

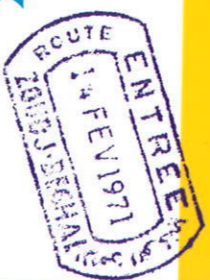


Third Culture Kids

The Experience
of Growing Up
Among Worlds

*“Absolutely brilliant... will quickly
become the most sought-after book
in the international expatriate
community.”*

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Transition Dynamics



David C. Pollock
and Ruth E. Van Reken

"Rich with real-life anecdotes...a ground-breaking book... highly informative reading and well recommended for the parents, relatives, friends, and teachers of [TCKs] as well as the children themselves who, through these pages, will discover they share a common heritage with countless other kids from similar multicultural life experiences."

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—George Simons, George Simons International

Third Culture Kids

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Third Culture Kids

**The Experience
of Growing Up
Among Worlds**

**David C. Pollock
and Ruth E. Van Reken**

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For Betty Lou and David, our lifelong partners and unfailing supporters throughout our journeys. And to our children, who have taught us so much—TCKs "for true."

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Foreword

It is an honor to have been asked to write the foreword to this perceptively written and valuable book in which Dave Pollock and Ruth Van Reken demonstrate their combined wisdom and their ongoing commitment to the TCK community. They do so with depth and sensitivity. Each has had a profound impact on my own personal and professional development and that of scores of others who live and work in the global corridor.

My association with Dave Pollock began at a SIETAR International conference (International Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research) in 1984. At that time, Fanchon Silberstein and I gave the very first presentation on *global nomads*, a term I had coined as synonymous with TCK, and Dave was in the audience. Two years later he became a founding board member of Global Nomads International (GNI), serving as a source of insight and vision for that body. He is an esteemed colleague, mentor, and forever a friend. I am privileged to have worked with him and continue to enjoy the lively exchange of ideas and possibilities that have marked our collaboration over the years. Our interaction continues to inform my life and my work.

Dave Pollock works tirelessly on behalf of and with the TCK community. His presentations and consultations with TCKs and their

families have literally changed lives. For this book he has distilled decades of direct experience with TCKs of all ages and numerous nationalities. The result is a highly distilled body of knowledge that is both anthropological and psychological in nature. Through this knowledge he gives voice to what so many of us have felt soul deep but often cannot articulate. As a result, the outcome of his work runs deeper than an "aha" experience. As lightening thrusts the power of electricity into the earth, so it is when this defining moment occurs in a group he is guiding—the impact of emotional grounding is palpable for those present. Clearly, for many who have grown up globally, having their past validated and placed in the clear context of a shared heritage brings with it a stunning sense of safe homecoming.

On a lighter side, watching spouses during Dave's presentations is a wonder in itself. They sit, wide-eyed and incredulous, listening intently as their beloved's peculiarities are described in detail by a total stranger. As Dave has said, this underlines the critical need for premarital counseling of TCKs and their intendeds. Indeed, too many assume that common nationality means shared culture; they thus unwittingly enter into what is, in actuality, an intercultural marriage.

My first memory of Ruth Van Reken reaches back to 1987 at the International Conference on Missionary Kids (ICMK) in Quito, Ecuador. It was at the Hotel Colon that I stayed up all night in an alcove off the lobby reading her first book, *Letters I Never Wrote* (now *Letters Never Sent*). I had sought refuge there so I could weep with abandon without waking my roommate of the moment. Suffice it to say, I, too, experienced the sense of catharsis commented on by those who have read her powerful personal story.

It was there, also, that Ruth displayed her remarkable ability to relate to others with great simplicity and authenticity. In one lengthy, private conversation during the conference, the two of us discussed being TCKs, the cultures of our respective sponsors—God and the corporation—and the stereotypes each expatriate subgroup smugly held of the other. We got quite the chuckle out of it, but we also decided that it was time to move beyond such judgments. The no-

tion needed to be put forth that we were all grazing in the same pasture separated by—and seeing only—the fences marking boundaries dictated by our sponsorship. Now, as members of the global nomad/TCK community, it was time to look for the gate between our pastures, to understand the power of our shared heritage, and to draw on it for our benefit and for those who come after us. It was Ruth who articulated this vision to our action group the following day, in effect swinging that gate wide open and shepherding us through it.

Her actions there were testimony to her consistent willingness to risk emotionally. She is able to be with TCKs in a way that affirms their worth, draws them to awareness of common strengths as well as pain, and encourages their personal healing in the context of their own community. It is her gift to gently lead others beyond the superficial to the place of greatest vulnerability and growth, where one heart touches another. The Quito conference marked the beginning of what has been for me a valuable and enduring friendship.

What Ruth has done in crafting this book as a writer and a contributor, honing and refining it—yet staying intellectually fresh and emotionally present through its many iterations—demands our utmost respect. It is we readers who benefit most from her persistence and commitment.

Together these two extraordinary people have given us a well-organized, highly readable text that will prove to be a classic in the intercultural field.

For those of us who share the global nomad/TCK heritage, having this experience named, being able to say "I am a TCK," "I am a global nomad," is a powerful gift to our community. In the words of Nori Hsu in the *Global Nomad Quarterly*:

Suddenly it came out, blurring like a geyser from the ground, I am a global nomad. Nothing has felt the same since. I now have a culture. After three decades of learning other peoples' cultures and still being an outsider, I look to the future.... The recognition has

been life-changing. For me, it is as if three quarters of my life has emerged from shadow into full color.

The authors give us a deep understanding of the wide range of hues in the palette of TCK experience. They enable us to add depth, dimension, and definition to the personal portraits of our own lives over time.

Most of us are, I believe, in a lifelong process of integrating our globally nomadic upbringing into our present and our future. We strive, to paraphrase Dr. Kathleen Finn Jordan, to make the pieces of our complex puzzle fit. Just when we feel we have put the mobility/relationship piece securely in place, it is jostled by a pending marriage, another move, a teenager's departure for college, or the prospect of where in the world (literally) to retire. That same old feeling wells up, only this time it's in a different context, buried in a deeper place.

Whatever our life stage may be, then, this book resonates on several levels. It affirms our experience and releases us from self-imposed and external judgments about our TCK-based reactions and behaviors. It offers the renewal born of insight and action. With considerable care, Dave and Ruth have cleared the path, marked it, and given us the tools for self-discovery. By the end of this book, T. S. Eliot's words, elegantly expressed and certainly applicable to the globally nomadic, could be our own:

We shall not cease from exploration.

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And to know the place for the first time.

Owing to the knowledge, skills, and global awareness born, as Paul Seaman has said, of ordinary lives lived in extraordinary circumstances, we TCKs have great potential to effect change. We have the capacity, as Margaret Pusch has said, to view the world whole. So please—let the authors hear from you. Tell them what makes this book work for you, what it sparks in you. Share it with your school, university administrators, or coworkers. Use it as a reference for

writing an article for your alumni association. Encourage and support these institutions in acknowledging, valuing, and guiding the TCKs in their midst.

If you haven't already done so, consider the impact of the TCK/global nomad experience on your life and how you can use it beneficially—within your family as well as locally and globally. After all, after awareness is raised about the characteristics and dynamics of being a TCK, then what? Not surprisingly, the authors take us to that next step—integration. The sections of the book that deal with exploring cycles of mobility, uncovering hidden losses and addressing them and reframing grief, for example, are brilliant. Enlightening suggestions are provided on how TCKs, family, friends, and counselors can engage in dialogue that clears emotional logjams and permits the lifestream to flow freely.

With this book, the authors add a new level of understanding, articulation, and visibility to an emerging interdisciplinary social science field—one with a focus on the children of the globally nomadic community. Undoubtedly it will prompt greater intellectual discourse and synergy.

With that in mind, I would add one cautionary note regarding the definition of *TCK*. The original intent of the term, used by Dr. Ruth Hill Useem in her research in the 1960s, referred to children whose parents' *work* took them abroad to live. The authors have included the children of what they term temporary refugees—those whose parents take them abroad to avoid civil strife, for example. They have also included those who have entered another culture (the Native American community) without leaving their country. In addition, Ruth Van Reken mentions that Dr. Useem herself now refers to TCKs simply as children who accompany their parents into another culture. These, then, broaden the definition of *TCK* to include the children of refugees, immigrants, and those whose experience is domestic, not global. As a result the term risks being diluted beyond use for both researchers and TCKs themselves. If researchers are to be able to exchange research data without contamination,

they need clarity on who it is they have been researching. We can only assure this when we maintain the integrity and continuity of past terminology.

Further, in respecting original intent, we also securely establish the starting point for understanding the layering of other related experiences in a global nomad's life.

What are the implications, for example, for a family forced to flee its homeland—or risk death—only to find itself moving again as a result of a parent's career choice? The older children experience both the refugee layer of the journey—complete, perhaps, with all the trauma and violence often associated with such flight—and the TCK layer. Younger offspring, on the other hand, may directly experience only the TCK layer when a parent's job with the World Bank, for example, takes the family to several other elsewhere. These layers of family history, experienced both directly and indirectly, call different issues into play that influence the family dynamic. Clear terminology helps us to articulate the nuances.

As consultant Barbara Schaefti has commented, "We need to disentangle the layers so they can be more clearly understood, while at the same time *respecting their intersection within an integrated identity*." From there we can explore how the dynamics of each affects the internationally mobile child and the adult she or he becomes.

Because each of us makes use of language in a different way, a healthy and vigorous debate on terminology, such as on the definitions of *TCK* and *global nomad*, has been going on for years—in groups, on listserves, in workshops, at conferences. This is as it should be. It is a dialogue and it, indeed, stimulates inquiry and encourages growth. We invite your participation in this ongoing discussion.

The authors have included two powerful pieces by Sophia Morton and Paul Seaman, both excellent writers. They are not to be missed. Those of you who are not TCKs, prepare to be moved by their stark honesty. Those of you who are TCKs will know well the place in the heart where they take you. Look for them in Appendix B.

Finally, in reflecting on this book, the *mola* as metaphor keeps pushing itself forward. Molas are embroidery pieces crafted in a style unique to the Kuna Indians of Panama. The symbolism inherent in their construction speaks to who I am as a global nomad. I offer it to you in closing.

Pieces of bright-colored fabric, as many as five to eight, are layered upon one another and attached temporarily at each corner. The seamstress cuts down to different layers, folds the edges under in the desired shape to reveal the color beneath, and stitches the folds in place. As she continues to cut, fold, and stitch, a multihued pattern slowly emerges, finally coming together in a richly vibrant image of a fish or a lobster, for instance. The end result is a piece that has a solid hue on one side and emerges brilliantly into full color on the other. Each has the stamp of the creator's individuality but is borne of a distinct cultural heritage.

So it is with our lives as global nomads, as TCKs. During childhood and beyond, all our experiences of mind, heart, body, and spirit—cultural, emotional, physical, geographical—all of the moves, the relationships, the places, the losses, the discoveries, the wonder of the world—are layered one upon another through time. Ultimately, to revel in the beauty of our personal mola-like tapestry means cutting, sometimes deeply, through these layers to reveal the richness and color beneath. This can be painful. It is the legacy of transition and change, and it is also the precursor to growth.

Sometimes the cut feels more like a tear, a violation committed with dull, badly nicked scissors. The stitches on ragged edges are crude. We feel powerless. Restitching takes longer and leaves deep scars on our souls.

Some of the transitions are surprisingly easy. The cut is cleaner. The stitches are neater. We heal faster and settle into the new layer of culture more comfortably. This is so for any number of reasons—good preparation, family interaction, and community support; better continuity (old friends in a new place); familiar routines in a new setting; or the stimulation of the new culture and country. Our mola

takes on its own character, its own vibrancy and expression with each successive experience.

Some of us, upon returning home, turn our tapestry over, hide the brilliance of its colors and its uniqueness, deny our heritage or reveal it to few. Perhaps this is done to blend in and gain acceptance, perhaps to deny the impact of loss—what's past is past—perhaps because, frankly, it just seems easier. In that denial, we choose to present ourselves—to ourselves as well as others—as being of one hue.

Dave and Ruth encourage you in this book, as do I, to turn your "life mola" over, to reclaim and proclaim your TCK heritage fiercely. Your mola, unique and complex in its layering of events, emotions, and experiences, in what is folded back and what remains covered, in what is well stitched and what may need mending, is who you are. Hide it and you have little to show for a childhood like no other in its challenges and invaluable gifts. Display its richness, add to it, share it—and you may well change your life and your world, as have many TCKs before you.

—Norma M. McCaig
 Founder, Global Nomads International (GNI)
 President, Global Nomad Resources

Acknowledgments

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Above all, without each TCK and ATCK who has shared his or her story with us through the years, without the honest dialogue we have witnessed among so many, there would have been no story to tell. In particular, we thank the Global Nomad chapter at Valparaiso University for the time they gave to engage in dialogue specifically designed to address issues we are raising in this book. And a huge thanks to "Erika" not only for letting us use her story, but also for helping in the early stages of writing it.

And many thanks to David Hoopes for having the vision that this is a topic whose time has come—to say nothing of his masterfully helping two people join their different thoughts and writing styles into one text. He did not have an easy job. Thanks also to Toby Frank for her further suggestions and Judy Carl-Hendrick for substantial help in the final editorial process. Without each of them this book couldn't have been written in the readable form we trust it now is. And thanks to Patty Topel for readying this manuscript for publication. We've decided it not only takes a village to raise a child but also to birth a book.

Last, but certainly not least, we thank God not only for life but for the richness of our lives. We have experienced much joy in our journeys as we have studied this topic and lived it as well.

Introduction

David C. Pollock

Third culture kids (TCKs) are not new, and they are not few. They have been a part of the earth's population from the earliest migrations. They are normal people with the usual struggles and pleasures of life. But because they have grown up with different experiences from those who have lived primarily in one culture, TCKs are sometimes seen as slightly strange by the people around them.

I have had the joy of working with TCKs since the mid-1970s. In 1986, when David Hoopes, editor-in-chief of Intercultural Press, first asked me to write about TCKs, I struggled with two concerns that still haunt me. First of all, there is much about the highly mobile, transcultural young person that we still don't know or that should be established through research. Second, since we are dealing with people, we are writing about process and progress, not a fixed entity. In the past two decades alone, dramatic changes related to the care of children and adults have occurred in the global nomad community, and undoubtedly new theories and practices will continue to evolve.

We must begin somewhere, however. After more than twenty years of virtually daily interaction with TCKs and their families, we have seen a set of patterns of behavior or reactions to life emerge that stem from the cross-cultural and high-mobility aspects of their upbringing. As I have shared these observations with TCKs, their parents, teachers, and caregivers throughout the world, I have observed a common type of response. Giggles start among the students in one corner of the room. In another, a parent pokes her child in the ribs. Teachers look at each other (and their students) with knowing glances. They all recognize the story. And as I've made this presentation to people in many different kinds of organizations and on every continent except Antarctica, a multitude of TCKs have validated that this is, indeed, their story.

Sometimes the third culture experience is unfairly blamed for problems it didn't generate. At other times it is viewed as a pathology for which therapy is needed and from which one must recover. It is my conviction that being a TCK is not a disease, something from which to recover. It is also not simply okay—it is more than okay. It is a life healthily enriched by this very TCK experience and blessed with significant opportunities for further enrichment.

Since the variety of experience is wide, let's acknowledge that breadth by recognizing that for some, growing up as a TCK has been very difficult, for others much easier. Someone whose experience has been close to ideal isn't in denial for seeing it as so. Someone whose experience has been difficult or painful isn't a wimp, a whiner, or a spoiled child for acknowledging it as such. And those who have known both are also within the normal range of human experience.

My appeal to you as the reader—whether a TCK of any age, a parent, a caregiver for TCKs, or an administrator of agencies with cross-cultural personnel—is that you read carefully and empathetically, act to make a positive difference in the lives of our TCK and adult TCK populations, and provide leadership and support to smooth the way and amplify the advantages for our future TCKs.

I hope the eyes of many will be opened by this book and that it will spark honest thought, sensitive discussion, and productive research into this topic. I pray too that the result will be positive action to help make the TCK experience a strong foundation on which TCKs can build a satisfying and productive adulthood.

A Beginning Word

Ruth E. Van Reken

Sometimes there is a specific moment in a specific day that creeps up so unannounced, it is hardly recognized for its significance, but ever afterward it marks the point when everything changed. Life is never quite the same again. I, and countless others who have grown up in countries and cultures outside that of our parents, have known such a moment. It is that first instant we learn we have a name—that we are third culture kids (TCKs) or adult third culture kids (ATCKs).

My moment came in 1984. It was a typically hot, muggy day in Monrovia, Liberia, where I lived with my husband, David, and our three daughters. I sat on the bed in David's study, sorting through the mail that had just arrived. Mail for me, as for anyone living overseas, was a precious commodity—one to be savored. It looked like a good day.

I organized the letters into piles according to the priority by which I would read them, including a letter from Mom. Ever since my years in boarding school, Mom hasn't missed a week of writing a letter to me when I'm away from her. Faithful as clockwork, never

missing a beat. I should have known her letter would be here. It was Monday and the planes came from the States on Friday nights. Mom's letter went on the "slightly later" pile. If there were any earthshaking news, we would have gotten a radio message. Her letter could wait until I finished the rarer one from my school friend.

I read my friend's letter. Nice to get the news, to catch up on what's happening, but nothing particularly unusual. Now for Mom's letter.

"Open carefully, Ruth. Don't tear the stamps." The voice of my philatelist father echoed in my ear even six years after his death. Our mail had always come from so many different countries, each stamp had the potential to be a collector's treasure.

Along with Mom's letter came another two sheets of paper. I casually opened the extra papers to find a two-page article by David C. Pollock called "Ministering to the TCK (Third Culture Kid)." Presumably, Mom had sent it since we were working in what was then called a "Third World Country" and it must have something to do with that. While laying it aside, I wondered if she realized I worked with adults far more than with children. Still, it was nice she'd thought of me.

