Nice

I grew up in a nice place. Madison, Wisconsin in the 1970s and 80s was a town where everyone was pretty well educated, had pretty good jobs, and had a lot of opportunities for really cheap ways to have fun. Bored during the summer? Literally, you could go jump in a lake. There are four of them, so you could select the one closest to you, or you turn it into a destination—go downtown, jump in a lake, shop for new inexpensive clothes, and then have a beer by the lake of your choice. Naturally, sequencing was key—beers before the lake-jumping, while common, could lead to trouble. Wintertime, you ask? Jump on the lake and cross-country ski to your heart's content. Check the ice first.

This was maddening for me as a teenager. People moved to Madison to die a natural death after a long, pretty good life. Conversations with new acquaintances followed a strikingly similar pattern. Where are you from? "Here." Where are you going to college? "Here." Where are you going to move and raise a family? "Here." Where do you see your kids going to school? "Here." As long as you didn't get too crazy at Oktoberfest and followed some basic lake-enjoyment rules (see above, and always boat with a life vest or other PFD) a pretty certain, pleasant, and seemingly dull future yawned in front of you like a gigantic sinkhole. We called Madison "the womb." It drove me nuts.

So for my senior year of high school, I signed up to be a foreign exchange student. It sounded like a combination of the French Foreign legion without guns, and a long, really awesome break from all the certainty I grew up in.   I wanted to go someplace really different—like Guinea, Algeria, or maybe Fiji, or someplace really hard to find on the National Geographic map on the wall of my room. I couldn't choose my destination for that year, but that was OK. I wanted to be surprised.

I got assigned the one place on earth most like South Central Wisconsin: German-speaking Switzerland.   This was because German-speaking Swiss people had settled southern Wisconsin: a few of the towns you had never heard of there were named after Swiss towns you had never heard of. I slowly realized that there were already Swiss people all around me: I nearly jumped out of my skin when saw a small picture of the Matterhorn in the barbershop I went to. The guy I got my cross country skis from was named Sepp, the Swiss version of Jim-Bob, as were the hardware stores my Dad would reluctantly shop at, Dorn, and Wolff Kuebli.

Rural Switzerland did turn out to be much older, prettier, and even more pleasant than Wisconsin. I lived with a master cheese maker and his family. There were ample lakes to jump in. My classmates at school were funny, mostly very smart, and utterly sane. Things were very clean, and the trains could run on time without a scary dictator being involved. Everyone was very punctual, all the time. For me and my fellow exchange students, it was very frustrating.

One word embodied everything in Switzerland that got under our young-adult skins: "Schön." Pronunciation in English is a little rough with the umlaut: it's *Sh* followed by a vowel mash up of *–one* from *methadone* with *eh* of Canada fame. There are a lot of ways to translate German "schön", or Swiss German "schyyn", but there's a theme: combine beautiful, handsome, pleasant, good, great, pleasant and nice and you have an overall sense of schön. Switzerland was rotten with schön, and every day as a foreign exchange student, you would smack into schön from sunup to whenever you stumbled home from drinking to get schön off your mind. Even the exchange kids who were in French, Italian and Romansh speaking areas knew what schön was, and struggled with it.

Even worse, Swiss people would constantly notice schön and remark on it All. The. Time. It was more than just seeing a nice mountain. Train arrives on time ? *Like it always does?* Schön. Kläusi and Sepp kill it yodeling at the semi-annual alpine festival *like they always do*? Schön. Next day you're walking downtown and there are no empty beer bottles or evidence of that alpine festival *like always* ? Schön. Swiss people would say the word out loud, and pause, having a little Zen moment whenever something schön happened. Every day in Switzerland seemed like every other, and that was schön.

The next few decades of my life were a headlong flight from schön. There were highs and lows. I learned a little about love, a lot about hate, and got a taste for how truly messy living could be. The culmination of that turmoil was my decision to become a physician.

During the upheaval of my first year of medical school, the word "Nice" started to crop up. At first, I think I said it because second years were saying it. All my classmates said it. Our medical student teaching fellows said it. Visiting doctors would say it. The context seemed to be when someone did something well. Did you come up with an elegant way to explain amino acid metabolism? Nice. Dug out the jumper cables to help someone with a dead battery? Nice. Did you actually dissect out the thoracic duct and all the tiny nerves inside the thoracic cavity in anatomy lab? Nice. Did you fix that nagging backache your classmate had small, simple twist and a push? Also nice.

I don't know exactly when, but I eventually made the connection between how we used nice, and all the baggage I had with schön. It was clear: I had become a monster. While there seemed little danger of me becoming a Nice Guy (although many seemed fooled into thinking this), I found myself being drawn to nice, and started to self-medicate with it.

It was way better than booze. A whole morning of frustration reviewing biochem for boards could be dealt with a quick shot of nice. I actually remembered that enzyme! Nice! Problems remembering one of a myriad of manual medicine techniques could be dealt with another hit of nice—she told me her hip feels better after that treatment! I also found myself enjoying nice in others—that lecturer

totally cleared up arterial blood gases for me! My classmate did a really good job with his oral presentation! Wow, she's an amazing singer! Nice.

Only recently I realized that's what the Swiss people had been doing all those times they had commented on the punctual train showing up at exactly 0855. They could guess that maybe someone had had a tough morning in the train yard in Luzern, that Kläusi had lost his voice for a few weeks before killing it with Sepp at the alpine festival, and that the cantonal public works guys had been doing a lot of other things before they had to show up late to clean up after the party. Plenty of things go wrong, even in Switzerland and Wisconsin. Still, someone had done something right, and in a small but meaningful way, that kept the rest of us going. Schön. Nice. It feels surprisingly good to stop, take a moment, and acknowledge that.