Robert Van Herik, Jr. graduated from Batavia High School and enriched himself with experiences such as the one in his essay "Some Random Transformation" before coming to NIU. Robert plans to go into forestry after graduating. Aside from nature, Robert is also interested in music and poetry. The subject of this essay is about a pivotal experience in Robert’s life.
Some Random Transformation

Robert Van Herik, Jr.

My life has been scattered with defining moments from my earliest memories to the experiences of last week. So many factors contribute to what makes a person, and one experience could forever change the person. A paramount period of time for most people is graduating from high school and becoming an adult. When I was eighteen years old and finally done with mandatory school, infinite options spread out before me. I decided that in order to really find out who I was, and who I was to be, I had to separate myself from everything known and comfortable. Luckily for me, my great aunt and uncle were planning an international move and I was invited along for the ride. That summer, I went to Thailand and India, and the events that unfolded were to greatly mold me into who I am today.

I remember not being able to sleep the night before, taking roll call of all the essentials: tickets, passport, money, phone numbers, embassy cards, and notebook; everything else I could live without. I obsessed over my itinerary again and again, making sure of the time changes and the duration of my layovers. I wondered what I was going to do on a thirteen-hour flight. After a sleepless night and a drowsy car ride to the airport, I was on a plane headed west for thirteen hours to Seoul for a five-hour layover and finally a six-hour flight to Bangkok. In a daze that matched the smog-magnified sunset that was just over the skyscrapers, I stepped out of the plane and didn't know if it was morning or dusk or Monday or Tuesday; everything seemed more than just a little alien to me. Needless to say, I was happy to see my uncle.

The first two weeks of my trip I spent with my aunt and uncle, living the life they did as teachers in the International School at Bangkok and American Embassy School at New Delhi; at the schools, privileged children from all over the world are educated right next to the worst slums I've ever witnessed. During the weeks spent with them, I did the touristy activities, taking pictures, eating at restaurants,
and going to plays and musical performances. All these activities were very enjoyable and helped orientate me to the countries, but I was most excited, and in the long run most affected, by the second two weeks of my trip. I spent these last weeks alone, first in the Rajasthan Providence in India traveling by train, and then in Thailand’s northerly city Chang Mai and the surrounding mountain jungles traveling by bus. I truly believe that a foreign country should be enjoyed head first, with as little known comfort as possible.

The creaky crooked train struggled over the bumpy tracks, leaving the haze of New Delhi behind as it traveled west into the desert of Rajasthan. Eastern-style toilets, of the kind one has to squat to use, the lack of air conditioning, and the cramped space due to the overselling of seats made this the cheapest ticket to the city of Agra, home of the Taj Mahal and where many precious stones are mined. This cheap ticket also led to the fact that I was the only noticeable foreigner aboard. There was no alphabetic or English translation for the names of the stops or the food menu, which made this an unnerving experience for an American used to people in the cities speaking English and being accommodating to Americans.

The confusion I felt on the train showed me what it was like for foreigners in our country. The first thing that happened when I stepped off the train was that a swarm of taxi drivers, who outnumbered the train passengers two to one, started yelling out prices at me as the other more culturally-conscious passengers quickly got away. As I walked down the block to find a more agreeable auto rickshaw, I noticed a pile of garbage sitting in an alley behind a building with sacred cows foraging through it, sleepers in rows on the sidewalk, and random dogs and monkeys running amok. I also noticed sheet-metal tenements spread out for a city block. I knew I was on a different planet. These images forever seared in my soul the idea of utter poverty and showed me that here in America even our poor live a good life.

After Agra, I traveled by train to the neighboring city of Jaipur, which is situated in high rolling fields and is also home to many precious stones. I met a young man there about my age who was a student and was very forward. We became friends in no time, and he showed me around the city, the pink city, as it’s called, for the color of many of its buildings in the main district. Before meeting Janou, I encountered Indians as distrustful of foreigners who saw them as a way to make money. Finally, I could see an Indian city through the eyes
and ideas of an Indian. Janou even took me to visit his guru, who lived in a little concrete structure in the middle of a roundabout intersection. We brought him milk and chai, and as we drank, he made offerings to his idols and spoke to me about the Hindu religion through the translation of my new friend. I was then allowed to pray with them. I made a prayer up, feeling the overall spirituality of the Hindu people before leaving for my hotel in the thick, stagnant, odorous night and walking on the empty streets next to the sidewalks that were full of sleepers.

The next week I left India and flew back to Bangkok for a couple of nights. I had become lonely with my thoughts and set out to meet people; lo and behold, there were many travelers just like me, from all different countries and walks of life. I felt like I could connect with strangers just because we were all curious and in alien territory, and the Thai were just as curious as we. After a twenty-hour bus ride north, I set upon the more sparsely inhabited, far less polluted Thai city of Chang Mai, which was surrounded by lush mountainous jungle. This was the jungle I was to set out upon for a three-day guided trek. The day before we left I toured the surrounding temples, called wats, heard monks speak, and respectfully meditated alongside other Buddhists. To have a religious experience in a foreign country, especially since I was interested in Buddhism, gave my spirituality a whole new light, and I could feel the age of the religion and the generations of energy espoused in the temple. My focus and veneration in spirituality was transformed and Buddhism instantly became my base.

The next morning six other foreigners and I set out on a not-too-vigorous trek of the surrounding mountainside. We stayed with village tribes, who made money off of us by selling us food, beer, Coca-Cola, and fruits, but who still maintained an agricultural and simple lifestyle in remote villages. The villagers lived in such contrast to the busy city dwellers, and a lifestyle gap that was not as prevalent in America was apparent there. Everything was lush and picturesque, green, and inspiring. We rode elephants to the top of a hill, navigated bamboo rafts down the river, and slept under mosquito nets with the innumerable stars above us and the indescribable sounds of the jungle surrounding and seeping into us.

Visiting Thailand and India was a life-changing experience to me, and my identity is forever chiseled and set apart from the mundane.
It’s hard to elaborate on who I would be without traveling there, but I can say that I would have a much narrower outlook on the world and I would be a generally less spiritual person. The western inspired big-city atmosphere of Bangkok, in comparison to the way the villagers lived in a time that seems distant from modernization, was a big eye opener for me. To see the post-British occupied New Delhi compared to the spice market-centered Old Delhi showed me what foreign influence can do. To see huge class gaps in two more recently modernized countries and to view utter poverty far beyond anything we have in America proved to me that life here is good. Exploring the differences and likenesses of cultures and peoples around the world strengthened the notion that being human is universal beyond national borders. This proved to be the trip that would categorize my life of wandering internationally and here in our expansive United States for years past and hopefully years to come, if finances permit.

**Instructor Melina Probst's comments:** In this essay on a trip to a foreign country, Robert’s perspective on life is inspirational and unique, qualities that make this paper successful. Robert made significant revisions from his first draft to the draft that appears in this anthology, which demonstrated the importance of writing in a process. Drawing upon an experience that not many people of his generation know is one reason his essay is compelling for readers.