As I read Mom's letter, I almost forgot about the enclosure. After gathering the other letters and now empty envelopes, I stood up and the article fell to the floor. I bent over to retrieve it, thinking, I might as well read it now as later.

The article began, "He spent sixteen of his first eighteen years in a country where his parents were foreigners. He attended the community schools and spoke the language of the host country better than his parents.... When his parents traveled to the United States for furlough, they spoke of 'going home,' but when furlough was over and they returned to where they were foreigners, he went home."

I couldn't believe it. *This man is writing about me!*

As I continued to read, I was amazed at seeing expressed so many feelings I had experienced but never heard another person put into words. Somehow I had always thought to myself it was my

fault for being so "out of it" when I returned to the States from Nigeria for eighth grade. Or when I felt so stupid for not knowing how to swim in high school. But here was someone actually naming some of these kinds of feelings—like always being a square peg in a round hole. Was I truly not the only one in the world to have gone through this? What was this third culture kid idea about anyway?

A crack had occurred in my armor that was to grow and later open the way to a whole new world. I didn't know it that day, but this was the moment my life took a new direction and changed forever.

Since then, I have talked to countless other adult TCKs and heard of the moment when they, too, first learned they had a name. That moment is a time to celebrate the many gifts of our backgrounds. It is also a time to begin to understand some of the particular challenges that a highly mobile international childhood can bring. Perhaps, above all else, we've found out we are "normal," whatever that means. Some of our experiences may have been different from those of others we know, but our humanity is the same.

Strangely enough, it took a little longer before I realized that my own father was also a TCK—an American born and raised in Iran. Then I realized I had aunts and uncles and cousins who were all TCKs and that my three daughters were TCKs—Americans reared for nine years in Liberia. Even my husband spent two of his preschool years in China. (And now my first two grandchildren are TCKs in Ghana.)

Since that time, I have discovered a world filled with TCKs from many backgrounds with whom I share a common bond. I hope each one who reads this will have as much joy in discovering his or her connection with this interesting world as I did.

Section One The Third Culture Kid Experience

Part I
Understanding
the World of TCKs

1

Where Is Home? Erika's Story

As the Boeing 747 sped down the runway, Erika sat inside with seat belt secure, her chin propped against a clenched fist, staring out the window until the final sights of her beloved Singapore disappeared from view.

How can it hurt this much to leave a country that isn't even mine? Erika closed her eyes and settled back in the seat, too numb to cry the tears that begged to be shed. Will I ever come back?

For nearly half of her twenty-three years, she had thought of Singapore as home. Now she knew it wasn't—and America hadn't felt like home since she was eight years old.

Isn't there anywhere in the world I belong? she wondered.

Countless people of virtually every nationality and from a great variety of backgrounds identify with Erika's feeling of not belonging anywhere in the world. Like her, they may be Americans who grew up in Singapore. But they may also be Japanese children growing up in Australia, British kids raised in China, Turkish youth reared in Germany, African children living in Canada, or the child of a Norwegian father and a Thai mother growing up in Argentina. All of

them have one thing in common: like Erika, they are spending, or have spent, at least part of their childhood in countries and cultures other than their own. They are third culture kids (TCKs) or, by now, adult TCKs (ATCKs).

Children are TCKs for many reasons. Some have parents with careers in international business, the diplomatic corps, the military, or religious missions. Others have parents who studied abroad. Still other families live for a period of time outside their home culture because of civil unrest and war.

TCKs are raised in a neither/nor world. It is neither fully the world of their parents' culture (or cultures) nor fully the world of the other culture (or cultures) in which they were raised. This neither/nor world is not merely an amalgamation of the various cultures they have known. For reasons we will explore, in the process of living first in one dominant culture and then moving to another one (and maybe even two or three more and often back and forth between them all), TCKs develop their own life patterns different from those who are basically born and bred in one place. Most TCKs learn to live comfortably in this world, whether they stop to define it or not.

TCKs are not a new phenomenon. They've been around since the beginning of time, but, until now, they have been largely invisible. This has been changing, however, for at least three reasons.

1. *Their number has increased.* In the last half of the twentieth century, the number of people involved in international careers of all types has grown dramatically. In her book *The Absentee American*, Carolyn D. Smith says,

Since 1946, therefore, when it was unusual for Americans to live overseas unless they were missionaries or diplomats, it has become commonplace for American military and civilian employees and businesspeople to be stationed abroad, if only for a year. The 1990 Census counted 922,000 federal workers and their families living overseas, and the total number of

Americans living abroad either permanently or temporarily is estimated at 3 million.¹

That's a lot of people! But Smith is only talking about Americans. Add to this the burgeoning number of citizens from every other country working and living outside their home cultures and we can only imagine the total worldwide.

Not only do more people have international careers, but now it's easier than ever before for these people to take their children when they move to a new country. Traveling between home and a host country rarely takes more than one day compared to the three weeks to three months it used to take on an ocean liner. International schools exist everywhere; advanced medical care is an airlift away (and soon may be even more accessible via the Internet!). It is now normal for children to accompany their parents overseas rather than to stay home.

2. *Their public voice has grown louder.* As these growing numbers of TCKs become adults, they are becoming more vocal. Through their alumni associations or organizations such as Global Nomads International,² they have formed visible, identifiable groups. Through writing or speaking out, their voices are beginning to be heard. As these TCKs and adult TCKs share their stories, they encourage others to do the same.

3. *Their significance has increased.* The TCK experience is a microcosm of what is fast becoming normal throughout the world. Few communities anywhere will remain culturally homogeneous in this age of easy international travel and instant global communication. Growing up among cultural differences is already, or soon will be, the rule rather than the exception—even for those who never physically leave their home country. Sociologist Ted Ward claims that TCKs of the late twentieth century are "the prototype [citizens] of the twenty-first century."³ Experts are trying to predict the outcome of this cultural juggling. Looking at the TCK world can help us prepare for the

long-term consequences of this new pattern of global cultural mixing.

The benefits of the TCK lifestyle are enormous. Many TCKs and ATCKs are maximizing the potential of these benefits in their lives. Unfortunately, others are not. For some the challenges of the TCK experience have been overwhelming, seemingly canceling out the many benefits—a sad waste for both the TCKs and the world around them. It is our hope that a better understanding of some of these benefits and challenges will help TCKs and ATCKs everywhere use the gifts of their heritage well. To this end, throughout this book we examine this paradoxical world of the TCK experience from a variety of perspectives.

We begin by returning to Erika for a better look at one young woman's true story. Only the names and places have been changed.

Erika didn't notice that the captain had turned off the "Fasten your seat belt" sign until a flight attendant interrupted her reverie.

"Would you like something to drink?" he asked.

How many Cokes and roasted peanuts have I eaten on airplanes? she wondered. Far too many to count. But today her grief outweighed any thought of food or drink. She shook her head, and the attendant moved on.

Erika closed her eyes again. Unbidden memories flashed through her mind. She remembered being eight years old, when her family still lived in upstate New York, Erika's birthplace. One day her father entered the playroom as she and her younger sister, Sally, performed a puppet show for their assembled audience of stuffed animals.

"Wanna watch, Dad?" Erika asked hopefully.

"In a few minutes, sweetie. First, I have something special to tell you."

Puppets forgotten, Sally and Erika ran to their dad, trying to guess what it could be. "Are we gonna have a

new baby?" Sally began jumping up and down in excited anticipation.

"Did you buy me a new bike?" Erika inquired.

Erika's dad shook his head and sat in the nearby rocking chair, gathering one daughter on each knee.

"How would you like to take a long airplane ride?" he asked.

"Wow!"

"Sure."

"I love airplanes."

"Where, Daddy?"

He explained that his company had asked him to move from the United States to Ecuador to start a new branch office. The family would be moving as soon as school ended that June.

A flurry of activity began—shopping, packing, and saying good-bye to relatives and friends. It all seemed so exciting until the day Erika asked, "Mom, how is Spotty going to get there?"

"Honey, it's not easy to take a dog. Grandma's going to take care of him 'til we get home again."

"Mom, we can't leave Spotty! He's part of our family!"

No amount of pleading worked. Spotty was sent to his new home, and finally, with a mixture of eagerness for the adventures ahead and sadness for the people and things they were leaving, Erika and her family flew off to their new world.

Wanting to stop this flood of memories, Erika opened her eyes, trying to focus on her fellow passengers. The diversion didn't work. As soon as she had adjusted her cramped legs and resettled in a more comfortable position, the flashbacks continued. It was almost as if every few seconds a button clicked inside her brain to advance her mental slide show. Pictures of Ecuador replaced those of New York. She had been so scared the first time her family flew into Quito. How

would the airplane weave its way between the mountain ranges and find a flat place to land? Yet she remembered how, in time, those same Andes mountains gave her a deep sense of security each morning when she woke to see their towering peaks looming over the city, keeping watch as they had for centuries past.

But what did these memories matter now? She put on her headset, hoping that music would divert her thoughts. Unfortunately, the second channel she switched to carried the haunting music of the hollow-reed flute pipes that always evoked a twinge of melancholy whenever she heard it. The sound brought instant memories of going to fiestas with her Ecuadorian friends and dancing with them while the pipers played. Certainly, listening to this music wouldn't help her now. She took the earphones off, letting them dangle around her neck.

By now the images of the in-flight movie were on the screen in front of her, but Erika never saw them. Her own internal picture show continued with its competing images—the scene changing from towering mountains to the towering skyscrapers of Singapore. After two years in Ecuador, her father had been transferred once more, and for the thirteen years since then—including the four years she attended university in Wisconsin—Erika had considered Singapore her home. Now she knew Singapore would never truly be home. But the question continued to haunt her: where was home?

Still refusing to dwell on that topic, her mind searched for a new cassette of slides to look at. Pictures of countless scenes from other places she had visited with her family through the years appeared—the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal at the beginning of the rainy season, the monkey-cup plants in the Malaysian rain forest, the Karen tribal people in the hills of

northern Thailand, winter on the South Island of New Zealand, the water-derrick wells of the Hortobagy in Hungary. One after another the frames appeared in her mind's eye. Even to herself, it seemed incredible how much she had done, seen, and experienced in her first twenty-three years of life. The richness and depth of the world she knew was beyond measure—but what good did that do her today?

Finally, the other pictures ended and Erika was left with the visions of life in Singapore that kept returning, insisting on a paramount spot in the show. Now instead of places, however, she saw people—her amazing collection of friends from the International School in Singapore: Ravi, Fatu, Sam, Kim Su, Trevor, Hilary, Mustapha, Dolores, Joe. One after another they came to her memory. How many races, nationalities, styles of dress, cultures, and religions did these friends represent? With diversity as their hallmark, who could say what was "normal"?

Erika never stopped to wonder that others might be surprised to know that the diversity among her friends reflected the norm rather than the exception of her life. Instead, she reminisced on how she had hated parting from them each summer, when her family returned to the States for vacation. (It was never America or the United States—simply "the States.") Somehow, she always felt much more like a fish out of water with her Stateside peers than she did in Singapore.

For the first time since the airplane had lifted off, a wry smile came to Erika's face. She remembered how strange she had felt the first time her American cousins had asked her to go "cruising." She presumed they meant some type of boat ride—like when she and her friends in Singapore rented a junk and sailed to a small island for a day of sunbathing, swimming, and picnicking. She was eager to go.

To her amazement, cruising for her cousins had nothing to do with boats and water. Instead, it meant endless driving about town with no apparent purpose. Eventually, they parked at a shopping mall and simply stood around. As far as Erika could see, it seemed their purpose was to block aisles rather than purchase any goods. What was the point?

For Erika "going home" meant something entirely different than it did for her parents. When her parents spoke of "going home," they meant returning to the States each summer. For her, "going home" meant returning to Singapore at the end of summer. But where was home now? The nagging question returned.

The temperature dropped inside the airplane as the short night descended. Erika stood up to grab a blanket and pillow from the overhead compartment, hoping for the comfort of sleep. But would sleep ever come on this journey? Not yet. Another set of pictures pushed their way into the muddle of her mind—now with scenes of the time she left Singapore to attend university in the States.

"Don't worry, darling. You'll be fine. I'm sure you'll get a wonderful roommate. You've always made friends so easily. I know you'll have no trouble at all," her parents had reassured her as she faced that transition.

But somehow it hadn't been that easy. Fellow students would ask, "Where are you from?" At first, Erika automatically answered, "Singapore." The universal reply was, "Really? You don't look like it," with the expectation of some explanation of how she was from Singapore.

Soon, Erika decided she would be from New York—where her grandparents lived. She hoped that would simplify these complicated introductions.

Eventually, as she adapted outwardly, picking up the current lingo and attire, others accepted her as one of them. By the end of her freshman year, however, she

felt angry, confused, and depressed. How could anyone care so much about who won last week's football game and so little about the political unrest and violence in Bosnia or Rwanda? Didn't they know people actually died in wars? They couldn't understand her world; she couldn't understand theirs.

As time went on, Erika found a way to cope. Once she realized most of her peers simply couldn't relate to what her life had been, she no longer discussed it. Her relatives were happy to tell everyone she was "doing fine."

Just before graduating from university, however, she lost the last internal vestige of home. Her dad was transferred back to the States and her family settled in Dayton, Ohio. For school vacations, she no longer returned to Singapore. Erika closed that chapter of her life. The pain of longing for the past was just too much.

As she stared at the rhythmic, almost hypnotic, flashing red lights on the jet's wings, Erika continued her reflections. *That chapter on Singapore didn't stay closed for very long. When did I reopen it? Why did I reopen it?*

After graduation, she had decided to get a master's degree in history. Thinking about that now while flying somewhere over the Pacific Ocean, she wondered why she had chosen that particular field. *Was I subconsciously trying to escape to a world that paralleled my own—a world that was once exciting but is now gone forever?*

Who could know? All Erika knew was that her restlessness increased in graduate school, and she finally dropped out. At that point, Erika decided only a return to Singapore would stop this chronic unsettledness, this sense of always looking for something that might be just around the corner but never was. But also, she couldn't define what she wanted. Was it to belong somewhere? Anywhere?

Although her family no longer lived in Singapore, she still had many Singaporean friends who had often invited her to stay with them. Why not live her own life overseas? Surely it would be far better to live in a place where she belonged than to wander forever in this inner limbo.

Erika called a travel agent, who knew her well because of all her trips during university days, and booked a flight to Singapore. The next step was to call one of her former classmates still living in Singapore. "Dolores, I want to come home. Can you help me find a job? I'm coming as soon as I get my visa, and I'll need a way to support myself once I'm back."

"That's wonderful! I'm sure we can find some kind of job for you," came the reply. "You can stay with me until you get everything lined up." Erika was ecstatic! It felt so familiar, so normal to be planning a trip overseas again. She couldn't wait to return to the world in which she so obviously belonged.

When she arrived in Singapore, her dream seemed to have come true. What airport in the world could compare to the beauty of Changi? Graceful banners hung on the walls, welcoming weary travelers in their own languages. Brilliantly colored flowers cascaded down the sides of the built-in garden beds throughout the terminal. Trees grew beside waterfalls that tumbled over rocks to a pond below. The piped-in sounds of chirping birds completed her sense of entering a garden in paradise. How could anyone not love this place?

As she walked out of the terminal, she took a deep breath. How wonderfully familiar were the smells: tropical flowers and leaded petrol fumes—what a paradox! Living, life-giving plants, and dead, polluting fuel—intermingled. Was it possible her whole life was a paradox? A life full of rich experiences in totally

diverse cultures and places, each experience filled with a special vibrancy that made her want to dance and celebrate the joy of life. And yet, a life in which she always felt a bit like an observer, playing the part for the current scene, but forever watching to see how she was doing.

Erika quickly brushed these thoughts aside. Those times of being an outsider were gone now because she knew where she belonged—in Singapore. How wonderful finally to be home!

As the days progressed, however, life seemed less familiar. She discovered that many things she had taken for granted as a child in the expatriate business community of Singapore were no longer hers to enjoy as a young, single, foreign woman living with a Singaporean family. No maid, no expensive restaurants, no car, fewer friends. Instead, she had to wash her clothes by hand, grab cheap rice dishes from street vendors, and get around the city by walking blocks in the hot sun to take a crowded bus.

While growing up, her family might not have been classified as wealthy, but there had always been enough money for them to be comfortable and not worry about paying the bills, taking little side trips or splurging on a particularly nice outfit. Now she had to consider seriously such mundane questions as how much lunch cost and how she could pay for her barest living expenses.

Finding a job was harder than she had guessed it would be. Jobs that paid enough for her to rent a reasonably modest apartment and buy food and clothes had to be contracted with international companies before entering the country. Now she realized that was what her father had done. To make matters worse, she learned that available jobs were next to impossible for a noncitizen to get. Because the

government wanted to save jobs for Singaporeans, it rarely issued a work permit for local jobs to a foreigner. The jobs for local hires that she could find would not pay enough for her to live safely, let alone well. Because a young white woman was so visible in a cheap rent district with high crime rates, Erika feared she would present a far too easy target for someone bent on robbery or assault.

Here, in the world she had always thought of as home, Erika realized she was seen as a foreigner—an outsider. There was no such thing as an international passport.

The sad day came when she finally had to admit that she didn't fit in this country either. Sitting in her friend's tiny apartment in a world she had thought was home, despair swept over her. She was lost. The promises of big dreams seemed foolish and childish. She belonged nowhere. With a muffled sob she picked up the telephone and dialed her parents' number.

"Mom, I can't make it here, but I don't know what to do. I don't fit in Dayton, but I don't fit here either. Somehow I seem to have grown up between two totally different worlds, and now I've found out I don't belong to either one."

With infinite sorrow this time, she made one last airline reservation, and now she was here, forty thousand feet in the air, going—home?

Erika's story is only one of thousands we have heard from TCKs all over the world. The particulars of each tale are different, yet in a sense so many are the same. They are the stories of lives filled with rich diversity but mixed with an underlying question of where TCKs fit among all that diversity. What are some of the reasons for this common thread among TCKs? Who, indeed, are these TCKs and what are some of the benefits and challenges inherent in the experience they have had? These are the questions we will address in the chapters which follow.

