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You Made it Home. But It's Not the Same!

Well, you made it! (or you almost made it!) Congratulations!

My guess is that there were moments (days, weeks) during the last year or so, while you served in the "mission field," when you wondered if you would make it, right? And, undoubtedly, you sometimes wondered if the day would ever come when you'd be going home! But here you are.

Returning home was something you looked forward to with great anticipation while serving overseas. On those dismal days when you felt like a failure... on those days when you felt totally misunderstood... on those days when you wanted to scream because the surrounding culture was so strange...on those days when you were so homesick you could die, on those days when.... Well, I think you get the point. On *those* days, the thought of going home kept you going. I know a number of volunteers who began the calendar countdown during one of those times—"just 127 days 'til I can go home!"

Now you are home, but I can almost guarantee that whether your time overseas was mostly good or mostly bad, or somewhere in between, when it comes right down to it, returning home hasn't been as easy as you thought it would be. Returning home is a major transition, and no one enjoys transitions. Things at home are somewhat different, and that worries you a bit. You intuitively know that you are somewhat different, and that likely worries you a lot. You intuitively know that no matter how much you've loved or hated the place you've been, there are things you'll miss—things no one "back home" seems to understand. The whole situation is a bit bizarre and inexplicable, even to yourself.

So here you are, at your re-entry, not sure just how to cope.

Interestingly, most organizations which send large numbers of people into cross-cultural situations have learned that for the majority of their people, returning home ("repatriation culture shock" it's called) is usually more challenging than the initial "culture shock" people experience when they go out.¹ This phenomenon is not limited to any one country or ethnic group. The following percentages indicate the number of people returning to their home countries who experienced major cultural adaptation upon their return: Japan--80%,

¹ Black, *So You're Coming Home*, 1999. San Diego, CA. p. 1

Finland--71%, Netherlands--64%, and U.S.A.--60%. The length of time this process takes and the intensity with which you experience it, will probably be directly proportional to how deeply involved you were with the local culture--the more involved, the harder the transition.² But the adaptation process is inevitable.

For whatever it's worth, the good news is that if you experience some bumps in the road as you return home, you're in good company, and since misery loves company....

But Why Would I Have Culture Shock When I'm Going *Home*?

The big question that puzzles us usually, is--why? Why, when you've returned home after being absent only a year or two, should you have any adjustment at all? After all, you're home!

Let's start by looking at some of the reasons this happens.

1. Probably the major single factor is that reverse culture shock is so unexpected. Virtually everyone anticipates some adjustment problems when they leave their home and go to a new culture. But no one really expects any major adjustments on their return. So what they don't anticipate, they don't recognize and prepare for. The obvious starting point for you then, in dealing with reverse culture shock, is simply to expect it.

2. The second major factor arises from our concept of home. What is home? Dumb question? Not really.

Most of us have never analyzed home. It just is. But if you analyzed it, you'd probably realize that home is where people and things are familiar... comfortable... predictable... safe.... It's where you belong. But when you go home after an extended absence, you discover several things:

- ◆ Some parts of the once-familiar may now actually feel a bit strange.
- ◆ Elements that previously comforted you may now seem somewhat uncomfortable.
- ◆ Neither the environment of home, nor even you yourself, feel quite so predictable...or safe.
- ◆ You may even discover that while you still belong, at the same time a part of you belongs somewhere else, too.

Life has moved on. People and places change, even in a short time, and if your stay overseas was even partially positive, you found new people and things that are familiar...comfortable... predictable...and safe. You even found a certain sense of

² Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, 1996. Yarmouth, Maine. p. 152

belonging in a new place. And so when you returned home, you found that home feels a little less like home now. You may even find yourself getting "homesick" for that faraway place where you lived for only a year or two. It's all quite confusing!

The result is that in a very real way, home may feel a bit like a "foreign country" at times, and you may feel a bit "homeless" upon your return, and that's not a very nice feeling! It's no wonder that many, many returning volunteers very quickly begin making plans to go back as soon as possible...back to that new "home."

3. Another factor contributing to reverse culture shock is that returning home is so sudden, so complete, and feels so permanent. You got on that plane and instantly you left behind everything of the new life you were living. There is no gradual adjustment. You recognize that the chances of you returning half-way around the world are pretty unlikely.

4. One additional factor in the adaptation process is that you often experience this alone. No one seems to understand you and if they try, they have a hard time understanding why you're having a hard time. After all, this is home! And we all know "there's no place like home!" You should be ecstatic! So what's wrong with you?

What are the Stages and Symptoms of The Transition Process?

The stages of transition back home are almost identical to those of out-going culture shock, with a few different twists. Let's look at them and some of the symptoms of each:

Stage 1: The Honeymoon Stage—It's great to be home!

- ◆ Everybody wants to see you—you have a certain "celebrity status"
- ◆ You get to eat the foods you've missed while you've been gone
- ◆ You revel in the things you missed—taking hot showers, drinking water out of the tap, going to Taco Bell, driving on good roads where the traffic is orderly and pretty predictable
- ◆ Everybody speaks your language and looks more or less like you. You can blend into a crowd without being noticeably different.

