

It's midnight – or close to it. In the last 24 hours I've been on, either a bus, waiting in an airport, or sitting on an airplane. My two companions, John Brissette and Doug Bogen, who I only met a week ago, are with me. At the moment the only thing I know we have in common is that we are jet-lagged and we have just arrived in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Due to airplane trouble, in Boston, we were delayed and missed our connecting flight in Munich. Now, having arrived eight hours late in St. Petersburg, we still have to connect with our flight to Severodvinsk.

Connecting from an international flight to a domestic flight in Russia is no simple task. No longer are the signs in multiple languages; the alphabet doesn't even look the same; no one speaks English. This seemingly simple task may prove to be our biggest challenge yet and the adventure has just begun. Fortunately for us, Lena Podorozhnaya was willing to get us through these hurdles. None of us had previously met Lena and yet she was willing to assist us. When we walked through customs, she embraced us with a warm, gentle smile, "Welcome! Welcome! It's so nice to meet you. I am Lena. How was your flight?" Her English was flawless.

With Lena's guidance, we lugged our suitcases and shuttled from the international airport to the domestic airport. The place was desolate because of the late hour. Our flight was due to depart at 9:00 AM (boarding at 8:00 AM). Therefore we settled in and began the process of making the best of it as we bid our time.

I look over at our host and I'm nearly too tired to engage. It occurs to me, "how do people, who have never met, who seemingly have nothing in common – history, language, literature – connect?" I consider Lena. She is lovely, with blond hair, a shapely figure, tastefully done make-up, comfortable yet classy attire. She has a gentle voice – yet confident. But even her eyes, though they are a beautiful blue and sparkle, give away that it is a late hour. We are all tired. Yet, Lena gently ushers us through the long night.

The answer to my question is not long in coming. It occurs to me, it is Lena's deep desire to connect with us that is the very bridge for us to connect with her. Here is someone who never met us and yet she has been waiting for us since before midnight and will continue to sit with us until 8:00 AM. She ensures our comfort, our safety, our connecting with the next leg of our journey. Lena was open, willing to be vulnerable, and shared about herself. She was a joy to meet.

When the time came and we finally boarded the plane to Severodvinsk, I recall turning around to see her waving us off – giving us one final assurance. Little did I realize the seed of friendship had been planted.

Upon our return to St. Petersburg, seven days later and with increased and new perspective, Lena once again greeted us, ready to show us the best of St. Petersburg. We spent three days interacting, sharing, laughing, and getting to know one another better.

Thank you, Lena for your generosity, your time and concerns and most of all for your friendship.