Endnotes

- ¹ Carolyn D. Smith, *The Absentee American* (1991; reprint, Putnam Valley, NY: Aletheia Publications, 1994), 2.
- ² An organization formed by Norma McCaig in 1986 for TCKs of every background and nationality.
- ³ Ted Ward, "The MKs' Advantage: Three Cultural Contexts," in *Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family*, edited by Pam Echerd and Alice Arathoon (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989), 57.

2

Who Are "Third Culture Kids"?

Who or what exactly is a third culture kid? Here's the definition we like best:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background.¹

Let's look at this definition in detail.

"A Third Culture Kid (TCK)..."

Some of the most vigorous discussions about TCKs start with a debate over the term itself. Over and over people ask, "How can you possibly say people with such incredibly diverse cultural backgrounds and experience can make up a 'culture,' when the word *culture*, by definition, means a group of people who have something in common?"

This is one of the strange paradoxes about TCKs. Looking at the differences among them—of race, nationality, sponsoring orga-

nizations, and places where they are growing (or have grown) up—you would think TCKs could have little in common. But if you attend a conference sponsored by Global Nomads International and watch the animated, nonstop conversation of the participants throughout the weekend, you will not question the powerful connection between them. What is this almost magical bond? Why have they been called *third culture kids*?

The Third Culture as Originally Defined

A common misconception about third culture kids is that they have been raised in what is often called the "Third World." While this might be true for some, the Third World has no specific relationship to the concept of the third culture. Two social scientists, Drs. John and Ruth Hill Useem, coined the term *third culture* in the 1950s, when they went to India for a year to study Americans who lived and worked there as foreign service officers, missionaries, technical aid workers, businessmen, educators, and media representatives.² While in India, the Useems also met expatriates from other countries and soon discovered that "each of these subcultures [communities of expatriates] generated by colonial administrators, missionaries, businessmen, and military personnel—had its own peculiarities, slightly different origins, distinctive styles and stratification systems, but all were closely interlocked."³ They realized the expatriates had formed a lifestyle that was different from either their home or their host culture, but it was one they shared in that setting.

To best describe this expatriate world, the Useems defined the home culture from which the adults came as the first culture. They called the host culture where the family lived (in that case, India) the second culture. They then identified the shared lifestyle of the expatriate community as an *interstitial culture*, or "culture between cultures," and named it the third culture. The Useems called the children who had grown up in that interstitial culture *third culture kids*.

The Third Culture as Currently Defined

The Useems did their research when most Western expatriates lived in specific communal systems such as military bases, missionary compounds, and business enclaves. Identifying a visible, local expatriate community was relatively easy.

However, the world has changed since then. Today, many expatriates no longer live in defined communities. The Japanese families who live in Kokomo, Indiana, and work for Delco-Remy don't live in a Delco-Remy compound. Their children usually attend local schools instead of going off to boarding schools as TCKs often used to do. Because there are frequently no well-marked expatriate enclaves anymore, some argue that the terms *third culture* or *third culture kid* are now misnomers. How can there be a culture if people don't live together?

When we asked Dr. Useem what she thought about this, she said, "Because I am a sociologist/anthropologist I think no concept is ever locked up permanently.... Concepts change as we get to know more; other times concepts change because what happens in the world is changing."⁴

In her recent report on a survey of adult TCKs, Dr. Useem herself defined the third culture as a generic term to discuss the *lifestyle* "created, shared, and learned" by those who are from one culture and are in the process of relating to another one. In that same article, she defines TCKs simply as "children who accompany their parents into another society."⁵

These larger definitions are justifiable because if culture in its broadest sense is a way of life shared with others, there's no question that, in spite of their differences, TCKs of all stripes and persuasions in countless countries share remarkably important life experiences through the very process of living in and among different cultures—whether or not they grew up in a specific local expatriate community. Further, the kinds of experiences they share tend to affect the deeper rather than the more superficial parts of their personal or cultural being.

Like a double rainbow, two realities arch over the TCK experience that shape the formation of a TCK's life:

1. *Being raised in a genuinely cross-cultural world.* Instead of simply watching, studying, or analyzing other cultures, TCKs actually live in different cultural worlds as they travel back and forth between their home and host cultures. Some TCKs who have gone through multiple moves or whose parents are in an intercultural marriage have interacted closely with four or more cultures.

2. *Being raised in a highly mobile world.* Mobility is normal for the third culture experience. Either the TCKs themselves or those around them are constantly coming or going. The people in their lives are always changing, and the backdrop of physical surroundings may often fluctuate as well.

Members of this broad third culture community usually have other characteristics in common, including:

1. *Distinct differences.* Many TCKs are raised where being physically different from those around them is a major aspect of their identity. Even when external appearances are similar to either their host or home culture, TCKs often have a substantially different perspective on the world from their peers.
2. *Expected repatriation.* Unlike immigrants, third culture families usually expect at some point to return permanently to live in their home country.
3. *Privileged lifestyle.* Historically, employees of international businesses and members of missions, the military, and the diplomatic corps have been part of an elitist community—one with special privileges bestowed on its members by either the sponsoring organization or the host culture or both. Often, there are systems of logistical support or “perks”: those in the military can use the commissary or PX; embassy or missionary compounds may employ home repair or domestic service person-

nel; diplomatic families may have chauffeurs to drive the children to school or around town. Even without the perks, there are entitlements such as worldwide travel to and from their post—all at the expense of the sponsoring agency.

4. *System identity.* Members of specific third culture communities may be more directly conscious than peers at home of representing something greater than themselves—be it their government, their company, or God. Jobs can hinge on how well the adults’ behavior, or that of their children, positively reflects the values and standards of the sponsoring agency.

The first two characteristics of living in a cross-cultural and highly mobile world are true for virtually every third culture person. The degree to which TCKs may differ from their host culture, expect to repatriate, enjoy a privileged lifestyle, or identify with the organizational system varies a bit more depending on where and why their families are living outside the home culture.

A Sample Slice of the “Neither/Nor” Third Culture

ATCKs Rob and Heather are citizens of different countries who grew up on opposite sides of the globe. The only thing they share is the fact they were both raised outside their parents’ home cultures. After hearing a lecture at a Global Nomads International conference about both the original and broader meaning of the term *third culture*, they talked together during a break.

Rob spoke first. “I felt pretty skeptical before coming to this conference, but maybe there is something to this third culture bit. It never occurred to me that the military lifestyle I grew up in had a culture that was different from my home or host cultures. I just thought of myself as an American in Japan.”

“Why?” Heather asked.

“I was nine when my family moved from Oregon to the ‘American Bubble’ in Japan—that’s what everyone called our Army base. It seemed completely American.

Through the commissary or PX we could get Cheerios for breakfast, Nikes to run in, and even Pringles for snacks. The movies in our base theater were the same ones being shown in the States. Man, we even had tennis courts and a swimming pool just like I did at my YMCA in Portland!"

Heather looked at Rob with amazement. "I can't believe it!" she said. "I'm at least twenty years older than you, I've never been to Japan, my dad worked for the British government in Nigeria, but I can relate to what you're saying!"

"How come?" asked Rob.

"Well, I really don't know. I guess I never thought about it before. Maybe because we lived in a 'British Bubble'? We just didn't call it that. Although we didn't have a PX or commissary, we did have Kingsway stores in every major city. They imported all those wonderful British things like Marmite, Weetabix, and Jacob's Cream Crackers. We also had a swimming pool and tennis courts at the local British club. It all seemed very British and very normal."

Rob responded, "Yeah, well, I don't know about you, but for me, even with so many American trap-pings, life in Japan still wasn't like living in Portland. When I left the base and took the train to town, I suddenly felt isolated because I couldn't understand the people chattering around me or read most of the signs."

"I know what you mean," Heather responded.

"With all our British stuff around, it still wasn't like living in England. I had a Nigerian nanny who taught me how to speak Hausa and how to *chiniki*, or bargain, for things as I grew up. I wouldn't have done that in England. But I probably got more into the local culture than you did, since we moved to Nigeria when I was two."

"Well, I got into the local culture too," Rob said, a bit defensively. "I mean, after a few months I found Japanese friends who taught me how to eat sushi, use chopsticks, bathe in an *ofuro*, and sleep on a futon. But my life wasn't like theirs any more than it was like life back in Portland. For one thing, I went to the local international school, where I studied in English instead of Japanese."

"I understand that, too!" Heather exclaimed. "My life wasn't the same as my Nigerian friends' lives either—even if I could speak their language. I had a driver who took me back and forth from school each day, while most of my friends had to walk long distances in the heat of the day to attend their schools."

"So did your life overseas seem strange?" Rob and Heather looked up in surprise to see that someone had joined them.

Both shook their heads at the same time in response to the stranger's question.

"Nope, not to me," said Rob.

"Me either," interjected Heather.

The newcomer persisted. "But how could you feel normal when you lived so differently from people in either your own countries or Japan or Nigeria? Seems to me that would make you feel somewhat odd."

Rob thought for a quick moment. "Well, I suppose it's because all the other American kids I knew were growing up in that same neither/nor world the speaker talked about today. All my Army and international friends had moved as often as I had. We were used to saying good-bye to old friends and hello to new ones. No big deal. That's life. Nothing unusual, since we were all doing it. I don't know—it just seemed like a normal way to live, didn't it, Heather?"

"Exactly. I lived the same way all my other British

and expatriate friends did. They had house help. So did we. They flew from one continent to another regularly. So did I. When we went out to play, all of us wore the same kind of pith helmets so we wouldn't get sunstroke. To me, it's just how life was."

While both Rob and Heather happened to grow up in an easily identifiable expatriate community, third culture families who live in less defined communities still find ways to keep some expression of their home culture. In Indiana the Japanese community has organized special swimming classes at the local YMCA for their TCKs because they want to maintain their traditionally more disciplined approach to training children. They also conduct Saturday classes, when all academic subjects are taught in Japanese, so their TCKs maintain both written and verbal language skills.

But all this talk about the third culture should not distract us from understanding the most crucial part of the TCK definition, the fact that a TCK:

"...is a person..."

Why are these words critical to all further discussion on third culture kids? Because we must never forget that above all else, a TCK is simply a person. Sometimes TCKs spend so much time feeling different from people in the dominant culture around them that they (or those who notice these differences) begin to feel TCKs are, in fact, intrinsically different—some sort of special breed of being. While their experiences may be different from other people's, TCKs have the same need as non-TCKs for building relationships in which they love and are loved, ones in which they know others and are known by them. They need a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives and have the same capacities to think, learn, create, and make choices as others do. The characteristics, benefits, and challenges that we describe later arise from the interactions of the various aspects of mobility and the cross-cultural nature of this upbringing, not from some fundamental difference in them as persons.

"...who has spent a significant part..."

Time by itself doesn't determine how deep an impact the third culture experience has on the development of a particular child. Other variables such as the child's age, personality, and participation in the local culture have an important effect. For example, living overseas between the ages of one and four will affect a child differently than if that same experience occurs between the ages of eleven and fourteen.

While we can't say precisely how long a child must live outside the home culture to develop the classic TCK characteristics, we can say it is more than a two-week or even a two-month vacation to see the sights. Some people are identifiable TCKs or ATCKs after spending as little as one year outside their parents' culture. Of course, other factors such as the parents' attitudes and behavior or policies of the sponsoring agency add to how significant the period spent as a TCK is or was in shaping a child's life.

"...of his or her developmental years..."

Although the length of time needed for someone to become a true TCK can't be precisely defined, the time *when* it happens can. It must occur during the developmental years—from birth to eighteen years of age. We recognize that a cross-cultural experience affects adults as well as children. The difference for a TCK, however, is that this cross-cultural experience occurs during the years when that child's sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formed in the most basic ways. While parents may change careers and become former international businesspeople, former missionaries, former military personnel, or former foreign service officers, no one is ever a former third culture kid. TCKs simply move on to being adult third culture kids because their lives grow out of the roots planted in and watered by the third culture experience.

"...outside the parents' culture."

The home culture is defined in terms of the parents' culture. Most often, TCKs grow up outside the parents' home country as well as culture, and the stories throughout our book predominantly feature this more typical TCK experience. It's important to recognize, however, that TCKs can be children who never leave their parents' country but are still raised in a different culture. Jennifer is one.

Both of Jennifer's parents grew up in upper-middle-class suburbs of Toronto. When Jennifer was nine, they became teachers for five years on a First Nation (Native American) reservation near Vancouver.

Jennifer went to school, played, ate, and visited with her First Nation playmates almost exclusively during those years—yet her lifestyle was not the same as theirs. For example, there were celebratory rituals in the First Nation culture that Jennifer's family never practiced. Her parents had rules for curfew and study hours that many friends didn't have, but Jennifer accepted these differences between her and her friends.

When she was fourteen, Jennifer's parents returned to Toronto. They wanted her to have a more "normal" high school experience. Unfortunately, it wasn't as normal as they had hoped. For one thing, Jennifer's new classmates seemed to judge one another far more critically by what styles of clothes they did and didn't wear than she had ever experienced before. Far worse, however, it seemed to her that this emphasis on apparent trivia stemmed from a lack of concern for what she considered the *real* issues of life. When newspapers reported the ongoing conflict of land issues between the First Nation people and the Canadian government, she read the accounts with keen interest. She personally knew friends whose futures were directly affected by these political

decisions. But when she tried to discuss such things with fellow classmates or their parents, the response was almost dismissive. "I don't know what those people are complaining about. Look at all we've already done for them." The more she tried to explain why this topic needed attention, the more they labeled her as radical, and the more she labeled them as uncaring. Jennifer sobbed herself to sleep many nights, wishing for the comfortable familiarity of the world and friends she'd known before.

Although she had never left Canada, Jennifer had become a TCK—someone raised in that world between worlds—within her own country. Military children who have never moved outside their countries may also share many TCK characteristics. The military subculture (see Mary Edwards Wertsch, *Military Brats*) is quite different from that of the civilian population around it. When military parents return to civilian life, their children often experience many of the same feelings that internationally mobile TCKs describe when they return to their passport countries.

Raised on Navy bases in California and Washington, DC, Bernadette was fourteen when her father retired from the Navy and her family settled in the midwestern town of Terre Haute, Indiana. Bernadette later described the experience as one of total alienation from her peers, whose life experience was completely foreign to her.

"...The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any."

This brings us back to Erika.

As she flew back to the United States, Erika wondered how it could be that life felt like such a rich dance in and through so many cultures while at the same time

that same richness made it seem impossible to stop the dance. To land in Singapore would mean she could celebrate the hustle and bustle of that wonderful city she loved so much, but then she would miss the mountains of Ecuador and the joy of touching and seeing the beautiful weavings in the Otavalo Indian markets. To end the dance in Ecuador meant she would never again see the magnificent colors of fall in upstate New York or taste her grandmother's special Sunday pot roast. But to stop in New York or Dayton, where her parents now lived, meant she would miss not only Singapore and Ecuador but also all the other places she had been and seen. Erika wished for just one moment she could bring together the many worlds she had known and embrace them all at the same time, but she knew it could never happen.

This is at the heart of the issues of rootlessness and restlessness discussed later. This lack of full ownership is what gives that sense of belonging "everywhere and nowhere" at the same time.

"...Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK's life experience,..."

Obviously, there are specific ways each home and host culture shape each TCK (Rob loves peanut butter and jelly, Heather prefers Marmite; Rob eats his Cheerios and speaks Japanese, while Heather eats Weetabix and speaks Hausa). But it's not only food and language that shape them. Cultural rules do as well.

- After living in London where his dad served as ambassador for six years, Musa had trouble with how people dealt with time when he returned to Guinea. Instead of relaxing as others from his home culture could when meetings did not begin and end as scheduled, he felt the same frustration many expatriates experienced. Musa had exchanged the more relational worldview of his home culture for a time-oriented worldview during his time abroad.

- At his summer job in Canada, Gordon's boss thought he was dishonest and lazy because Gordon never looked anyone in the eye. But where Gordon had grown up in Africa, children always kept their eyes to the ground when talking with adults.

Certainly cultural practices are incorporated from the unique aspects of both host and home cultures, but the third culture is more than the sum total of the parts of home and host culture. If it were only that, each TCK would remain alone in his or her experience.

"...the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background."

Erika returned to Dayton, Ohio, after her long, final flight back from Singapore. She began teaching high school French and Spanish during the day; tutoring international businesspeople in English filled her evenings. Once more she tried to accept the reality that her past was gone. Life must go on, and she couldn't expect anyone else to understand her when she didn't understand herself.

Then a remarkable thing occurred. Erika met Judy. One evening she went to see a play and got there a few minutes early. After settling in her seat, she opened her program to see what to expect.

Before she could finish scanning the first page, a middle-aged woman with curly, graying hair squeezed past her, sitting in the next seat.

Why couldn't she have a ticket for the row in front? That's wide open. Erika rolled her eyes to the ceiling. All I wanted was a little space tonight.

Then it got worse. This woman was one of those friendly types.

"Hi, there. I'm Judy. What's your name?"

Oh, brother, lady. I'm not into this kind of chitchat.

"I'm Erika. It's nice to meet you." *There, that's over with.* And she turned her eyes back to study the program again.

"Well, I'm glad to meet you too."

Why won't she let me alone?

The lady went on. "I come for the plays every month but I haven't seen you before. Are you new here? Where are you from?"

C'mon, lady. Erika was becoming more internally agitated by the moment. This is the theater, not a witness stand. Besides, you don't really want to know anyway. "I live here in Dayton," Erika replied, with cool politeness. *That ought to end it.*

But Judy continued. "Have you always lived here?"

Why does she care? Erika was definitely losing composure at this point. "No, I've only lived here for two years." *Now shut up, lady.*

"Oh, really? Where did you come from before that?"

With a sigh, Erika half turned to look at this pesky woman and said, "I've lived in lots of different places." *So there.*

"Hey, that's great. So have I! Where have you lived?"