Stage 2: Reverse Culture Shock Stage—It's terrible to be home! *(I have divided this stage into three sections, although the symptoms do not happen in any predictable order.)*

You notice some negative things you never noticed before. You may even begin to feel somewhat critical of "home."

- ◆ Everyone seems to be in too much of a hurry. There's no time just to "be."
- ◆ You seem surrounded by excessive materialism, abundance, and waste. This is painful if you've lived where there is real need and people live with few "frills" in their lives.

- ◆ People seem very direct, almost rude
- ◆ People seem very individualistic with little sense of community or family
- ◆ Everyone seems competitive, loud, and self-absorbed
- ◆ People seem ignorant of other places, peoples and cultures

You seriously miss things from your place of service, such as:

- ◆ People—your students, friends, fellow workers
- ◆ Foods—good mangoes and bananas, soba, kimchee, and other foods you thought you'd never adjust to
- ◆ Places—the beach, the markets, exotic places you got to visit
- ◆ Your status as a teacher, pastor, ADRA worker, whatever
- ◆ Your independence
- ◆ The climate (especially when really cold weather hits back home!)
- ◆ Amusements, sports
- ◆ The closeness of the community you were a part of
- ◆ The challenges that caused you to grow stronger

You feel “out of it,” a bit depressed, and wonder if you'll ever readjust.

- ◆ Many of your friends have moved on and you may wonder if you'll ever really belong again
- ◆ You are now interested in things others do not seem interested in at all
- ◆ You may feel “homesick” for your field of service
- ◆ Nobody seems even remotely interested in your experiences. In fact, their eyes kind of glaze over when you begin to share with them and you realize they're not really listening
- ◆ You wonder if you'll ever get to go back, and you may even begin to make plans to return as soon as possible
- ◆ You have newly-acquired skills (language, teaching, leading, preaching, etc.) that no one seems to recognize, want or need
- ◆ You now have a cultural sensitivity that makes you very aware of the narrowness and provincial attitudes of many people at home
- ◆ You may experience all kinds of negative emotions. You may feel depressed, irritable, sad, and/or critical. The reality of this stage is that you may actually be pretty self-centered. Chances are, you probably aren't too much fun to be around!

Stage 3: Entering—On some days it's okay to be home.

- ◆ You still feel somewhat marginal at times, but you're beginning to see more light at the end of the tunnel – it feels like you will fit back in again
- ◆ You've found a few people who more or less understand the new you and can appreciate who you are now
- ◆ You're learning to integrate the past and the present

Stage 4: Re-adjustment Stage. Home once again feels like home.

- ◆ You actually enjoy life again and on a regular basis you're really glad to be home
- ◆ You realize that you have some new attitudes and a somewhat altered focus for your life, but you begin to see ways to integrate that with parts of your "old life" and let it guide your future

The reality, of course, is that things at home probably didn't change all that much while you were away. The big difference is that *you* are now looking at them through different lenses. Your experience of the last year or two has changed your field of comparison and you therefore see things differently.

Some of the differences you may now find challenging. You may even catch yourself determining that you certainly don't want to be like "these people." The problem, of course, is that "these people" are your people--this is your home. And a critical spirit really won't fly, so you may feel trapped. In the end, some of the differences may turn out to be neutral, and you can adjust back to some of your former ways of doing things, thinking, reacting, etc. without too much difficulty. But some of the changes in you--how you see, think and feel--may be significant and a permanent part of the new you.

Ultimately, the challenge is how to channel your new insights, new "lenses," new focus, and new attitudes into something positive rather than simply feeling critical and frustrated.

Help! What Can I Do?

How can you facilitate your return so it will be as painless as possible? Let's consider several things that will help.

A good transition to a new place or position is dependant upon a good closure of your previous experiences. Bringing good closure to your overseas experience should begin before returning home. See the suggestions that follow. (*But if you are already home, you can still seek closure by phone, letters, emails, etc.*)

- ◆ Make any needed reconciliations with people who, for whatever reason, you've had difficulty with, so these issues won't haunt you after you return.
- ◆ Express appreciation. Thank the people who made your experience a positive one. They may have helped you out in big or small ways, but don't leave without saying thanks.
- ◆ Say proper farewells--to people, places, even things. Saying good-bye is especially important when you are moving half-way around the world. Bringing closure to these relationships is important. Some of us do not like farewells. They make us feel uncomfortable. We'd rather just "slip away in the dark." However, a farewell is for the other people as well as for us. We

need to face the sad parts of leaving and that helps bring closure—for us as well as others. But in addition to the people you'll be leaving, remember to "say good-bye" to special places you've come to appreciate (or dislike, even!) You may want to make one last visit to these places and take pictures to put away in a memory album. Say proper good-byes.

