I have been hard pressed to see substantive change in myself over the past year. I wrote the following a couple of months ago on this topic.

I have wanted to live abroad for many years. A big part of the reason for this is that I earnestly believed the experience would change me in some fundamental way; I have had, until recently, a longstanding faith in the notion that the individual should be continually evolving toward an ideal, unsullied self.

In his poem “The Dry Salvages”, T.S. Eliot argues against the notion of personal evolution:

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence –
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution

When, after eight months in Finland, I realized that the great changes that I was expecting were not occurring, I was distressed. Gradually, though, I came to an understanding that it wasn’t the fact that I wasn’t evolving that was the problem; it was, rather, that I was expecting substantive change at all.

Personal evolution, or self-improvement, can only occur in time. But the mystics say that freedom lies outside of time, in the life lived completely in the here and now. Most of us (me included) don’t have the ambition and self discipline to achieve such a life. But Eliot, again in “The Dry Salvages”, suggests that it is enough that we not stray too far and never stop trying.

And right action is freedom
From past and future also.
For most of us, this is the aim
Never to be realized;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying;
We, content at last
If our temporal reversion nourish
(Not too far from the yew-tree)
The life of significant soil.

When I shift my intention toward a “life of significant soil”, my time in Finland takes on new meaning. The experience has most certainly nourished my life’s soil, and what more can I ask than that?

How do I ensure that I live a life “Not too far from the yew-tree”? I think that for me the answer is gratitude. Gratitude for what I have takes me away from an over-focus on past wrongs and mistakes and on worries for the future.

One of the great gifts of my time in Finland is that I’ve realized that exotic experience by itself does not bring contentment or personal transformation. Contentment must be continually cultivated in the here and now. And personal transformation, I now feel, is something that we have no control over; it comes and goes as it will, and usually not when or in a way we would choose.
What I didn’t realize was that rather than becoming someone new, what was really needed was for me to rediscover parts of myself that had been lost to the years.

Over the past several days, we have been unpacking the house. In the process, I have come across some old journals. In browsing them, I became reacquainted with a poet I’d forgotten existed. Here’s a poem I wrote almost eight years ago.

**To My Father (The Potter’s Meal)**

At one with the movement
of the potter’s wheel,
you sat

with clothes splotched,
hand dirty
and wet.

The wheel spinning clay
was your way
to emptiness,

to feeling alive and connected,
like the Buddha,
like Jesus –

the Potter’s Meal.

‘I see that I am an artist;
I am a lover of women;
I am a valued friend,’

you wrote next to a drawing
of flowers
in clay.

Thanks to going away and coming back, I have become reacquainted with my poet-self, and I count this a great gift. My year in Finland prepared me for this rediscovery I think.

Thanks to you all, good friends. Here’s to remembering, but also to looking forward; life is short and is to be lived as fully as we can muster. Happy trails.

**Bye y’all, it’s been fun!**

**And good-bye Finland!**
The Bardsleys