For the first time, Erika looked Judy in the eye. She couldn't believe it. This lady genuinely wanted to know. Erika hesitated. "I lived in Ecuador and Singapore."

"How long?"

"Oh, about ten years between the two places, if you're talking about actually living and going to school there full-time."

"You're kidding! I grew up in Venezuela. I'd love to talk to you about it. It's not always easy to find someone here in Dayton who understands what it's like to grow up in another country."

Just then the curtain went up for the play, so they stopped talking. Afterward, they went for coffee and Erika found herself amazed. Here they were, two

women from two totally different backgrounds—Judy's parents had been in the foreign service while Erika's were in business. Judy had lived in Venezuela and Erika had lived in Ecuador and Singapore. Judy was forty-seven, married, the mother of four grown children, while Erika was twenty-five, single, with no children. Yet they were soon talking and laughing together like long-lost friends.

"I remember when the CEO's wife first came to our house for dinner," Erika said with a chuckle. "She had just arrived in Singapore and kept talking about how awful everything was. My sister and I made up all sorts of stories about how big the roaches were and how poisonous the spiders were just to scare her."

Judy laughed. "I know how you felt. I hated it when new people arrived and complained about everything. I always felt so protective for what seemed like my personal Venezuela."

"Well, I guess it was kind of mean," Erika said, "but we didn't like her barging into our world without trying to understand the parts we loved so much. We thought she was arrogant and narrow-minded and didn't deserve to be there—and she probably thought we were the same!"

They laughed together and continued talking for three hours. Erika couldn't believe it. For the first time in years she could speak the language of her soul without needing a translator. A space inside that had almost dried up suddenly began filling and then overflowing with the joy of being understood in a way that needed no explanation.

TCKs around the world instinctively feel this connection when they meet each other. But why? How can someone from Australia who grew up in Brazil understand that inner experience of someone from Switzerland who grew up in Hong Kong?

A video of TCKs meeting at Cornell University clearly demonstrates this bond.⁵ Among the TCK panelists are

- Kelvin—born in Hong Kong, raised in Nigeria and England;
- Marianne, a Danish citizen who grew up in the United States;
- Kamal, an Indian who lived in Japan as a child;
- a young Turkish man who spent his childhood in Germany, England, and the United States;
- one American who grew up in the Philippines; and
- another American reared in France.

Although each person in the video has differing points of identification with his or her host culture (e.g., the Turkish man feels he is extremely punctual as a result of living in Germany for many years), throughout the discussion it's obvious that their commonalities of feelings and experiences far outweigh their differences. It is equally obvious that they are delighted to finally find a forum where simply naming how they have felt in various circumstances brings instant understanding. No further explanation is needed to elicit a sympathetic laugh or tear from their peers.

But the question remains: what is it about growing up in multiple cultures and with high mobility that creates such instant recognition of each other's experiences and feelings?

Endnotes

- ¹ "The TCK Profile" seminar material, Interaction, Inc., 1989, 1.
- ² Ruth Hill Useem, "Third Culture Kids: Focus of Major Study," *Newslinks*, Newspaper of the International School Services 12, 3 (January 1993): 1.
- ³ Ruth Hill Useem, "Third Cultural Factors in Educational Change," in *Cultural Challenges to Education: The Influence of Cultural Factors in School Learning*, edited by Cole S. Bretnbeck and Walker H. Hill (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1973), 122.
- ⁴ Personal letter to David C. Pollock, February 1994.
- ⁵ Useem, "Third Culture Kids," 1.
- ⁶ *Global Nomads: Cultural Bridges for the Future*, coproduced by Alice Wu and Lewis Clark in conjunction with Cornell University.



Why a Cross-Cultural Childhood Matters

I am
a confusion of cultures.
Uniquely me.
I think this is good
because I can
understand
the traveller, sojourner, foreigner,
the homesickness
that comes.
I think this is also bad
because I cannot
be understood
by the person who has sown and grown in one place.
They know not
the real meaning of homesickness
that hits me
now and then.
Sometimes I despair of
understanding them.
I am

an island
and
a United Nations.
Who can recognise either in me
but God?

—"Uniquely Me" by Alex Graham James

Who Am I?

This poem by Alex, an Australian TCK who grew up in India, captures the paradoxical nature of the TCK experience—the sense of being profoundly connected yet simultaneously disconnected with people and places around the world. The question, however, is this: what makes Alex, like Erika and most TCKs, feel this way?

Before we can answer that question, we need to take a closer look at the world in which they grow up, a world filled with cross-cultural transitions and high mobility. These two related but distinct forces play a large role in shaping a TCK's life.

We recognize, of course, that TCKs aren't the only ones who experience cross-cultural differences or high mobility. In large metropolitan centers around the world, children may live their entire lives in one place with neighbors from a great variety of ethnic or racial backgrounds and become aware of cultural differences at an early age. Children may also experience high mobility within their own country for various reasons. Without doubt, these factors will shape a non-TCK's life as well. After Dave Pollock presented "The TCK Profile" in Washington, DC, one non-TCK said, "I'm an American who has never lived outside the States, but my dad climbed the corporate ladder while I grew up. We moved every two years or so, whenever he got his next promotion. I have all the challenges of the mobility issues without the benefits of the cross-cultural experience." We also realize that many adults experience both cross-cultural transitions and high mobility as they embark on international careers; their lives, too, are inevitably changed in the process.

So what makes the TCK experience different from that of these

children or adults? Children who grow up amid people from many cultures in one locality usually learn to be comfortable with the diversity. It's a relatively stable diversity. The child isn't being chronically uprooted, and the unwritten rules for how the groups coexist and relate to one another are clearly defined and practiced. The difference for TCKs is that they not only deal with cultural differences in a particular location, but the entire cultural world they live in can change overnight with a single airplane ride. Relationships are subject to equally dramatic changes as they or others around them constantly come and go. When non-TCK children move within the same culture, they miss old friends and need to go through grief at losing familiar people and places, but they don't have to relearn basic cultural rules and practices when they unpack in the next city. The language remains the same, the currency still works, and they already know who the president is.

When people first go to another culture as adults, they experience culture shock and need a period of adjustment, but their value system, sense of identity, and the establishment of core relationships with family and friends have already developed in the home culture. They clearly see themselves as Americans, Australians, Kenyans, or Indonesians who happen to be living in another place or culture. Their basic sense of who they are and where they belong is intact. Unlike adults with similar experiences, however, for TCKs the moving back and forth from one culture to another happens before they have completed the critical developmental task of forming a sense of their own personal or cultural identity. A British child taking toddling steps on foreign soil or speaking his or her first words in Chinese with an amah (nanny) has no idea of what it means to be human yet, let alone "British." He or she simply responds to what is happening in the moment.

To have any meaningful discussion about TCKs, it is essential to remember that it is an *interplay* of these factors—living in both a culturally changing *and* highly mobile world during the *formative* years—rather than any single factor alone that leads to the evolution

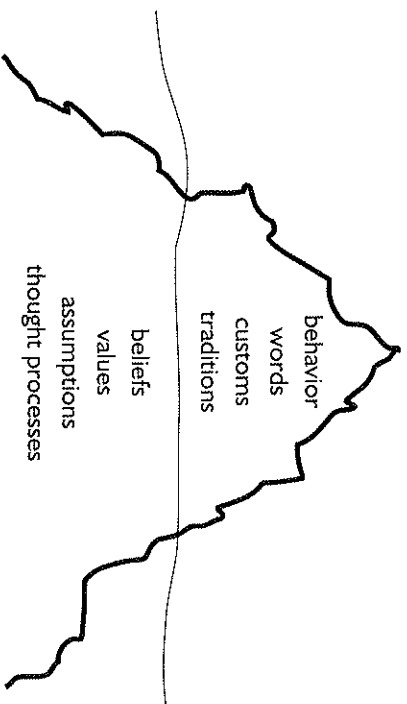
of both the benefits and challenges we describe as well as the personal characteristics. To better understand how the interplay of these factors works, we need to look at each one separately and in more depth to determine how a TCK's experience differs from that of the child who grows up among diverse cultures in one place or with high mobility alone. We will begin in this chapter by taking a look at the cross-cultural nature of the TCK's childhood. Then, in chapter 4, we will move on to high mobility.

The Significance of Culture

One of the major developmental tasks that help us form our sense of identity and belonging is to successfully learn the basic cultural rules of our society while we are children, to internalize those principles and practices as we move through adolescence, and then use them as the basis for how we live and act as adults. In order to look at this normal process and then why it is so significant for TCKs, we need to first answer these questions: What is culture? How do we learn it? Why is it important?

When we first think of the word *culture*, the obvious things such as how to dress and act like those around us come to mind. But learning culture is more than learning to conform to external patterns of behavior. Culture is also a system of shared assumptions, beliefs, and values.² It is the framework from which we interpret and make sense of life and the world around us. As cultural anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert emphasizes, culture is learned rather than instinctive behavior—something caught from, as well as taught by, the surrounding environment and passed on from one generation to the next.³ Author and cross-cultural trainer and consultant L. Robert Kohls suggests we look at culture as a kind of iceberg, with one part clearly visible above the surface of the water and another, much larger part hidden below. The part above the water can be identified as the *surface culture* and includes behavior, words, customs, and traditions. Underneath the water where no one can see is the *deep culture*, and it consists of beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought

processes. Here is a representation of Dr. Kohls' culture iceberg.



No group can be cohesive without its members sharing a basic consensus in the deeper dimensions of culture. Merely mimicking behavior—such as clothing styles or food preferences—will not hold a group together.⁴

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the traditional role of culture is seen in *Fiddler on the Roof*, a musical about a farmer named Tevye and his Russian Jewish village of Anatevka. For years Tevye's culture has remained basically the same. Everyone knows where he or she fits in relationship to one another and to God. There have been no major outside influences. The way things have always been is the way things still are, with the milkman, matchmaker, farmer, and all others clearly aware of their assigned roles in the village. Roles assigned by whom? By *tradition*, which is another word for how cultural beliefs are worked out in practice. Tevye says,

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you—I don't

know! But it's a tradition. Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.... Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as—as a fiddler on the roof!

Teyve then laments that tradition is breaking down. During the story, as the old ways rapidly change, he loses his former sense of balance. His grip on life is slipping, his comfortable world shattered. Mentally and emotionally, Teyve can't keep up, and he begins to feel disoriented and alienated, even from his own children.

Why is *cultural balance*—that almost unconscious knowledge of how things are and work in a particular community—important? Because when we are in cultural balance, we are like a concert pianist who, after practicing for years to master the basics, now no longer thinks about how to find the right piano keys or when to pedal or how to do scales or trills. Those functions have become almost automatic responses to notations in the score of music, and this freedom allows the pianist to use these basic skills to create and express richer, fuller music.

Cultural balance gives us that same kind of freedom. Once we have stayed in a culture long enough to internalize its behaviors and the assumptions behind them, we have an almost intuitive sense of what is right, humorous, appropriate, or offensive in any particular situation. Instead of spending excessive time worrying if we are dressed appropriately for a business appointment, we can concentrate on coming up with a new business plan. Being "in the know" gives us a sense of stability, deep security, and belonging. Like Teyve, we may not understand *why* cultural rules work as they do, but we know *how* our culture works.

Conversely, when we are having to learn and relearn the basic rules by which the world around us is operating, our energies are spent in surviving rather than thriving. It's as if we are still figuring out the fingering for the scales on the piano while others around us are playing a Rachmaninoff concerto. Being out of cultural balance leaves us struggling to understand what is happening rather than fully participating in the event.

A World of Changing Cultures

Through the years, many TCKs have told us they wonder what is wrong with them, because they never seem to "get it." No matter what situation they are in, they often make what looks like a dumb remark or mistake. Others wonder at their apparent stupidity, while they are left with the shame that somehow they can never quite fit in socially as others do.

Perhaps ironically, the struggle many TCKs face in trying to find a sense of cultural balance and identity is not because they learn culture differently from the way others do. In fact, the real challenge comes *because* they learn culture as everyone does—by "catching it" from their environment rather than by reading a book or getting a master's degree in cultural anthropology. What TCKs and those who know them seem to forget is that their life experiences have been different from someone who grows up in a basically stable, traditional, monocultural community such as Teyve's. As TCKs move with their parents from place to place, the cultural values and practices of the communities they live in often change radically. What was acceptable behavior and thinking in one place is now seen as crude or ridiculous in the next. Which culture are they supposed to catch? Do they belong to all of them, none of them, or some of each of them? Where in the world (literally) do they fit?

Another factor for TCKs in finding cultural balance is that cultural norms are as unconsciously taught as they are caught. Parents, community, school, and peers are all part of the cultural teaching process, whether the members of those groups think about it or not. When everyone in a community such as Teyve's holds the same basic values and customs, each group unthinkingly reinforces the next group's instructions. For TCKs, however, not only do the overall cultural rules often change overnight, but equally often the individual members of these four basic groups in any given place may hold markedly different world- and lifeviews from one another. Let's take a look at how the normal process of learning cultural balance may be complicated by each of these groups in a TCK's life.

Parents

Parents communicate both the "above water" and "below water" cultural norms in various ways. They do it by example, dressing differently for a business meeting than for a tennis match, or speaking respectfully of others. They do it by correction: "Don't chew with your mouth open." "If you don't stop hitting your brother, you'll have to take a time-out." Or they do it by praise: "What a good boy you are to share your toys with your sister!"

Wherever TCKs are being raised, their families' cultural practices and values are usually rooted in the parents' home culture or cultures and may be markedly different from the practices of the surrounding culture. This includes something as simple as the style of clothing. Girls from the Middle East may continue wearing a head covering no matter which country they live in. Dutch children wear Western dress in the forests of Brazil. Of course, it's far more than that as well. Telling the truth at all costs may be a prime value at home, while shading the truth to avoid shaming another person is the paramount value in the host culture.

Increasing numbers of TCKs are also being born to parents who are in an intercultural marriage or relationship. In 1960 one-quarter of American children living overseas had parents from two cultures, according to Ruth Hill Usem.⁶ In 1995 Helen Fail found that 42 percent of her ATCK survey respondents had grown up in bicultural families.⁷ One young man, for example, was born in the Philippines to a German father married to a Cambodian mother, and they speak French as their common family language. That's a lot of cultures for a young child to learn, and it complicates this most elemental step of learning cultural rules and practices from parents.

Community

In a community like Tevye's, other adults reinforce what the parents teach at home because the rules are uniform. The same characteristics—such as honesty, hard work, and respect for adults—bring approval (or, in their absence, disapproval) from the community as

well as from parents. No one stops to question by whose standards some cultural behaviors and customs are defined as proper and others as improper, but everyone knows what they are.

TCKs interface with different local communities, each having different cultural expectations, from the moment they begin their odyssey in the third culture experience. Unless they are isolated in a military, embassy, mission, or company compound and never go into the surrounding community, the host culture certainly affects them. They learn to drop in on friends without calling ahead. They call adults by their first names. When TCKs return to their home culture, they usually have to switch to a different set of cultural customs and practices. Now an unexpected visit becomes an intrusion. Addressing a playmate's mother or father by her or his first name is rude enough to be a punishable offense. Woe to the TCK who forgets where he or she is.

Besides the home and host cultures, in many situations TCKs are also conditioned by the overall expatriate community as well as the subcommunity—missionary, business, military, diplomatic corps—in which they grow up. Each of these groups also has its own subculture and clear expectations of behavior. In *Military Brats*, Mary Edwards Wertsch writes,

Certainly by the time a military child is five years old, the values and rules of military life have been thoroughly internalized, the military identity forged, and the child has already assumed an active stage presence as an understudy of the Fortress theater company.⁸

Whatever the rules are in any TCK's given subculture—be they matters of correct dress, correct faith, or correct political views—TCKs know that to be an accepted member of that group, they must conform to those standards.

School

Although culture isn't taught from a book, no educational system develops in a cultural vacuum. A curriculum, along with how it is

taught, is a direct reflection of the cultural values and beliefs of the society. Those who believe in the curriculum do so because they feel the values and practices it emphasizes are correct. As long as the community is in basic cultural agreement, the school will reinforce its views and practices because teachers and administrators (who also come from that community) will make choices for what is taught that are consistent with what parents and others in the community believe and teach.

For many TCKs, however, what and how things are taught at school may be vastly different as they shift from school to school while moving from one place to another. In addition, in an international community the individual teachers themselves often come from many different cultures. This can add significant confusion to the TCK's cultural development. Joe's story is an excellent example.

My siblings and I found ourselves the only Americans in an Anglo-Argentine culture and we went to British schools. But the Argentines also thought their education was pretty good, so Peron mandated an Argentine curriculum for every private school and, with what time was left over, the school could do what it wanted. We went to school from 8:00 to 4:00 with four hours in Spanish in the morning and four hours of an English public school in the afternoon.

Meanwhile, our parents fought desperately to keep some semblance of Americanism at home. They lost the battle of the "crossed 7s." They lost the spelling battle. Worse, when they were told that in a given year there would be a focus on North American history, geography, and literature, they discovered, to their dismay, North America meant Canada.⁹

It isn't only Americans going to British-oriented schools who struggle. Some of the most difficult situations are those of children who are from non-English-speaking countries who go to American-oriented schools. One Norwegian girl who attended such a school writes:

Norway became my well-kept secret. I was a fiercely patriotic little girl, and every May 17 I would insist on celebrating Norway's independence day. My American classmates had their Thanksgiving and Halloween parties. I was never invited, except for once, when I left the party in tears because I didn't understand the English in the video they were watching. Little did it help that we had a teacher from Texas who taught us U.S. history that year. When I put Florida on the wrong side of the map she scolded me for it. That memory is still very vivid in my mind. I was forced to hear about the wonders of America, and no one cared to hear about Norway. No one seemed to care that English wasn't my first language, and the school wouldn't give us time to learn Norwegian during school hours—we had to study Norwegian during our vacations. I used to think that was really unfair.¹⁰

If school is a place for learning the values as well as the behavior of culture, what happens when children attend a school with completely different customs, values, or religious orientation from that of their parents? This often occurs for globally nomadic families when the choices for schools that teach the academic curriculum of their home country may be limited to schools based on a belief system which does not match their own.

