was made eternal too.

Traveling with purpose is finding these moments, these beautiful bits of existence, and carrying them with you for the rest of your life. Anyone can look at the Colosseum and claim they saw Rome - and they would, in some ways, be right. But they cannot say that they *experienced* Rome, for purpose is not always found in the grand things. It's human connection that changes lives. Most people wouldn't talk with that artist on a bridge, and they wouldn't know that he grew up in Florence, or that it had always been his dream to move to Rome. They'd know their taxi driver spoke very little English, but they wouldn't go the extra mile to have a conversation with him - and they'd never know about his daughter, about the same age as me.

Many people visit, but they do not travel. When people *try* - *try* to envelop themselves in a foreign culture, *try* to meet new people, *try* to show kindness through cultural barriers - that is when they are traveling, and doing so with purpose. That is what changes lives. That is how we become eternal.