I understand this response is and will be written in an unusual manner; but, to be fair, this has been an unusual summer.

Sur-prise

|sə(r)ˈprīz|

1. Used as an noun: The Chicago Center: “The Chicago Center was a surprise”
   1. Before arriving this summer, I had about a million conversations with myself about how stupid I was for going away to Chicago. I kicked myself for not working. I kicked myself for not going with someone I knew. I kicked myself for packing three hours before my flight’s departure. I wanted to get away, I needed to get away, but why did I go straight for a city? My grandmother told me that I needed to put my purse in a garbage bag so it wouldn’t get stolen. My teacher told me that the Eisenhower Expressway’s real name is the “Heroin Highway.” My father told me that I needed mace. The ever-present monologue of family and friends only amplified my uncertainty of what the program was actually about. I had no idea what internship I’d be doing, who I’d be living with; when people asked me what I was doing for the summer in Chicago, I replied, “I don’t know.” Those three words have never sat well with me.
   2. From the endpoint, I can see why ambiguity is key to the Chicago Center. However, the message was not cohesive. I enjoyed the fact that on our excursions, we got to explore by ourselves. I never once had to tell one random fact about myself in some lame icebreaker. However, I longed for the setting of academia. I like context, and in most of the things we did, there was none. I was torn between this hypocritical state of complete independence, roaming and exploring around the city by myself Monday through Thursday, and then being shuttled like cattle on Friday from place to place, randomly dropped at places without much explanation. It was surprising, and because of this, I could never fully connect to the Friday classes. Moments stuck out, yes, but I wanted more, out of the teachers, out of the experience, out of the reading, and I was disappointed.
   3. It wouldn’t be fair to say that I didn’t enjoy the class at all. There were certain moments when I was beside myself, in awe of the action and work that people were doing. My parents’ generation, and their parents’ generation have adopted this mentality that we, the lost generation, have to fix their problems. But the people who inspired me the most, Kiran at Hamdard Center, Diane at Kids Off the Block, the Panelists from the “Where are We Now 9/11” seminar, these people aren’t just accepting adversity: they are doing something about it. Although I might not have had a vast knowledge of the subjects originally, these people were engaging because they were passionate; passion has no context.
2. Used as a transitive verb: Self: “I surprised myself”
   1. Like any teenage girl, I have doubts and insecurities about the woman I’m becoming. However, this summer has proved to me that I’m actually quite fond of myself, not in the way that I’m full of myself, but that it’s actually okay to like yourself, your flaws, and be comfortable in your own body. I was astounded at the amount of independence I felt because I didn’t have a roommate I could attach myself to (like I’d want that anyway). I was the only one here from my school. I was given an immense amount of mobility because no one knew anything about me and I could just be myself. I looked up my own internship outside of the database, went and made my own decision out of four options, and had to live with the consequences. Certainly, I’ve made those decisions on a smaller scale, but it’s never seemed so far from home, so out of character, and so new.
   2. I also learned that passion is what makes people move, and in particular, what moves me. Some people, like those in the gangs that Diane discussed and Sudhir Venkatesh wrote about, have a passion for money. Others, like the CJE members I interacted with, had a passion for music and education. After sitting from 9-5 editing film, I’ve discovered that editing just isn’t what I want to do, but I do love film, I love education, and I love music. I’ve discovered what I love through ways that can’t be found just sitting in a classroom or reading a textbook.
   3. I also learned that underestimating your ability to do anything, which was especially emphasized by panelists like Andy, is unacceptable. He was able to organize an entire march for something he believed in. Apathy runs rampant in my generation and his energy made me want to move. Take the resources you have and make it work.
3. Used as an adjective: People: “The people of Chicago were surprising”
   1. I have never lived with eight other people before. Aside from convincing me never to have a big family, if we weren’t watching T.V. together or partying, it was a pain. I’m a slob, but I keep it in my room, not on the kitchen table. Trash was never taken out, dishes were never washed, floors were sticky, couches moved, and beer pong was always present. If fraternity life had a center, it’d be the third floor of 1347 East Hyde Park Boulevard. I really got along with all the people, but I’m actually thankful that I had a room to myself to decompress: away from the drama, the stench, and the ever-present fruit flies.
   2. Aside from the cleaning issues, I was incredibly pleased with the people of this program. I am so grateful that there is a place like the Chicago Center that can bring liberal arts colleges together. If there were students from big schools here, it’d probably be an entirely different experience. No matter how different our lives are we have that common theme. I’ve enjoyed getting to know each person here and getting to know their story. I’ve made some friends that I will undoubtedly keep in contact with for years to come. After all, how many people can say they lived in Chicago for a summer with 27 other people?
   3. Before coming to the Chicago Center, I had never been to Chicago. New York is easily one of my favorite places in the world because of the anonymity: the city is so huge, you can just observe under its grandeur. But Chicago isn’t a town for ambiguity. Every part has distinction and flair, and people aren’t afraid to say hello. It was a little off-putting when I first came because I just didn’t understand the friendliness spectrum (I was quick to learn after I lost $30 to an all too kind Polish man). Of course, I worked on Wabash in a business district, where suits and ties adhere to this no-smile policy. I liked that I could have both the friendly mannerisms of Hyde Park and the professionalism of “Michigan Avenue” ideology.

I feel incredibly blessed to have met the people I’ve met, worked with such talented musicians and nonprofit organization advisors, and see a side of the “elephant” that most tourists, and undoubtedly, most people in Chicago have never seen.