TCKs who go to boarding school experience another distinct subculture twenty-four hours a day rather than only during school. Without question, different rules are needed to organize scores of children in a dormitory environment rather than two or three in a home. Some TCKs talk of being raised by their peers more than by adults in such a setting. Some consider this the most positive thing about boarding school; others say it was the most difficult. Either way, it is a different experience from going to a day school and returning to parents each night.

Peers

When children play together, they instinctively parrot the cultural rules they have been taught: "You're cheating!" "Don't be a sissy!" As children grow, shaming one another this way enforces the norms of the community.

Most TCKs attend school and play with peers from many cultures—each culture valuing different things. Some friends practically live and die for soccer and cricket; others love American football and baseball. Some children are raised to believe that academic success is the highest priority; others value peer relationships over high grades. How does a child decide which is really most important?

While virtually all children learn culture from their parents, community, school, and peers, TCKs often have two additional sources of cultural input: caregivers and sponsoring agencies.

Caregivers

Some TCKs are left with a caregiver for perhaps as long as all day, five days a week, while both parents work. These caregivers are often members of the host culture and may speak only their national language. A German child being cared for by a Scottish nanny will likely hear no German during the time they spend together. Methods of child care in various cultures can be radically different. Instead of being pushed in a pram, Russian children raised in Niger will be carried on their African nanny's back until they can walk. Shaming may be the main method of training a child in the host culture rather than the positive reinforcement typical of the home culture.

Caregivers inevitably reflect their culture's attitude toward children and life. The story goes that when Pearl Buck was a child in China, someone asked how she compared her mother to her Chinese amah. It is said that Buck replied, "If I need to hear a story read, I go to my mother. If I fall down and need comforting, I go to my *amah*." One culture valued teaching and learning while the other placed a

greater value on nurture, and as a child, Buck instinctively knew the difference.

Sponsoring Agencies

Many TCKs' parents belong to sponsoring agencies that have special behavioral or philosophical expectations of not only their employees but of the employees' families as well. This may result in situations that people in the home culture could never imagine. Two examples follow.

- A child's indiscretions (such as spraying graffiti on the wall of a public building) in a foreign service community might be written up and put in a parent's file, forever influencing future promotions, while that same behavior wouldn't cause a ripple in a parent's career if it happened in a suburban community in the home country.
- In the military, if a parent doesn't come in for a teacher-parent conference, the teacher can speak with the parent's officer-in-charge and the officer will require the parent to come in. If a military child does something as serious as getting drunk in school or setting off a firecracker, for example, he or she might be sent back to the home country, the parent won't be promoted that year, and the incident goes on the parent's permanent record.

In addition to such specific expectations for families in certain organizational subcultures, we have historically often neglected to look at how the root or home culture of the sponsoring agency itself may affect TCKs, particularly those who come from a different culture. The increasing internationalization of organizations throughout the world will soon force us to do so. When the policies and operational processes of an agency are rooted in a nationality or culture other than an employee's home culture, it means that without very careful planning, the decisions made by the executives of that organization which deeply affect the employee and his or her family may no longer coincide with the TCK's parental culture. Look at Ilpo's story to see

what a major effect this one factor alone can have on a TCK's life. This relates to schooling options provided for him.

Ruth Van Reken met Ilpo, a Finnish TCK who had grown up in Taiwan, while he was finishing his medical residency program at the University of Chicago. He had completed all his post-secondary school education in the United States, including medical school. She asked why he had chosen to come to the United States rather than returning to school in Finland.

"Well, it sort of just happened," Ilpo replied. "My folks taught in a seminary in Taiwan, but the other missionaries were from America and Norway. Even though the curriculum for our little mission school was supposedly an international one, we had an American teacher, so all our classes were in English." Ilpo went on to explain how at age twelve he had gone to the American boarding school in Taichung and he lived in a small dorm run by the Finnish mission. Although he spoke Finnish in the dorm, his classes and interactions with fellow students took place in English. It was about this time that Ilpo faced his first cultural crisis. If he had been in Finland, after ninth grade he would have competed with all other Finnish students in a special test to decide who could continue their academic schooling and who would go to a trade or vocational school. When the time came for Ilpo to take that exam, he encountered a major problem. His education had been in English and the exam was in Finnish. Although he spoke Finnish fluently with his family, his written language skills in that language and his knowledge of the curriculum content from which the tests came were deficient. Ilpo knew he wanted to be a doctor, but if he went back and competed with the students who had been studying in Finnish schools, the chances of his scoring high enough to attend university were slim. Ultimately, he felt his only option was to

attend university in the States within the educational system he knew. But that also meant he had to stay in the United States for medical training because in Finland, medical training begins during university, not after it.

When Ruth asked Ilpo where he expected to live after his training, he said it would be very difficult to go back to Finland. Not only was its system different, but he didn't know medical vocabulary in Finnish. Even if he learned that, fellow physicians would look down on him because he had trained somewhere else. Ruth asked how he felt about that and Ilpo said, "That's what I'm coming to grips with now. I didn't realize before how nearly impossible it would be ever to return to Finland. It's a choice that slipped out of my hands. I feel like my world slipped away."

TCKs in Relationship to Surrounding Dominant Culture

There is another aspect of cross-cultural living that has a significant influence on a TCK's life—the changing nature of how he or she fundamentally relates to the surrounding dominant culture, be it the home or host culture. Sometimes people presume we only mean a TCK's relationship to the host culture when we talk of his or her relationship to the "dominant culture," but they forget that one of a TCK's most stressful times may be trying to sort out the relationship to the home culture itself. So let us be clear—the patterns of how a TCK relates to the surrounding culture that we are about to describe are possible in both host and/or home cultures.

We said earlier that no group can hold together for long if they share only the visible or surface parts of culture such as dress, language, behavior, and traditions. That is true. Traditionally, however, people have used their surface culture (e.g., tribal scarifications, heraldry, or the chador) to identify themselves as people who also share a common deep culture; in other words, they have similar beliefs,

assumptions, and values. In some places, various tribes and nationalities may have coexisted side by side, but everyone readily knew by appearance who was and was not part of his or her group and, thus, who did or didn't share a common outlook in the deeper culture values as well.

Things are not so simple anymore. Across the world, external patterns of behavior are changing. TV, videos, and the Internet expose people all over the world to similar styles and fashions. Traditional garb is replaced by business suits (or blue jeans). Increased contact through trade, communication, and travel also causes the influences of music, food, and language to spread from one place to another with dizzying speed. We are careening toward the global village Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers predicted, where the campfire in the middle is a TV set telling us what we should all buy and how we should all look.¹¹

But the deeper levels of culture that Kohl's mentions are far slower to change than the surface ones. This creates a major problem. Why? As long as we look different from another person, or have some way to quickly and easily identify that we are different, we don't expect the other to behave or believe as we do. But when a person looks and acts much like us on the outside, we assume sameness on the inside and fully expect that other person to respond in a situation as we would. The truth is, the *appearance* that we are the same hides the fact that in those deeper places of culture—the ones from which we make our life decisions—we may be as different as ever. This actually increases cultural stress. We are far more offended if people who look like us don't behave as we assumed they would than if we never have any expectations of similarity in the first place.

How does this characteristic of cultural interaction affect the TCK experience? And how does that relate to our discussion of cultural differences?

Despite the fact that our world is becoming more of a global village, whatever country TCKs live or travel in, there is still a pre-dominant national or local culture. The language and currency used

for trade, the view of the elderly, whether tasks or relationships are most valued, and the racial or ethnic makeup of the majority of the population are examples of what might be part of the prevailing, overall cultural milieu. Wherever a TCK lives, he or she may or may not resemble the physical appearance of the majority of the members of that culture. In addition, the prevailing cultural beliefs and assumptions may or may not be the same ones from which the TCK operates. In other words, wherever they live, at both the superficial and deeper levels of culture, TCKs either appear similar to and/or think like members of the surrounding dominant culture or they appear different and/or think differently from members of that culture. This means that there are four possible ways they relate to the surrounding culture, be it the home or host culture. For our purposes, we have called these relational patterns *foreigner*, *adopted*, *hidden immigrant*, and *mirror*.

| Foreigner Look different Think different | Hidden Immigrant Look alike Think different |
|---|--|
| Adopted Look different Think alike | Mirror Look alike Think alike |

1. *Foreigner*—*look different, think different*. This is the traditional model for TCKs in the host culture. They differ from those around them in both appearance and worldview. They know and others know they are foreigners. In a few cases (e.g., international adoption), this category may apply to TCKs in their official home culture as well.

2. *Adopted*—*look different, think alike*. Some TCKs appear physically different from members of the surrounding culture, but they have lived there so long and immersed themselves in the

culture so deeply that their behavior and worldview are the same as members of that culture. While TCKs may feel very comfortable relating to the surrounding culture, others may treat them as foreigners.

3. *Hidden immigrant—look alike, think different.* When TCKs return to their home culture, or when they grow up in countries where they physically resemble the majority of the citizens of that country, they appear like those around them, but internally these TCKs view life through a lens that is as different from the dominant culture as any obvious foreigner. People around them, however, presume they are the same as themselves inside, since they appear the same outside.

4. *Mirror—look alike, think alike.* Some TCKs not only physically resemble the members of their host culture, but they have lived there so long that they have adopted the deeper levels of that culture as well. No one would realize they aren't citizens unless they show their passports. TCKs who return to their home culture after spending only a year or two away or who were away only at a very young age may also fit in this category. Although they have lived abroad, their deeper levels of culture have remained rooted solidly in the home culture and they identify with it completely.

Of course, non-TCK children and adults may fall into one or another of these boxes at any given time, but the difference for TCKs is that throughout childhood they are constantly changing which box they're in depending on where they happen to be. They may be obvious foreigners one day and hidden immigrants the next. To complicate the matter further, many TCKs do not make a simple move from one culture to another but are in a repetitive cycle of traveling back and forth between at least home and host cultures throughout childhood. But why does that matter? Because as they move in and out of various cultures TCKs not only have to learn new cultural rules, but more fundamentally, they must understand who they are in relationship to the surrounding culture.

Defining this relationship is relatively simple when they are in the foreigner or mirror categories. In both cases, they are who they seem to be. Those in the foreigner box look around and realize that the people around them are different from themselves. People in the community look back at the TCKs and realize they are different as well. Neither TCK nor the member of that culture expects the other person to necessarily think or act like he or she does; they automatically know they are not the same—and they're not. Of course, TCKs in the mirror box look at the community and the community looks back and both expect the other to share similar fundamental principles for life as they do—and they are right again. In both the foreigner and mirror categories the expectations of who others are in the deeper levels as well as superficial levels of culture matches reality—for both TCKs and those in the community.

When TCKs are in the adopted or hidden immigrant categories, however, the expectations no longer hold true. What they and those around them presume is not what they get. Sometimes adopted TCKs feel frustrated when community members overexplain simple things they already know or speak to them slowly, presuming they can't understand the local language. Community members don't realize that in spite of physical differences these TCKs are remarkably like them inside. On the other hand, community members look at the hidden immigrant TCKs, presuming they can do every common task others around know how to do. A Cameroonian TCK who is raised in London and then returns to Cameroon at fourteen, however, probably has no idea how to husk a coconut just off the palm tree like other Cameroonian children can. Members of the community wonder how one of its own could be so ignorant. That same TCK may also be shocked, however, that friends at home don't yet know how to surf the Internet. Based on similar appearances, both TCKs and those in the community are expecting the others to be like themselves in every basic way. This time their expectations are wrong, but neither side forgives the other as they would a true immigrant or obvious foreigner for unexpected behavior or even ignorance. Re-

lating as a hidden immigrant in any culture may be one of the greatest cultural challenges that many TCKs face.

It's not hard to see how growing up cross-culturally can affect a child's attempts to understand who he or she is in relation to the world around, but how does the highly mobile nature of a TCK's childhood also influence the very development of who they are? This will be the subject of chapter 4.

Endnotes

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- ² Paul G. Heibert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 28–29.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁴ L. Robert Kohls (unpublished manuscript). Used by permission.
- ⁵ Book by Joseph Stein, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, based on Sholom Aleichem's stories, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 4th Limelight Edition (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994), 2, 9.
- ⁶ Useem, "Third Cultural Factors," 126.
- ⁷ Helen Fail, "Some of the Outcomes of International Schooling" (master's thesis, Brookes University, Oxford, England, 1995), 76.
- ⁸ Mary Edwards Wertsch, *Military Brats* (1991; reprint, Putnam Valley, NY: Aletheia Publications, 1996), 6.
- ⁹ Joseph McDonald, MK e-mail communication, October 1995. Used by permission.
- ¹⁰ Personal correspondence from TCK to David C. Pollock, November 1995. Used by permission.
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4

Why High Mobility Matters

I had adored the nomadic life. I had loved gallivanting from Japan to Taiwan to America to Holland and onward. In many ways, I had adapted well. I had learned to love new smells and vistas and the mysteries inherent to new cultures.... I had conquered the language of internationalists, both the polite exchange of conversation in formal settings and the easy intimacy of globetrotters. I was used to country-hopping. To move every couple of years was in my blood. In spite of the fact that foreign service life is one long continuous meal of loss—loss of friends and beloved places—I loved it. The warp of my life was the fact of moving on.¹

—Sara Mansfield Taber

We have looked at the cross-cultural nature of the TCK experience in some detail. We also want to clarify how we define the term *high mobility* and why it is the second major factor in the life of most TCKs.

People often ask how we can say that high mobility is one of the two nearly universal characteristics for TCKs when mobility patterns vary so widely among them. Some move to a different country every two or three years with parents who are in the military or

diplomatic corps. It's obvious that their lives are highly mobile. Others stay in one country from birth to university, and mobility wouldn't appear to be an issue for them.

All TCKs, however, deal with mobility issues at one level or another. Children of parents in business like Erika or those with parents in the foreign service usually take home leave each summer. Missionaries' children may only go on furlough every four years, but they usually stay away from the host country for a longer period of time, sometimes up to a year. Each leave means good-bye to friends in the host country, hello to relatives and friends at home; then good-bye to those people a short time later, and hello again to the host country friends—if those friends are still there. TCKs who attend boarding school have other major patterns of mobility. Whether they go home once or twice a year or spend three months at school followed by one month at home, each coming and going involves more greetings and farewells—and more adjustments. Paul Seaman describes this pattern of mobility well.

Like nomads we moved with the seasons. Four times a year we packed up and moved to, or back to, another temporary home. As with the seasons, each move offered something to look forward to while something had to be given up.... We learned early that "home" was an ambiguous concept, and, wherever we lived, some essential part of our lives was always someplace else. So we were always of two minds. We learned to be happy and sad at the same time. We learned to be independent and [accept] that things were out of our control.... We had the security and the consolation that whenever we left one place we were returning to another, already familiar one.²

Besides a TCK's personal mobility, every third culture community is filled with people who continually come and go. Short-term volunteers arrive to assist in a project for several weeks and then they are gone. A favorite teacher accepts another position a continent away. Best friends leave because their parents transfer to a new post.

Older siblings depart for boarding school or university at home. The totality of all these comings and goings—of others as well as the TCKs themselves—is what we mean when we use the term *high mobility* throughout this book, and any time there is mobility, everyone involved goes through some type of transition experience as well. To understand better why high mobility is the second major factor in a TCK's developmental process, we need to look at the normal process of transition.

The Transition Experience

In a certain sense, life for everyone, TCK or not, is a series of transitions—a "passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another."³ Each transition changes something in our lives. Some transitions are normal and progressive—we expect them, as in the transition from infancy to childhood or from middle age to old age. Sometimes these life transitions include physical moves from one place to another, such as when a young person goes off to university in another state. In most cases, we know these transitions are coming and have time to prepare for them.

Other transitions, however, are sudden and disruptive—such as the unexpected loss of a job, a serious injury, or the untimely death of a loved one. Life after these transitions is drastically different from what it was before. The abruptness of the change disorients us and we wonder, "What am I ever going to do?"

TCKs also experience expected and unexpected transitions. There are two important reasons, however, why this topic deserves special focus in a discussion on TCKs. First, because of the high mobility inherent in their lifestyle, TCKs go through major transitions far more frequently than those born and raised in one basic area. Psychologist Frances J. White says, "Because of the nature of their work, [third culture families] are particularly vulnerable to separations. They experience not only the...usual share of situational separations faced by the world at large but also a number of partings idiosyncratic to their profession."⁴

Second, TCKs not only go through the transition process more often than most people, but when it involves their personal movement from one location to another, TCKs usually change cultures as well as places. This increases the degree of impact from that experience as the issues related to what is commonly referred to as *culture shock* are piled on top of the normal stress of any transition.

Although there are many types of transitions, for our purposes we will concentrate on describing transition within the context of physical mobility. In any particular transition, of course, we may be a member in the sending or receiving community, but our discussion will primarily focus on how the process takes place from the perspective of the one who is leaving. Basically, each transition experience goes through these five predictable stages:

1. Involvement
2. Leaving
3. Transition
4. Entering
5. Reinvolvement

Involvement Stage

We barely recognize this first stage of transition because life seems too normal to be a "stage." We feel settled and comfortable, knowing where we belong and how we fit in. Under ideal circumstances, we recognize we are an *intimate* part of our community and are careful to follow its customs and abide by its traditions so that we can maintain our position as a valued member. We feel a responsibility to be involved in the issues that concern and interest our community, and we're focused on the present and our immediate relationships rather than thinking primarily about the past or worrying over the future.

Involvement is a comfortable stage for those around us as well. People hear our name and instantly picture our face and form. They

know our reputation, history, talents, tastes, interests, and our place in the political and social network.

