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Re-entry Shock: Coming "Home" Again

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I recently completed a six year appointment as an academic in South Africa. In retrospect this experience proved to be richly rewarding. Having dared to get my feet wet in a new stream, I profited greatly by my experience. I learned a great deal about other peoples and different cultures. Most of all, I learned about myself.

A great deal has been written about the stresses, strains, and displacement of relocating to a new community. Even if the move has the comfort of being within the same geographical area or state, or even if it is just down the block, such a change is still jolting. The shock can be that much greater when the move involves thousands of miles, a different country, and even a different hemisphere. Most individuals prefer to cling to what is familiar, predictable, and comfortable.

The trauma of moving to a foreign country is thought to impact even more severely on the sojourner. Various models of the stages each individual presumably experiences in the adjustment process have been given. In one model, stage one is the *contact* or *honeymoon* stage in which differences

are intriguing and perceptions are biased toward the positive direction. Stage two is *disintegration*, where differences have a great impact. Stage three is *reintegration*, where the unique and new ways of doing things in the host culture are rejected as less desirable than the more familiar ways of one's home culture. Stage four is *autonomy* where differences and similarities are both identified and accepted as legitimate and accurate perspectives. Finally, stage five, *independence*, is when differences and similarities are valued as significant and are perceived independently in a new set of familiar values (Adler, 1975).

It is important to recognize that culture shock does not necessarily progress neatly and in orderly fashion from one stage to the next. The entire process may be delayed or may be compressed. Adjustment models do have value in psychologically preparing the individual who is making a major relocation move, yet exactly how any individual will actually react is probably more the result of a complex set of variables. These may include prior life experiences, the individual personality characteristics of the sojourner, preparation for the journey, "goodness of fit" with the new location, and so on.

In my own case, although I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and was the product of a Southern culture, I somehow managed to escape total cultural encapsulation in a number of ways. Wrenn (1985) described the culturally encapsulated individual as one who evades reality through ethnocentrism ("mine is best") and who becomes insensitive to cultural variations among individuals. Reality is

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defined according to one set of cultural assumptions and stereotypes that become more important than the real world outside.

Despite growing up in a cultural context that was considered a closed system by many, I was fortunate enough to have parents who celebrated diversity and found differences intriguing. Every summer there were cross-country automobile trips throughout the United States. We often stopped at native-American sites, Amish locales, and the like. My travel experiences were similar to the popular Charles Kuralt "On the Road" television vignettes.

I can also remember being encouraged to have pen pals who lived in Germany and corresponding with someone who was located in the Phillipines. The latter was always a guest in our home when she returned to the United States on visits. Books of all kinds were abundant, and reading about foreign lands was one of my great pleasures. Africa particularly fascinated me.

While growing up I had the experience of changing homes and living in three different neighborhoods. As a young adult I had the "going off to college" experience and graduate school represented yet another move. While married there were four more moves. Although these relocations were limited to cities in the Midwest and Southeast, I suppose they served as a valuable preparatory training ground. Yet I still had never lived or traveled abroad prior to my overseas appointment.

Innumerable books have recommended techniques designed to facilitate individual adaptation to "culture shock" when moving to a foreign country. The early pioneering efforts of the Peace Corps have been particularly helpful in this regard (Weeks, Pedersen, and Brislin, 1977). In virtually all the models that address the "culture shock" experience of living abroad, the major theme is that such relocation represents a major life stressor. That much planning and prior preparation is needed in order to facilitate a less harrowing transitional experience is a foregone conclusion. Accordingly, such travelers are advised to read relevant literature, see pertinent films, talk to people who have lived in the host culture, and even adopt pen pals within the designated culture who can answer personal inquiries and give general counsel (Pedersen, 1988).

Prior to assuming a teaching post at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, in 1985, I took all of this advice very seriously. I was one busy American preparing for my new experience. Six months prior to my South African departure

date an intensive study plan was devised. Going back to 1975, every issue of *South African Digest*, a news periodical, was read, as well as assorted news periodicals about the southern Africa region. Johannesburg newspapers were subscribed to as well. People in the university community where the author was presently teaching, Mississippi State University at Starkville, who had either lived in the region or had visited it, were contacted. Friendships with international university students from the targeted area were also initiated and innumerable rap sessions conducted. Daily "to do" lists designed to ensure greater knowledge and insight about South Africa were dutifully completed. All natural tendencies toward perfection were marshalled toward the one goal of "getting it right." In short, I "absorbed" the host culture prior to the actual event much like a highly motivated mother or father might have prepared for a long-awaited family vacation.

In July of 1985 I departed for Johannesburg via South African Airways. Fortified with the fact that I had done my homework, I was "prepared." Like a prize fighter, I had "trained." On foreign shores for the first time, I didn't feel cautious, but I did feel curious. Let the show begin.