- ◆ Begin to make realistic plans for the future as you return home—to a job or to school. This will include re-examining your expectations, assumptions, and anticipations, knowing that changes have occurred and that a certain amount of "pain" is a normal part of the transition process.

Then when you get home, the saga continues:

- ◆ Remember that the symptoms you are experiencing are normal. It's "the nature of the beast." Be patient with yourself!
- ◆ Be patient with your compatriots and don't jump to conclusions about them even though they may seem superficial, provincial and materialistic. They haven't experienced what you have so they can't be expected to see things or respond to them as you do.
- ◆ Begin evaluating your time of service—realistically. In some ways it probably did not meet your expectations. In other ways it may have exceeded them. Certainly it's a mixture of positive and not-so-positive experiences—"the best of times, the worst of times." You may need someone to help you look at it realistically, but you need to look at it and accept it as it was.
- ◆ Analyze what you learned through this experience, how you grew and how you changed. (The people back home aren't the only ones who've changed!) Some honest journaling may be very helpful as you review your time away from home.
- ◆ Find someone to "debrief" you—to listen as you sort out your experiences. One good way to do this is at a re-entry seminar which some colleges and universities hold each year for returning missionaries.
- ◆ Expect some ambivalence—one day you're glad to be home, the next day you may hate it!
- ◆ Reach out to others, remembering that the things they've done while you've been gone are as important to them as your adventures are to you. Affirm them and be a better listener.
- ◆ Above all, remember to derive your primary identity from the fact that you are and always will be a child of God (Luke 10:17-20) rather than basing most of your identity on the "fabulous experiences" you had as a missionary.
- ◆ Give yourself time to adjust. Be slow to jump to conclusions about life, people, the future, etc. It takes time for your body, mind and emotions to adjust. For some people the adjustment time may be brief—a few weeks or months. But for many people the process may take a year or more. However, just as initial culture shock passes, so does reverse culture shock. You survived culture shock before and you will survive this too!
- ◆ Remember that not only has "home" changed, you've changed, too. Probably

a lot. You've had experiences that others probably cannot identify with. You are no longer mono-cultural. You will forever see the world through different eyes. You have a broader view of the world. You've changed in ways your friends, and even your family probably cannot fully understand. Deal with it and don't put undue pressure on them (and yourself) to be what they (and you) can't be and to do what they (and you) can't do.

- ◆ If you experienced serious trauma during your time of service (major political upheaval, evacuation, or a life-threatening situation of any kind), seek help from a qualified professional who understands trauma management and counseling. The pain and grief from such incidents can haunt us for years if we don't take care of them properly. As Shakespeare said, "The grief that does not speak knots up the overwrought heart, and bids it break." Being the strong, stoic sufferer is neither wise nor Christian.

Some Special Questions

1. How can I keep in touch with the mission field?

- ◆ Obviously, it's important to keep in touch via letters, e-mails, etc. with the people in your field of service that you came to know and love.
- ◆ Get to know people from "your" country who live at your college or home town. This will help you feel connected.
- ◆ Connect your church, Sabbath School class or youth group with a needy project in your field.
- ◆ Find a "new mission field" close to home (inner city, migrant workers, immigrant populations, youth, etc.) This will help you channel your newly-developed interests and talents.

2. How can I utilize the new skills I've acquired overseas?

- ◆ If you learned a language, find people with whom you can use it (i.e. immigrants, international students, etc.)
- ◆ Without being pushy, volunteer to do things that utilize your new skills (i.e. teach in children's Sabbath school, speak in weeks of prayer or evangelistic series, accept offices that require your type of leadership skills.)
- ◆ Because of your newly-acquired cross-cultural skills, you will be able to reach out to other volunteers who are returning home, or to international students, missionary kids, immigrants, exchange students, etc.
- ◆ Look for receptive venues to share your story. Some churches are eager for "real mission stories." Seek them out, but don't stop there. If you're comfortable talking to kids, let local schools know you'd be glad to share with their students (of special interest to elementary schools are first-hand cultural experiences). Many service clubs (i.e. Kiwanis, Rotary) have international

service projects and are happy for first-hand reports. Some churches and other organizations have projects to help immigrant populations (i.e. ESL programs, "Welcome to X City" programs, etc.) There are many ways to get involved and combine your new focus with your life back home. Go for it!

Epilogue

The following thoughts are borrowed from a wonderful book on the re-entry process called *The Art of Coming Home* by Craig Storti.

Symptoms That You're Well on the Way to Adjustment³

1. You've stopped carrying toilet paper with you wherever you go!
2. Some of your clothes are not out of date.
3. You have a few friends who have never had any kind of international experience.
4. You don't have to think twice about drinking the water out of a faucet.
5. You can approach a stranger to ask directions without first thinking you need to ask, "Do you speak English?"
6. You don't cry (or feel too sad) whenever someone mentions your country.
7. You're not tempted so often to say, "But in Country Q we did it this way...."

³Storti, *The Art of Coming Home*, Yarmouth, Maine. p.159-160