Leaving Stage

One day life begins to change. We learn we will be leaving, and deep inside we begin to prepare. At first we may not realize what's going on—especially if our departure date is more than six months away. With shorter warning, however, the mostly unconscious leaving process starts immediately. We begin loosening emotional ties, backing away from the relationships and responsibilities we have had. We call friends less frequently. We don't start new projects at work. During the last year before graduation from high school or university, this leaning away is called "senioritis."

While it may be normal—and perhaps necessary—to begin to detach at some level during this stage, it is often confusing as well to both our friends and ourselves. This detachment can produce anger and frustration in relationships that have been close or in the way we handle our job responsibilities.

During one transition seminar, Dave Pollock talked about this loosening of ties as part of the leaving stage. Soon he noticed a general buzz in the room. One gentleman sat off to the side, blushing rather profusely as others began to laugh. When Dave stopped to ask what was happening, the blushing gentleman said, "Well, I guess I better confess. I'm the manager here, and just yesterday those working under me asked to meet with me. They complained about my recent job performance and told me I don't seem to care; I take far too much time off; I'm unavailable when they need me, and so on. As you've been talking, I just realized what's been happening. Last month, my CEO told me I would be transferred to a new assignment, so mentally I've already checked out."

"That's pretty normal," Dave said rather sympathetically.

"I know," he replied. "The only problem is I'm not due to leave for two more years. Maybe I'd better check back in again!"

We may not upset an entire office staff as this man did, but unless we consciously choose to maintain and enjoy relationships and roles as long as possible, at some point all of us will back away in one form or another. It's part of the state of denial that comes during the leaving stage as we unconsciously try to make the leaving as painless as we can. Other forms of self-protective denials surface as well.

Denial of feelings of sadness or grief. Instead of acknowledging sadness, we begin to think, "I don't really like these people very much anyway. Susie takes way too much of my time with all her problems. I'll be glad when I'm out of here and she can't call me every day." We can also deny our sadness at leaving by focusing only on what is anticipated. We talk about the wonderful things to do, eat, and see in the next location and seemingly make a mental leap over the process of getting there.

One Canadian ATCK began to weep at this point in a transition seminar. Later he said, "Dave, I feel terrible. I grew up in a remote tribe in Papua New Guinea. When I left to return home for university, I could only think about how much I'd enjoy having Big Macs, TV, and electricity. I looked forward to new friends. When my PNG friends came to say good-bye, they started to cry, but I just walked away. Now all I can think about is them standing there as my little plane took off. They thought I didn't care. I want to go back and hug them one last time. What should I do?"

Of course, there was nothing wrong with this TCK developing a positive view of the coming move, but when he didn't acknowledge the losses involved in the leaving, he had no way to deal with them. Denying our feelings may get us through an otherwise painful moment, but the grief doesn't go away, and we simply hold on to it into the next stage of transition.

Denial of feelings of rejection. As friends plan for future events (e.g., next year's annual company picnic or the school play), we suddenly realize they are talking around us. No one asks what we would like to do or what we think about the plans. We have become invisible. Of course, we understand. Why should they include us? We'll be gone. In spite of what we know, however, we can still feel intense rejection and resentment. If we deny those feelings and push them aside as ridiculous and immature behavior (obviously we *shouldn't* feel like this), then that underlying sense of rejection and resentment easily produces a seething anger, which results in almost unbelievable conflicts—especially with those who have been close friends and colleagues. Failing to acknowledge that we are beginning to feel like outsiders (and that it hurts) only increases the chances that we will act inappropriately during this stage.

We may not consciously realize it, but as we're loosening our ties to the community, it's loosening its ties to us. Not only do people forget to ask our opinion about future events, they begin giving our jobs to others. They choose someone else for committees and announce the name of the teacher replacing us next year. The same types of denials we use are being used by them. Suddenly our flaws as friends or coworkers seem glaringly obvious, and they secretly wonder why they've maintained this relationship for so long in the first place.

Denial of "unfinished business." The closer we come to separation, the less likely we are to reconcile conflicts with others. We talk ourselves out of mending the relationship, unrealistically hoping that time and distance will heal it—or at least produce amnesia. Once more, the unfortunate reality is that we arrive at our next destination with this unfinished business clinging to us and influencing new relationships. Bitterness in one area of our lives almost always seeps out in another.

Denial of expectations. To prevent disappointment or fear, we may deny anything we secretly hope for. "It doesn't matter what kind of house I get; I can live anywhere." We deny we would like

people to give us a nice farewell. We presume that if we have no expectations, we can't be disappointed. In reality, however, we all have expectations for every event in our lives. When they are too high, we're disappointed. When they're too low, we create fear, anxiety, or dread for ourselves.

One thing, however, helps save the day for everyone. This is the time when communities also give us special attention. There are ceremonies of recognition—a watch presented for years of faithful service or a plaque given to say thanks for being part of a team. Graduation ceremonies remind us this school will never be the same without our shining presence. This special attention and recognition help us forget for a moment that even though we are promising never to forget each other, already there is a distance developing between us and those we will soon leave behind.

Transition Stage

At the heart of the transition process is the transition stage itself. It begins the moment we leave one place and ends when we not only arrive at our destination but make the decision, consciously or unconsciously, to settle in and become part of it. It's a stage marked by one word—*chaos*! Schedules change, new people have new expectations, and living involves new responsibilities, but we haven't yet learned how everything is supposed to work. Norma M. McCaig, founder of Global Nomads, says the transition stage is a time when families moving overseas become at least temporarily dysfunctional. This dysfunctionality doesn't last (we hope), but it can be painfully discomfiting at the time.

First, we and all family members making the move with us lose our normal moorings and support systems at this point. Suddenly we aren't relinquishing roles and relationships—they're gone! We've lost the comfort they gave but haven't formed new ones yet. We're not sure where we fit in or what we're expected to do.

Second, this sense of chaos makes us more self-centered than normal. We worry about our health, finances, relationships, and per-

sonal safety to a far greater degree than usual. Problems that aren't generally a big deal are exaggerated. Headaches become brain tumors and sneezes become pneumonia. The loss of a favorite pen causes despair. We know we'll never find it again because the usual places we would look for it are gone.

Third, parents who are focusing on their own survival often forget to take time to read their children stories, stop to pick them up, or sit on the floor with them for a few minutes as they did in the past. Children wonder what's happening. The insecurity of each family member contributes to everyone's chaos. Family conflicts seem to occur for the smallest reason and over issues that never mattered before.

The enormous change between how the old and new communities take care of the everyday aspects of life—banking, buying food, cooking—can create intense stress. To make matters worse, we may be scolded for doing something in the new place that was routine in the old one.

TCK Hanna grew up in an area of chronic drought.

The local adage for flushing the toilet was "if it's brown, flush it down. If it's yellow, let it mellow."

Breaking that rule meant serious censure from her parents or anyone else around.

Unfortunately, Hanna's grandma in the States had never heard this wonderful rule. At age thirteen,

Hanna visited her grandma. Imagine Hanna's chagrin and embarrassment when Grandma pulled her aside and scolded her for not flushing the toilet.

A severe loss of self-esteem sets in during this transition stage. Even if we physically look like adults, emotionally we feel like children again. Not only are we getting scolded for things about which we "should have known better," but, particularly in cross-cultural moves, it seems we have to learn life over practically from scratch. As teenagers and adults, probably nothing strikes at our sense of self-esteem with greater force than learning language and culture, for these

are the tasks of children. Suddenly, no matter how many decibels we raise our voices, people don't understand what we're trying to say. We discover gestures we have used all our lives—like pointing someone out in a crowd using our index finger—have completely opposite meanings now (in some cultures, it's a curse). Our cultural and linguistic mistakes not only embarrass us but make us feel anxious and ashamed of being so stupid.

Initially, the community may welcome us warmly—even overwhelmingly. But in every culture the newcomer is still exactly that—and newcomers by definition don't yet fit in. Our basic position in the new community is one of *statuslessness*. We carry knowledge from past experiences—often including special knowledge of people, places, and processes—but none of that knowledge has use in this new place. No one knows about our history, abilities, talents, normal responses, accomplishments, or areas of expertise. Sometimes it seems they don't care. Soon we question whether our achievements in the previous setting were as significant as we thought.

People may now see us as boring or arrogant because we talk about things, places, and people they have never heard mentioned before. We feel the same way toward them because they talk about local people and events about which we know nothing.

Even with an initial warm welcome, we may discover it's not as easy as we thought it would be to make close friends. Circles of relationships among our new acquaintances are already well defined, and most people aren't looking to fill a vacant spot in such a circle. It's easy to become resentful and begin to withdraw. Fine, we say inside, if they don't need me, I don't need them.

Sadly, this type of withdrawal results in more feelings of isolation and alienation, for it continues to cut us off from any hope of making new friends. This increasing sense of loneliness can lead to more anger—which makes us want to withdraw even more.

The transition stage is a tough time because we often feel keenly disappointed. The difference between what we expected and what we're experiencing can trigger a sense of panic. All connection and

continuity with the past seem gone, and the present isn't what we had hoped it would be. How can we relate the different parts of our lives into a cohesive whole? Is the orderliness of the past gone forever? We look longingly to the future—hoping that somehow, sometime, life will return to normal.

Entering Stage

Standing on the edge of the Quad at Houghton College, TCK Ramona quietly said to no one in particular, "I think I'll go to my dorm and unpack my suitcase...and my mind."

Ramona had graduated from an international school more than a year before. For fifteen months she'd been traveling and visiting relatives while working at short-term jobs. Without her own place to nest,

Ramona could never finish the transition stage. Finally, with her arrival at school and the decision to settle in, she began the entering stage of the overall transition process.

During this stage life is no longer totally chaotic. We have made the decision that it is time to become part of this new community: we just have to figure out how to do it. Although we very much want to move toward people in this new place, however, we still feel rather vulnerable and a bit tentative. What if we make a serious social faux pas? Will others accept us? Will they take advantage of us? We often deal with these fears through an exaggeration of our normal personality traits as we begin to interact with others in our new location. People who are usually shy, introverted, or quiet may become more so. Normally gregarious or outgoing individuals may become loud, overbearing, and aggressive. Then, of course, we're mad at ourselves for acting so "stupid" and worry even more that people won't like us.

This stage is also when we feel a lot of ambivalence. We start to learn the new job, feel successful on a given day, and think, "I'm

glad I'm here. This is going to be all right." Next day, someone asks us a question we can't answer, and we wish we were back where we knew most of the answers. Our emotions can fluctuate widely between the excitement of the new discoveries we're making and the homesickness that weighs us down. When we say *boot* and *bonnet* instead of *trunk* and *hood* (or vice versa), everyone laughs and tells us we're so funny. We laugh with them, but inside there is that feeling that nobody thought this was strange in our last place. There we were "normal," not different. On the other hand, tomorrow we catch ourselves just before we say the wrong word and use the local term instead. When it passes without a flicker from those around us (in spite of how strange it sounds to our ears!), we realize we are actually beginning to learn how life works here.

Entering is the stage, more than any other, where we need a good mentor. While we'll discuss that in detail later, suffice it to say that the day finally comes when we actually recognize someone from our new community in the grocery store and can call that person by name. We drive to the other side of town, down quiet, unmarked streets, without anyone telling us where to turn—and we find the house we are looking for! Someone calls with a procedural question at work and this time we *do* know the answer. Hope begins to grow that we will, in fact, one day have a sense of belonging to this community.

Of course, we must not forget that this entry stage is a bit uncomfortable for members of our new community as well, although they may have been eagerly anticipating our arrival. Before we came, everyone's roles were clear. Relationships—whether positive or negative—were established. Life functioned without explanation. We show up, and life changes for them too. Now *everything* seems to need an explanation. They also have to adjust their social order at least slightly to help us find our way in. In the end, however, people in the community begin to remember our names, include us in the events going on, realize we are here to stay rather than simply visiting, and start to make room for us in their world.

Reinvolvement Stage

And then the day finally comes. The light at the end of the proverbial tunnel is that in any transition, cross-cultural or not, a final, recognized stage of reinvolvement is possible. Although there have been moments of wondering if it will ever happen, given enough time and a genuine willingness to adapt, we will once again become part of the permanent community. We may not be native to that community, but we can ultimately belong.

We have learned the new ways and know our position in this community. Other members of the group see us as one of them, or at least they know where we fit in. We have a sense of intimacy, a feeling that our presence matters to this group. We feel secure. Time again feels present and permanent as we focus on the here and now rather than hoping for the future or constantly reminiscing about the past.

This is the normal process of transition. Knowing about the various stages doesn't keep them from happening, but it does help us to not be surprised by what happens at each stage, to recognize we are normal, and to be in a position to make the choices that allow us to gain from the new experiences we encounter while dealing productively with the inevitable losses of any transition experience.

Just as TCKs learn culture in the same ways others do, so they are quite as capable as anyone else of navigating their way through these stages of transition and being enriched by them. As with the cultural overlay, however, we need to be aware of some extra stresses TCKs may encounter during the transition process because of their particular lifestyle. Some globally nomadic families make international moves every two years or so, and their TCKs may chronically move from the leaving to entering to leaving stages without knowing the physical or emotional comfort and stability of involvement, let alone reinvolvement. When a tree is transplanted too often, its roots can never grow deep. So it is with these young people. Some TCKs refuse

to get involved in a new place because they fear that liking this new place would mean betraying the friends and places they have known and loved before. Others don't settle in as a protection against being hurt again in a future move they know will inevitably come. If they refuse to make close friends, it won't matter when they have to say good-bye next time.

All of this raises the question, "How can any child survive so much cultural confusion and chronic change?" Perhaps one of the strangest things about TCKs is that for most of them this type of lifestyle itself becomes normal. Even the mobility becomes part of the routine. What Pico Iyer describes as the international culture⁵ is, in fact, their world and, like Rob and Heather, our American and British ATCKs, they have found a comfortable place and sense of identity and security in it.

What we have also discovered, however, in doing seminars around the world is that because theirs is an intangible world, not tied to one visible place, most TCKs have lived their experience without the words to define it. Our presentations are often not so much about giving new information as much as they are about putting words to matters TCKs and their families already know without realizing they know it. They just never had words to describe their total life experiences before. With the hope that this book will do the same for many more, we proceed to look at the specific benefits and challenges as well as other characteristics we have observed through the years and call "The TCK Profile."

Endnotes

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Part II

The TCK Profile

5

Benefits and Challenges

Besides the drawbacks of family separation and the very real adjustment on the permanent return to the [home country], a child growing up abroad has great advantages. He [or she] learns, through no conscious act of learning, that thoughts can be transmitted in many languages, that skin color is unimportant...that certain things are sacred or taboo to some people while to others they're meaningless, that the ordinary word of one area is a swearword in another.

We have lived in Tulsa for five years...I am struck again and again by the fact that so much of the sociology, feeling for history, geography, questions [about] others that our friends' children try to understand through textbooks, my sisters and I acquired just by living.¹

—Rachel Miller Schaetti

Introduction: The TCK Profile

In Part I we focused primarily on defining third culture kids and describing their world. Now we want to look in depth at the specific benefits and challenges of this experience. Then we will examine

the character traits this lifestyle fosters along with how it affects interpersonal relationships and developmental patterns. Because this is a group profile, not every characteristic will fit every person. But the "Aha!" moment of recognition, which we have seen among countless TCKs and ATCKs, tells us these characteristics are valid as an overall representation of their world.

The often paradoxical benefits and challenges of this profile are sometimes described as being like opposite sides of the same coin, but in reality they are more like the contrasting colored strands of thread woven together into a tapestry. As each strand crosses with a contrasting or complementary color, a picture begins to emerge, but no strand alone tells the full story. For example, the high mobility of a TCK's life often results in special relationships with people throughout the world, but it also creates sadness at the chronic loss of these relationships. That very pain, however, provides opportunity to develop a greater empathy for others. A TCK's expansive worldview, which enriches history classes and gives perspective to the nightly news, also makes the horror of the slaughter of Hutus and Tutsis in refugee camps a painful reality. That same awareness can be what motivates a TCK's concern for solving those kinds of tragic problems. And so it goes.

Some of the characteristics as well as the benefits and challenges are primarily a result of the cross-cultural nature of the third culture experience. Others are more directly shaped by the high mobility of the lifestyle. Most of the profile, however, is this weaving together of these two dominant realities. We begin by discussing some of the most common general benefits and challenges we have seen among TCKs, but before we do, let us make clear that when we use the word *challenge*, we purposefully do not infer the word *liability*. A challenge is something people have the choice to face, deal with, and grow from. A liability can only be something which pulls someone down. Some may say we concentrate too much on the challenges, but if that criticism is valid, it is for a reason. We have seen the benefits of this experience enrich countless TCKs' lives, whether

or not they stop to consciously define or use them. Many have also found unconscious ways to deal with the challenges and make them a productive aspect of their lives in one way or another. We have also seen, however, that for some TCKs (and those around them) the unrecognized challenges have caused years of frustration as they struggle to deal with matters that have no name, no definition. It is our hope that in not only naming these challenges but also offering suggestions on how to deal with them productively, many more TCKs will be able to maximize the great gifts that can come from their lives and not be trapped by the challenges. We begin.

Expanded Worldview versus Confused Loyalties

Benefit: Expanded Worldview

An obvious benefit of the TCK experience is that while growing up in a multiplicity of countries and cultures, TCKs not only observe firsthand the many geographical differences around the world but they also learn how people view life from different philosophical and political perspectives. Some people think of Saddam Hussein as a hero; others believe he's a villain. Western culture is time and task oriented; in Eastern cultures, interpersonal relationships are of greater importance. The TCK's awareness that there can be more than one way to look at the same thing starts early in life. Once we listened to some rather remarkable stories during a meeting in Malaysia with younger TCKs—ages five to twelve.

"You know, last year we had to hide on the floor for four days because of typhoons."

"We couldn't go out of our compound in Bangladesh for a week when everybody in town started fighting."

"On our vacation last month we got to ride on the backs of elephants and go look for tigers."