Indeed, the advance preparation aided me tremendously. Like an actor I knew my script well. The first six months were filled with the predictable crises of not only coming to a new country, but beginning a new job as well. A further challenge was that I had come on my own, knew no one, and did not have a ready made support group. I had purposely chosen to take the risk of growth. Such experiences can be exhilarating and can be sources of real personal growth.

Reflecting on the experience of living in a foreign culture six years down the road, I now know that it has been one of those "mountaintop" experiences. It was a significant "marking" in my life, and catalyzed a personal change which can only be described as "creative dislocation." I had conquered *uncertainty*—or so I thought.

CAN YOU GO HOME AGAIN?

After feeling the great exhilaration at the airport of returning permanently to U.S. soil, I was caught totally off-guard and totally unaware that I would have yet another hurdle to face: my return to my own country. In my own case my return home actually caused more upheaval than the demands of the

initial cross-cultural adjustment. The major reason for this, I believe, is that problems in adjustment were totally unforeseen. I did not envision any possibility that I would have difficulties in the culture I already knew so well. I did not know that sometimes I would feel uncomfortable and lost in conversations, that encounters would be somehow awkward and stilted, that many exchanges would have the effect of instantly revealing the lack of common points of reference. I did not realize that hardly anyone would pay much attention to the fact of my sojourn and experiences abroad. I did not realize that I would feel like a stranger in a strange land and like an outsider.

It never occurred to me that my expectations concerning my return home would not be met. I am now slowly beginning to realize that whenever there is *change*, adjustment is needed. There have been and will continue to be difficulties readjusting to my original society. I now realize that the adjustments I had to make in order to live in South Africa have left me a *changed* person. Now certain other adjustments have to be made in order to function in my original society. In a very real sense my return home has the "feel" of a cross-cultural situation itself.

One of the most difficult feelings I've had to deal with is that of ambiguity or lack of reference. No guidelines seem to be available for "re-entry

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shock" and how to adapt to it. It is very strange indeed that the things that should seem so familiar and comforting actually make me uncomfortable.

In navigating re-entry into one's country of origin, a special compass is needed. I knew what to look for in the great trek to a foreign culture. But

where is the instruction kit for returning to the endless landscapes that were previously known, and yet now have a strange and unfamiliar topography? What I feel I can't quite describe, but there are feelings of alienation and estrangement, as if I don't quite belong here.

How do you explain to your countrymen that you have experienced the reality of a "deep culture vision," a transformation, if you will, brought about by what anthropologists call "deep cultural immersion?" The turnabout in your consciousness is that you no longer perceive yourself as a "Southerner" or as an "American." You now realize that you are part of the family of man. Your concerns have become global and you realize that what violates one person in a distant land now violates a part of you. Seen with new eyes you are now aware of the interdependence with the rest of human society. The world really is a global village.

You realize, however, that you are still faced with a good deal of uncertainty. How can you "connect" with those in your land of birth who, when learning of your move to a foreign country, can only think to say, "What did you do *that* for?" How can you explain that "that" was not *destructive* but *instructive*?

A large part of re-entry shock and coming home is a realization that many, if not most Americans, uncomprehendingly feel that there is no rational reason for experiencing a foreign culture. Trying to communicate your vision means to experience communication apprehension:

I think to myself, That's the problem all right, where to start. To reach him you had to back up and back up. And the further back you go, the further back you see you have to go, until what looked like a small problem of communication turns into a major philosophical inquiry (Pir-sig, 1982, p. 64).

Having returned to America I wondered if other peoples in distant lands also saw no need to experience other cultures. A part of me asked, "Is this just America?"

Paradoxically, one of the real values of directly experiencing a foreign culture is that it may trigger a critical shift in thinking which may itself prove problematic. The experience, for you, may be likened to an entry point, which becomes a turning point, which becomes a point of no return. You may feel like Dorothy, who, in the *Wizard of Oz* said, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

Perhaps the experience cannot be properly communicated except to fellow sojourners:

You might describe purple to someone who knows red and blue, but you cannot describe red to someone who has never seen it (Ferguson, 1982, p. 69).

In returning to the home culture, in "coming home" again, my re-entry has left me feeling like a voyager who has just hatched out of the space capsule and into the water after an interesting voyage. I'm having to learn how to swim in a strange and yet familiar ocean without benefit of a gyroscope or mission control. I'm not sure where the traps, caves, quicksand, and dangerous crossings are.

On reflection, it would seem that the returnee can either adopt a passive acceptance with a futile world view or accept that although uncertainty can be very uncomfortable, at the same time, it can be a life enhancing and enriching experience. Kelly (1955) developed a theory of personality that placed primary emphasis on each person's active, cognitive construction of his or her world. He posited that all events are open to alternative interpretations and that people can always define their present difficulties in different ways. In Kelly's view each person has a unique set of personal constructs and a belief system which determine the way he or she will think, feel, act, and define new situations. I hope I can be guided by the belief that every problem is really a gift and that I can come to appreciate ambiguity and the lesson it has to teach me.