"Well, so did we!" countered another seven-year-old from across the room. "We saw six tigers. How many did you see?"

And so it went.

Eventually New Year's Day came up as part of a story. We asked what we thought was a simple question, "When is New Year's Day?" Instead of the simple "January 1" that we expected, many different dates were given—each young TCK trying to defend how and when it was celebrated in his or her host country. We knew that if we had asked most groups of five- to twelve-year-olds in the United States about New Year's Day, this discussion wouldn't be occurring. Most of them probably had no idea that "New Year's Day" could mean anything but January 1.

This may seem like a small detail, but already these children are learning how big and interesting the world they live in is and how much there will be to discover about it all through life.

Challenge: Confused Loyalties

Although their expanded worldview is a benefit, it can also leave TCKs with a sense of confusion about such complex things as politics, patriotism, and values. Should they support the policies of their home country when those policies are detrimental to their host country? Or should they support the host country, even if it means opposing policies of their own government?

Joe, the American TCK raised in Argentina and educated in a British school, writes about divided loyalties:

When I came to the U.S., there was the matter of pledging allegiance to the American flag. I had saluted the Union Jack, the Argentine flag, and now I was supposed to swear loyalty to a country which, in 1955, didn't even have decent pizza or coffee. Worse, Americans, many of them, were still McCarthyites at heart, and feared anything tainted with foreignisms.

The unfortunate side effects of a multicultural upbringing are substantial, of course. Whose side are you on? I had a Dickens of a time with my loyalties during the Islas Malvinas war (no, make that the

Falkland Islands war). After all, as an eleven-year-old I had sworn undying fealty to Juan Domingo Peron and his promise that he would free the Malvinas from British enslavement. After the army booted him out of Argentina, I figured I was off the hook. But could I really be sure? On the other hand, I whistled "Rule Britannia" at least three times a week and really felt proud to know that a massive British force was headed to the Falklands and that British sovereignty would be asserted, unequivocally. I was dismayed by the profound indifference to this war exhibited by Americans.²

Confused loyalties can make TCKs seem unpatriotic and arrogant to their fellow citizens. If Joe is a good American, how could he ever pledge allegiance to Argentina and Britain—or be angry with his own country for not getting involved in someone else's war? If British TCKs who grew up in India try to explain negative remnants of the colonial era to fellow classmates in England, they can seem like traitors.

In *Homesick: My Own Story*, Jean Fritz writes of her experiences as an American TCK in China during the 1920s. She attended a British school in China but defiantly refused to sing "God Save the King" because it wasn't *her* national anthem. She was an American, although she had never spent a day in the United States in her life. Throughout the growing turmoil that led to the revolution in 1927, Jean dreamed of her grandmother's farm and garden in Pennsylvania, fantasizing over and over about what it would be like to live and go to school in America. Finally, after an endless boat ride and many struggles, Jean arrived at that long-awaited first day in an American school. Here's what happened.

"The class will come to order," she [Miss Crofts, the teacher] said. "I will call the roll." When she came to my name, Miss Crofts looked up from her book. "Jean Guttery is new to our school," she said. "She has come all the way from China, where she lived beside the Yangs-Ta-Zee River. Isn't that right, Jean?"

"It's pronounced Yang-see," I corrected. "There are just two syllables."

Miss Crofts looked at me coldly. "In America," she said, "we say *Yongs-Ta-Zee*."

I was working myself up, madder by the minute, when I heard Andrew Carr, the boy behind me, shifting his feet on the floor. I guess he must have hunched across his desk, because all at once I heard him whisper over my shoulder:

"Chink, Chink, Chinaman

Sitting on a fence,

Trying to make a dollar

Out of fifteen cents."

I forgot all about where I was. I jumped to my feet, whirled around, and spoke out loud as if there were no Miss Crofts, as if I'd never been in a classroom before, as if I knew nothing about classroom behavior. "You don't call them Chinamen or Chinks," I cried. "You call them Chinese. Even in America you call them Chinese."

"Well, you don't need to get exercised, Jean," she [Miss Crofts] said. "We all know that you are American."

"But that's not the point!" Before I could explain that it was an insult to call Chinese people *Chinamen*, Miss Crofts had tapped her desk with a ruler.

"That will be enough," she said. "All eyes front."

Which country had Jean's greatest loyalty and devotion—the United States or China? Did she know? All her life she had thought of herself as American—now here she was defending the Chinese. Certainly Miss Crofts and Jean's classmates couldn't understand why she would want to defend a people and a country halfway around the world from them—particularly at the expense of getting along with people from her own country.

More difficult than the questions of political or patriotic loyalties, however, are the value dissonances that occur in the cross-cul-

tural experience. As we said earlier, TCKs often live among cultures with strongly conflicting value systems. One culture says female circumcision is wrong. Another one says female circumcision is the most significant moment in a girl's life; it is when she knows she has become an accepted member of her tribe. One culture says abortion is wrong. Another says it is all right for specific reasons up to certain points in the pregnancy. Still other cultures practice abortion based on the gender of the baby: males are wanted; females are not.

In each situation, which value is right? Which is wrong? Is there a right and wrong? If so, who or what defines them? Conflicting values cannot be operational at the same time, in the same place. How do TCKs decide from all they see around them what their own values will and won't be?

This expanded worldview and its resulting confusion of loyalties and values can be a problem for those who return to cultures that remain relatively homogeneous. In a study of Turkish TCKs, Steve Eisinger discovered that "the statistics regarding public opinion... indicate that this expanded worldview may not be necessarily viewed as a positive characteristic."⁴ The new ideas that the TCKs bring back, and their refusal to follow unthinkingly the cultural patterns of preceding generations, can make them unwelcome citizens in their own countries.

Three-Dimensional View of the World versus Painful View of Reality

Benefit: Three-Dimensional View of the World

As TCKs live in various cultures, they not only learn about cultural differences but they also experience the world in a tangible way that is impossible to do through reading books, seeing movies, or watching nightly newscasts alone. Because they have lived in so many places, smelled so many smells, heard so many strange sounds, and been in so many strange situations, throughout their lives when they read a story in the newspaper or watch it on the TV screen, the flat,

odorless images there transform into an internal 3-D panoramic picture show. It's almost as if they were there in person, smelling the smells, tasting the tastes, perspiring with the heat. They may not be present at the event, but they have a clear awareness of what is going on and what it is like for those who are there.

Each summer Dave Pollock leads transition seminars

for TCKs. During one of these, he asked the attendees, "What comes to your mind if I say the word *riot*?"

The answers came back, "Paris," "Korea," "Iran,"

"Ecuador."

Next question. "Any details?"

More answers: "Broken windows," "Water

cannons," "Burned buses," "Tear gas, mobs," "Burning tires."

Burning tires. Who would think about burning tires except somebody who had smelled that stench?

"Tacks."

Anyone might think of guns in a riot, but why tacks? Because this TCK had seen tacks spread on the streets of Ecuador to flatten tires, so people couldn't travel during a riot. Makes sense, but probably only someone who had seen it would name it.

Having a 3-D view of the world is a useful skill not only for reading stories but for writing them. For TCKs who like to write, their culturally rich and highly mobile childhoods give them a true breadth of hands-on experiences in many places to add life to their work. In a feature article for *Time* called "The Empire Writes Back," Pico Iyer gives an account of an entirely new genre of award-winning authors, all of whom have cross-cultural backgrounds.

Authors from Britain's former colonies have begun to capture the very heart of English literature, transforming the canon with bright colors and strange cadences and foreign eyes. They are revolutionizing the language from within. Hot spices are entering English, and tropical birds...magical creations from the makers of a new World Fiction.⁵

Iyer goes on to describe the great diversity of each writer's background and then states,

But the new transcultural writers are something different. For one, they are the products not so much of colonial division as of the *international culture* that has grown up since the war, and they are addressing an audience as mixed up and eclectic and uprooted as themselves.⁶

Without ever using, or perhaps knowing, the term *third culture kids*, Iyer has conveyed vividly the richness of their experience.

Challenge: Painful View of Reality

With this three-dimensional view of the world, however, comes the painful reality that behind the stories in the news are real flesh-and-blood people—not merely flat faces on a TV screen. When an airplane crashes in India, TCKs find it appalling that U.S. newscasters only say how many Americans died—as if the other lives lost didn't matter. As they watch a Serbian woman weep for her child who has been killed in war, TCKs know her loss is as painful as their own would be if they were in that situation. Many of them know that when bombs drop on Iraq, people scream with fear and horror there just as they do when a bomb explodes in Oklahoma City. Many TCKs have seen war or faced the pain of evacuation and its disruption of their world, school, and friendships. Others have parents living and working in dangerous areas of the world, while they themselves are back in the home country.

During the Gulf War, Courtney's American parents lived in Saudi Arabia, while she lived with relatives and attended secondary school in the States. Unfortunately, her parents' home in Saudi happened to be in a target area for SCUD missiles. Naturally, she felt anxiety and fear for her family. While other friends waited to hear the headlines on the evening news, Courtney checked the news throughout the school day so she could keep up with events in Saudi.

Although her worry for her folks was intense, one of the hardest things about the experience came when she realized that none of her American friends could relate to what she felt. To Courtney, the desert images on the television were home; to most of her friends, the war was far away and incomprehensible. She found herself resenting her classmates for their seeming lack of interest in not only her family, but all the Saudis, Iraqis, and Kuwaitis who were suffering as well.

Cross-Cultural Enrichment versus Ignorance of the Home Culture

Benefit: Cross-Cultural Enrichment

TCKs usually have a sense of ownership and interest in cultures other than just that of their passport country. During university they run to the radio whenever they hear their host country named. They have learned to enjoy many aspects of the host culture others might not appreciate so highly. While the smell of the Southeast Asian fruit, *durian*, would precipitate a gag reflex in most of us, TCKs who grew up in Malaysia inhale the scent with glee, for it is the smell of home. TCKs from India use chapatis (a flat bread) to pick up the hottest curry sauce. Still other TCKs sit cross-legged on the floor whenever they have a choice between that and a lounge chair. TCKs consider these aspects of their lifestyle part of the wealth of their heritage.

Perhaps more important than what they have learned to enjoy from the more surface layers of other cultures, however, is the fact that most TCKs have also gained valuable lessons from the deeper levels as well. They have lived in other places long enough to learn to appreciate the reasons and understanding behind some of the behavioral differences rather than simply being frustrated by them as visitors tend to be. For example, while a tourist might feel irritated that the stores close for two hours in the middle of the day just when

he or she wants to go shopping, most TCKs can understand that this custom not only helps people survive better if the climate is extremely hot, but it's a time when families greet the children as they return from school and spend time together as a family. Many TCKs learn to value relationships above convenience as they live in such places, and it is a gift they carry with them wherever they may later go.

Challenge: Ignorance of the Home Culture

The irony of collecting cross-cultural practices and skills, however, is that TCKs may know all sorts of fascinating things about other countries but little about their own.

Tamara attended school in England for the first time when she was ten. Until then she had attended a small American-oriented school in Africa. In early November, she asked her mother, "Mom, who is this Guy Fawkes everybody's talking about?"

Tamara's mom, Elizabeth, a born and bred Englishwoman, tried to hide her shock at her daughter's ignorance. Tamara seemed so knowledgeable about countless global matters—how could she not know a simple fact about a major figure in British history? And particularly one whose wicked deed of trying to blow up the Parliament was decreed each year as people throughout the country burned him in effigy? Elizabeth hadn't realized that while Tamara had seen the world, she had missed learning about this common tradition in her own country.

TCKs are often sadly ignorant of national, local, and even family history. How many rides to various relatives' homes are filled with parents coaching TCKs about who is related to whom? Many kids simply haven't been around the normal chatter that keeps family members connected.

Although this may be changing in the Internet age, TCKs have also often missed the rise to renown of the currently famous—movie

stars, politicians, musicians, and other public figures. Household names in one country mean nothing in another.

In 1958, TCK Jordan returned to the States at age thirteen and heard friends discussing Elvis. Imagine the look on their faces when he innocently asked, "Who's Elvis?"

When people switch cultures, humor is another unknown. Jokes are often based on a surprise, an indirect reference to something current, or a play on words with a double meaning specific to that culture or language. Few things make anyone, including TCKs, feel more left out than seeing everyone else laughing at something they can't understand as funny. Or conversely, they try to tell a joke that was hilarious in their boarding school, but none of their new friends laughs. Adelle writes,

Early in my dating relationship with my [now] husband, something happened and he hummed the theme to the TV show, "The Twilight Zone." I guess I didn't react properly so he said, "You don't know what that is, do you?" I replied, "I know it's supposed to be funny, but I don't know why."

Probably most TCKs have some story about getting caught in an embarrassing situation because they didn't know some everyday rule of their passport culture that is different in their host culture. One TCK couldn't pay her bill because she had forgotten to mentally add the tax to the amount listed on the menu. Another was shamed by his visiting relatives because he came into the room and sat down before making sure that all the oldest guests had found their places. Not knowing cultural rules can also be dangerous.

In the village in Mali where Sophie had grown up, passing anyone—male or female—on the street and not saying hello created instant social disfavor. In New York the rules were different, as she learned in a police seminar on rape prevention during her first semester at university. "Never look a stranger in the eye," the

policeman said. "After attacking someone, a man often accuses the woman of having invited him with her look." And Sophie had been smiling at strange men all over the city!

All the above benefits and challenges are a mere beginning of the TCK Profile. We continue our discussion by looking at common personal strengths and struggles many TCKs seem to share.

Endnotes

- ¹ Rachel Miller Schaetti, comments from a questionnaire for Jack O. Claypoole, George Williams College, 1957. Used by permission of the Schaetti family.
- ² Joseph McDonald, e-mail message on MK Net, October 1995. Used with permission.
- ³ Jean Fritz, *Homesick: My Own Story* (Santa Barbara, CA: Cornerstone Books, 1987), 148–50.
- ⁴ Steve Eisinger, "The Validity of the 'Third Culture Kid' Definition for Returned Turkish Migrant Children" (report submitted upon the partial completion of research done in the country of Turkey, 31 August 1994), 16.
- ⁵ Pico Iyer, "The Empire Writes Back," *Time*, 8 February 1992.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 48. Italics ours.
- ⁷ Adelle Horst Ward, personal e-mail to Ruth E. Van Reken, November 1995. Used by permission.



Personal Characteristics

The benefits of this upbringing need to be underscored: In an era when global vision is an imperative, when skills in intercultural communication, linguistic ability, mediation, diplomacy, and the management of diversity are critical, global nomads are better equipped in these areas by the age of eighteen than are many adults.... These intercultural and linguistic skills are the markings of the cultural chameleon—the young participant-observer who takes note of verbal and nonverbal cues and readjusts accordingly, taking on enough of the coloration of the social surroundings to gain acceptance while maintaining some vestige of identity as a different animal, an "other."¹

—Norma M. McCaig

Founder, Global Nomads International

Norma M. McCaig, one of the true pioneers in raising global awareness of the issues facing TCKs, is a business ATCK herself and now works with international companies preparing employees and their families for overseas assignments. In this chapter and the next we will discuss many of the characteristics and skills (their benefits and their corresponding challenges) of the TCK that she mentions, beginning with the cultural chameleon McCaig describes above.

Cultural Chameleon: Adaptability versus Lack of True Cultural Balance

Benefit: Adaptability

TCKs usually develop some degree of cultural adaptability as a primary tool for surviving the frequent change of cultures. Over and over TCKs use the term *chameleon* to describe how, after spending a little time observing what is going on, they can easily switch language, style of relating, appearance, and cultural practices to take on the characteristics needed to blend better into the current scene. Soon their behavior is almost indistinguishable from longtime members of this group and they feel protected from the scorn or rejection of others (and their own ensuing sense of shame) that often comes with being different from others.

Cultural adaptability may begin as a survival tool, but it also has immensely practical benefits. TCKs usually learn to adjust with relative calm to life where meetings may start the exact minute for which they have been scheduled or two hours later, depending on which country they're in. Partly because of the frequency with which they travel and move, TCKs learn to think on their feet and can often "roll with the punches," even in unusual circumstances.

Nona and her ATCK friend, Joy, waited in vain for a bus to carry them from Arusha to Nairobi. They finally found a taxi driver who would take them to the Tanzanian/Kenyan border and promised to find them a ride the rest of the way. At the border, however, the driver disappeared. Night was approaching, when travel would no longer be safe.

As Nona watched in amazement, Joy walked across the border to find another taxi. She soon came back to the Tanzanian side, got Nona and the bags, and returned to a waiting driver who took them to Nairobi. Later, Nona complimented Joy, "If it was me by myself, I'd still be sitting at the border, waiting for that first driver to come back."

Joy replied, "Well, there are times when all I can think is that this is going to make a great story in three months, but right now it's the pits. But I always know there's a way out if I can just think of all the options. I've been in these kinds of situations too many times to just wait."

Challenge: Lack of True Cultural Balance

Becoming a cultural chameleon, however, brings special challenges as well. For one thing, although in the short term the ability to "change colors" helps them fit in with their peers day-by-day, TCK chameleons may never develop true cultural balance anywhere. While appearing to be one of the crowd, inside they are still the cautious observer—always checking to see how they are doing. In addition, others may notice how the TCK's behavior changes in various circumstances and begin to wonder if they can trust anything the TCK does or says. It looks to them as if he or she has no real convictions about much of anything.

Some TCKs who flip-flop back and forth between various behavioral patterns have trouble figuring out their own value system from the multicultural mix they have been exposed to. It can be very difficult for them to decide if there are, after all, some absolutes in life they can hold on to and live by no matter which culture they are in. In the end, TCKs may adopt so many personas as cultural chameleons that they don't know who they really are.

Ginny returned to Minnesota for university after many years in New Zealand and Thailand. She looked with disdain on the majority of her fellow students, who seemed to be clones of one another, and decided she would be anything but like them. She struck up an acquaintance with another student, Jessica, who was a member of the prevailing counterculture. Whatever Jessica did, Ginny did. Both wore clothing that was outlandish enough to be an obvious statement that they weren't going to be swayed by any current fads.