WHAT IS "HOME"?

C. Gilbert Wrenn (1985) in a personal reflection wrote the following:

Once, as a young man, I "revisited" my childhood. I returned to the village where I had spent the first few years of my life and was sorely disillusioned. The houses and yards were all smaller—and dingier—than I remembered them to be, the streets were narrower, my "swimming hole" was a puddle—and only ten years had elapsed. I regretted the return (p. 233).

What "home" means to an individual varies with age and maturation. Yet an individual of any

age needs stability in living patterns and relationships with significant people. A universal need is to feel grounded and to have a place to which one can go in joy as well as in sorrow and defeat. Without this anchor most people feel insecure and adrift. If indeed, however, life is best understood as a journey that begins at the moment of conception and continues through an individual's lifespan, throughout the journey a variety of transitions must occur. A transition itself may be defined as a passage or movement in life from one stage to another. An environmental transition, particularly when adjusting to a foreign culture, can serve to facilitate important behavioral transitions, such as skillful mastery related to operating in one's surroundings. Being transported to a different cultural setting can result in psychological transitions as well, such as changes in an individual's internal ways of perceiving and processing perceptions. All transitions involve change and a movement toward something new and different for the developing individual. Experiencing a foreign culture can serve as an important learning experience in preparation for future journeys. Moreover, the process of being open to a foreign culture and strange and unfamiliar ideas can be an integral part of one's personal odyssey and voyage of discovery.

In coming home again to my country of birth, I realize, as Aldous Huxley noted in the *Doors of Perception*, that the person who comes back through the "Door in the Wall" will never be quite the same as the one who went out. Prior to my relocation experience I was like a little chick encapsulated in its egg. All it knows is what it is experiencing while locked up in its shell, yet it does not even *know* that it is locked inside the shell.

In pecking through the shell I have been able to hatch out of my embeddedness. I now have begun to catch a ray of light from outside and to realize that there is something out there that has not been seen, something I have not felt, some place I have not been. Outside the shell I have found more new and interesting things than would a child at the foot of a Christmas tree on Christmas day. I have experienced the realization that I am no longer restricted and bound from being able to see, hear, feel, and experience countless things in a great new world. Breaking through the limitations of a mind that tried to tell me that there were only the people and the territory around me, I have discovered lands and countries and people of all nations. But I had to go beyond all that I knew or thought I knew and I had to travel beyond my small community. Indeed,

I had to break out of the shell of my own narrow experience.

It is with a touch of sadness, however, that upon returning to the United States I realized that the old familiar landmarks didn't look as familiar as they once did. I realized again, however, that the richness of the growth experience of living in a foreign land will forever be part of my consciousness. I discovered in strange and unfamiliar foreign places personal experiences that opened the way to a dimension of wisdom that was new. I also discovered the truth behind Henry David Thoreau's wisdom: "You never gain something but that you lose something." You can't come home again.

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Traveler Re-Entry to Home Country. "Why would anyone return to where they came?" -from the film, Such a Long Journey. Coming home means being a nobody again. I have gotten use to being a foreigner, being someone "something" different, being the focal-point at which people gaze and stare. I like people looking at me and wanting to talk to me, and I have molded my character around this attention, around being the foreigner. "Wade from Vagabond Journey.com in Brooklyn, New York City- November 23, 2008 Travelogue "Travel Photos". But in New York City I am not a foreigner, I am nothing Only RUB 220.84/month. Ch, 36 Re-entry Shock: Coming "Home" Again. STUDY. Flashcards. A large part of the re-entry shock and coming home is a realization that many uncomprehendingly feel that there is not rational reason for experiencing a foreign culture. One of the real values of directly experiencing a foreign culture is that it may. Repatriation shock is due, in large part, to those changes sojourners made in their behavior and thinking which helped them be more effective in the host country. But expatriates are often not expecting that coming home will cause problems, and this lack of awareness or erroneous expectations can lead to increased difficulty in repatriation. (p. 6). Step seven: Sojourners experience a "subtractive" identity response. They feel as though they no longer fit into their home country and culture, and as a result find it difficult to relate to family, friends and co-workers. We hope you're enjoying our article: Coming back to re-entry shock. This article is part of our course: Intercultural Communication. Learn more about this course. Help with expat reverse culture shock, re-entry and transitions issues. ROCKY RE-ENTRY. the realities of life after living cross culturally. Thoughts, encouragement, and resources for those transitioning off the field from those who've been there. This blog is composed of archived articles and as of 3/20/19 is no longer being updated. 8 Things I wish Someone Had Told Me Before I Moved back to the US. To all of you who have recently returned after living overseas, you have a special place in my heart because not too long ago, I Read More. 7 Things I Learned about Transitioning. Today, we have some great re-entry wisdom from Amy Young.