Only years later did Ginny realize that she too had been a chameleon—copying Jessica—and had no idea of what she herself liked or wanted to be. She had rejected one group to prove she wasn't like them, but she had never considered the possibility that among their styles of dress or behavior there might be some attributes she did, in fact, like. Since she had totally aligned herself with Jessica, Ginny never stopped to think that some of Jessica's choices might not work for her. Was it all right for her to like jazz when Jessica didn't? What types of clothes did she, Ginny, really want to wear? It was some time before she was able to sort out and identify what her own gifts, talents, and preferences were in contrast to those she had borrowed from Jessica.

Hidden Immigrants: Blending In versus Defining the Differences

While virtually all TCKs make cultural adaptations to survive wherever they live, traditionally, most TCKs—such as the children of early colonialists—were physically distinct from members of the host culture and still easily recognizable as *foreigners* when living there. Even today, the child of the Norwegian ambassador in China would never be mistaken for a citizen of the host culture. As mentioned earlier, when TCKs are obvious foreigners, they are often excused—both by others and by themselves—if their behavior doesn't exactly match the local cultural norms or practices. No one expects them to be the same based on their appearance alone. Only when these TCKs, who are true foreigners in their host culture, re-enter their home culture do they face the prospect of being the hidden immigrants we described in chapter 3.

A frequently overlooked factor, however, is that in our increasingly internationalizing world, many TCKs are becoming hidden immigrants in the host culture as well. British children in Canada appear the same as most of their classmates; a Ugandan diplomat's

child may look just like the African Americans in his classroom in Washington, DC. So, why is this an important issue? For one thing, being a hidden immigrant gives those TCKs who desire it the choice to not only be *cultural* chameleons, but *physical* chameleons as well. Often people around them have no idea they are actually foreigners, and the TCK may like this type of relative anonymity. A second reason for noticing this new development in the TCKs' world, however, is that those TCKs who prefer *not* to totally adapt to the surrounding scene have to find some way other than their skin color or facial features to proclaim they are different from others. This may explain what otherwise might seem like rather bizarre behavior. Take a look at three TCKs who were hidden immigrants in their host cultures.

Benefit: Blending In

The first is Paul, an international business TCK who was born in Alaska and then lived in California and Illinois until he was nine. At that time his family moved to Australia, where his father worked for an oil company. Paul tells us his story.

My first year of school in Australia was horrible. I learned that Americans weren't very popular because of a nuclear base they'd set up near Sydney. People protested against the "ugly Americans" all the time. I felt other students assigned me guilt by association just because I was a U.S. citizen. Looking back, I realize the only kids who were good to me didn't fit in either.

By the end of the first year, I'd developed an Australian accent and learned to dress and act like my Australian counterparts. Then I changed schools so I could start over and no one knew I was American. I was a chameleon.

As a hidden immigrant, Paul made a choice an obviously foreign TCK could never make. Until he chose to reveal his true identity, no one had to know that he was not Australian. Theoretically, some

might argue that he made a poor choice, but from Paul's perspective as a child, blending in to this degree gave him the opportunity to not only be accepted by others but also to more fully participate in school and social events while he remained in Australia.

Challenge: Defining the Differences

While Paul chose to hide his identity, Nicola and Krista are TCKs who reacted in an opposite way. Because they looked like those around them, they felt they would lose their true identity if they didn't find some way to shout, "But I'm *not* like you." This is how each of them proclaimed their differences.

Nicola, a British TCK, was born in Malaysia while her dad served with the Royal Air Force. He retired from the service when Nicola was four years old. The family moved to Scotland, where Nicola's dad took a job flying airplanes off the coast of Scotland for a major oil company.

At first, Nicola tried to hide her English roots, even adopting a thick Scottish brogue. In spite of that, by secondary school she realized something inside her would never fit in with these classmates who had never left this small town. She looked like them, but when she didn't act like them, they teased her unmercifully for every small transgression. It seemed the more she tried to be like them, the more she was having to deny who she really was inside.

Finally, Nicola decided to openly—rather defiantly, in fact—espouse her English identity. She changed her accent to a proper British one and talked of England as home. She informed her classmates that she couldn't wait to leave Scotland to attend university in England. When Nicola arrived in Southampton on her way to university, she literally kissed the ground when she alighted from the train.

Krista is an American business TCK raised in England from age six to sixteen. She attended a British

school for six months before attending the local American school. We were surprised to hear her tell of how fiercely anti-British she and her fellow classmates in the American school became. In spite of the prevailing culture, they steadfastly refused to speak "British." They decried Britain for not having American-style shopping malls and bought all their clothes at American stores like The Gap and The Limited during their summer leave in the States. And why did everyone insist on queuing so carefully anyway? It looked so prim and silly. She couldn't wait to return to the U.S. permanently, where everything would be "normal."

The difficulty for Nicola and Krista, however, is that in trying to proclaim what they consider their true identity, they ultimately form an "anti-identity"—be that in clothes, speech, or behavior. Unfortunately, this also tends to cut them off from the many benefits they could be experiencing in friendships and cultural exchange with those around them from the local community. In addition, as TCKs scream to others, "I'm not like you," people around soon avoid them and they are left with a deep loneliness—although it might take them a long time to admit such a thing.

Prejudice: Less versus More

Benefit: Less Prejudice

The opportunity to know people from diverse backgrounds as friends—not merely as acquaintances—and within the context of their own cultural milieu is another gift TCKs receive. They have been members of groups that include a striking collection of culturally and ethnically diverse people, and most have the ability to truly enjoy such diversity and to believe that people of all backgrounds can be full and equal participants in any given situation. Sometimes their unconscious, underlying assumptions that people of all backgrounds are still just that—people—can surprise others, and the TCKs

in turn are surprised that such acceptance isn't necessarily "normal" for everyone else.

One white ATCK living in suburban U.S.A. had an African American repairman arrive to fix a leaky faucet. As the repairman prepared to leave, he said, "I can tell you've been around black people a lot, haven't you?" Since the ATCK had grown up in Africa, she had to agree, but asked, "Why do you say that?" He replied, "Because you're comfortable with me being here. A lot of white people aren't." And she was surprised, because she hadn't been thinking about racial relationships at all. To her, they had simply been talking about fixing faucets and paying the bill.

TCKs who use their experiences well learn there is always a reason behind anyone's behavior—no matter how mystifying it appears—and may be more patient than others might be in a particular situation.

When ATCK Anne-Marie returned to Mali as a United Nations worker, she heard other expatriates complaining that the Malians who worked in the local government hospital never planned ahead. The medicine, oxygen, or other vital commodities were always completely gone before anyone reported that it was time to reorder. This had caused endless frustration for the UN workers.

While listening to the usual grumbling during morning tea one day soon after she arrived, Anne-Marie interrupted the flow of complaints. "I understand your annoyance," she said, "but did it ever occur to you what it's like to be so poor you can only worry about each particular day's needs? If you haven't got enough money for today, you certainly aren't worrying about storing up for tomorrow."

Of all the gifts we hear TCKs say they have received from their backgrounds, the richness and breadth of diversity among those they

truly count as friends is one they consistently mention as among the greatest.

Challenge: More Prejudice

Unfortunately, however, there are a few TCKs who appear to become *more* prejudiced rather than less. Perhaps it is because historically many TCKs' parents are part of what others consider a special, elite group (such as diplomats or high-ranking military personnel) in the host country and their positions often bring special deference. Their standard of living is usually well above the mean for that particular country, and their lifestyle may include servants, drivers, and other special privileges such as extensive travel.

The movie *Empire of the Sun* gives a clear picture of what this privileged lifestyle has been for some TCKs. The story opens with the scene of a young British lad being driven home from school in the back seat of a chauffeured limousine while he stares uncaringly out the windows at starving Chinese children on the streets. As he enters his home, the young man begins to order the Chinese servants around as if they were his slaves.

One day all is changed. When the British boy tries to tell the maid what to do, she runs up and slaps him. The revolution has come, and years of suppressed bitterness at his treatment of her erupt. It takes World War II and several years of incarceration in a concentration camp before this TCK finally understands that the world is not completely under his control.

While this may seem like an exaggeration, when adults from any expatriate community constantly speak poorly of the host culture residents in their presence, TCKs can pick up the same disdain and thereby waste one of the richest parts of their heritage.

Decisiveness: The Importance of Now versus the Delusion of Choice

Benefit: The Importance of Now

Because their lifestyle is transitory, many TCKs have a sense of urgency that life is to be lived *now*. They may not stop to deliberate long on any particular decision because the chance to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro will be gone if new orders to move come through. Do it now. Seize the day! Sushi is on the menu at the shop around the corner today. Better try it while you can. Some may fault them for impulsiveness, but TCKs do get a lot of living done while others are still deciding what they do or don't want to do.

Challenge: The Delusion of Choice

Ironically, for the same reason that some TCKs seize every opportunity, other TCKs seem to have difficulty in making or feeling excited about plans at all. So often in the past, their desires and intentions to do such things as act in a school play, run for class office, or be captain of the soccer team were denied when Dad or Mom came home one day and said, "Well, I just received orders today; we are shipping out to Portsmouth in two weeks." No matter how much the TCKs thought they had a choice to do things they wanted to do at school or in the neighborhood, it turned out they had no choice at all. They weren't going to be there for the next school year or the next soccer season after all. Off they went, their dreams vanishing. In Portsmouth, or wherever their next post was, the TCKs asked themselves, "Why even make plans for what I want to do? I'll just have to leave again."

These preempted plans can lead to what some mental health professionals call a "delusion of choice." In other words, a choice to act is offered ("Would you like to run for class president next year?"), but circumstances or the intervention of others arbitrarily eliminates that choice ("Pack your bags, we're leaving tomorrow"). In reality, the person has no choice at all. The achievement of a goal, the de-

velopment of a relationship, or the completion of a project can all be cut short by some unexpected event or the decision of a personnel director.

For some TCKs, decision making has an almost superstitious dimension. "If I allow myself to make a decision and start taking the necessary steps to see it through, something will happen to stop what I want." For others, this delusion of choice is wrapped in a theological dimension. "If God finds out what I really want, he'll take it away from me." Rather than be disappointed, they refuse to acknowledge to themselves, let alone to others or to God, what they would like to do.

Other TCKs and ATCKs have difficulty in making a choice that involves a significant time commitment because they know a new and more desirable possibility may always appear. Signing a contract to teach in Middleville might be a wise economic move, but what if a job opportunity opens in Surabaya next week? It's hard to choose one thing before knowing all the choices. Experience has taught that life not only offers multiple options, but these options can appear suddenly and need to be acted on quickly or they are gone—yet the very fact that one choice might preclude another keeps some TCKs and ATCKs from making any choice at all.

Chronically waiting until the last minute to plan rather than risk disappointment or having to change plans can be particularly frustrating for spouses or children waiting for decisions to be made that will affect the entire family. Adult TCKs may also miss significant school, job, or career opportunities. It becomes such a habit to wait, they never follow through on leads or fill out necessary forms by the deadline.

Of course, many TCKs have parents who have given them significant opportunities for meaningful choices—even within what appeared to be "no choice" situations—and they have developed the ability to look for possible options and ramifications of those possible choices in any circumstances and make solid decisions based on those facts.

Relation to Authority: Appreciative versus Mistrustful

Benefit: Appreciative of Authority

For some TCKs, living within the friendly confines of a strong organizational system is a strong and happy fact of their lives. Relationships with adults in their community are basically positive and nurturing. There may be almost a cocoon atmosphere on their military base or at their embassy, business, or mission compound. The struggles of others in the world can be shut out, at least for some period of time, and perks such as generators, special stores, and paid vacations are all part of a wonderful package deal. As adults, they look back on their TCK childhoods and those who supervised their lives with nothing but great fondness.

Challenge: Mistrustful of Authority

Other ATCKs and TCKs feel quite different. For all the reasons (and maybe more) mentioned under "The Delusion of Choice," they begin to mistrust the authority figures in their lives, easily blaming virtually all of their problems in life on parents or organizational administrators who made autocratic decisions about where and when they would move with little regard for their needs or the needs of their family. One of them told us:

My parents finally got divorced when Mom said she wouldn't make one more move. The company had moved my dad to a new position every two years. Each time, we went to a different place, even a different country—sometimes in the middle of the school year, sometimes not. My mom could see how it was affecting us children as well as herself. We would finally start to find our own places within the new group, when it was time to move again. Mom asked Dad to talk to the managers of his company and request they leave us in one place while we went

through high school at least. They said they couldn't do it; they were amalgamating their headquarters and the office in our town was being phased out. Dad didn't want to find a new job, and Mom wouldn't move, so they got divorced. I've always been angry about both my dad's decision and the company's.

In the end, some TCKs who have had their life unhappily affected because of decisions made by others tell us they will starve before risking the possibility that the direction of their lives will be so profoundly changed once more by the decision of someone in authority over them.

Arrogance: Real versus Perceived

Sometimes the very richness of their background creates a new problem for TCKs. Once, after a seminar, a woman came up to Dave Pollock and said, "There's one issue you failed to talk about tonight and it's the very thing that almost ruined my life. It was my arrogance."

Unfortunately, arrogance isn't an uncommon word when people describe TCKs or ATCKs. It seems the very awareness which helps TCKs view a situation from multiple perspectives can also make TCKs impatient or arrogant with others who only see things from their own perspective—particularly people from their home culture. This may happen for several reasons.

1. A cross-cultural lifestyle is so normal that TCKs themselves don't always understand how much it has shaped their view of the world. They easily forget it's their life experiences that have been different from others', not their brain cells, and they may consider themselves much more cosmopolitan and just plain smarter than others.
2. This impatience or judgmentalism can sometimes serve as a point of identity with other TCKs. It becomes one of the markers of "us" versus "them." It's often easy for a get-together of

TCKs to quickly degenerate into bashing the stupidity of non-TCKs. The irony is that the TCKs are then doing unto others what they don't like having done unto themselves—equating ignorance with stupidity.

Sometimes TCKs and ATCKs appear arrogant because they have chosen a permanent identity as being "different" from others.

Todd, an ATCK, was angry. His parents could do no right. His sponsoring organization had stupid policies, and his American peers ranked among the dumbest souls who had ever been born. Todd castigated everyone and everything. Mark, his good friend, finally got tired of the tirades and pointed out the pride and arrogance coming out in his words.

"You know, Todd," Mark said, "it's your experiences that have been different—not your humanity. I think if you try, you might discover you are not as different from the rest of the world as you seem to feel. You know, you're a normal person."

At that, Todd fairly jumped out of his chair. "The last thing I want to be is 'normal.' That idea is nauseating to me."

This "I'm different from you" type of identity is often a defense mechanism to protect against unconscious feelings of insecurity or inferiority. But a "different from" identity has a certain arrogance attached to it. TCKs who put other people down often do so as a way to set themselves apart or boost their sense of self-worth. "I don't care if you don't accept me, because you could never understand me anyway." TCKs chalk up any rejection they feel or interpersonal problems they have to being different rather than taking a look to see if they themselves might have added to this particular problem.

At other times, however, what is labeled as arrogance in TCKs is simply an attempt to share their normal life experiences. People who don't understand their background may feel the TCKs are brag-

ging or name-dropping when they speak of places they have been or people they have met. Non-TCK friends don't realize TCKs have no other stories to tell.

And sometimes there may be a mix of both real and perceived arrogance. The conviction or passion with which TCKs speak because of what they have seen and/or experienced makes them seem dogmatic and overly sure of their opinions. Is that arrogance? It's hard to know.

While these are some of the general personal characteristics we have repeatedly seen among TCKs, there are others McCaig also referred to that can develop into true life skills. We look at them in chapter 7.

Endnote

¹ Norma M. McCaig, "Understanding Global Nomads," *Strangers at Home* (New York: Atheneia Press, 1996), 101.

7

Practical Skills

One day I poured out my bitter complaints to a senior missionary. I could not understand why the mission imported thirty Canadian and U.S. young people to do famine work, when not one of the more than fifteen resident MKs [missionary kids]—experienced in language and culture—had been asked to help. He told me to quit complaining and sign on. I did.¹

—Andrew Atkins

The feelings Andrew expresses reflect the fact that growing up as a TCK not only increases an inner awareness of our culturally diverse world, but the experience also helps in the development of useful personal skills for interacting with and in it. Some of these skills are acquired so naturally they aren't recognized, acknowledged, or effectively used—either by ATCKs or others—as the special gifts they are. At the same time, some of these skills also have a flip side, where a skill becomes a liability, as we will see in the discussion of social and linguistic skills below.

Cross-Cultural Skills

As TCKs have the opportunity not only to observe a great variety of cultural practices but also to learn what some of the underlying as-

sumptions are behind them, they often develop strong cross-cultural skills. More significant than the ease with which they can change from chopsticks to forks for eating or from bowing to shaking hands while greeting is their ability to be sensitive to the more hidden aspects or deeper levels of culture and to work successfully in these areas. For ATCKs who go into international or intercultural careers, this ability to be a bridge between different groups of people can be useful in helping their company or organization speak with a more human voice in the local community and be more sensitive to the dynamics of potentially stressful situations in the work environment.

ATCK Jamal became a prime negotiator for his company during tense negotiations between executives from the home office in the United States and members of the host country who oversaw daily operations in the company's branch overseas. He told us: "Everyone gets mad at me because I can see both sides in the discussions." But ultimately he played a key role in bringing resolution when he pointed out to both sides that much of the impasse related to different cultural styles of negotiation rather than a difference in what each side wanted. The executives from the home office presumed frank, confrontational discussions were most useful, while host culture members believed that saving face was more important. To them, confrontation meant openly shaming another person—a cardinal offense in that particular culture. Once Jamal helped them understand their different outlooks, both sides were able to step back and consider each other's views more objectively and work to a mutually satisfactory conclusion.

Because of their experience in very different cultures and places around the world, ATCKs often find themselves particularly qualified when it comes to jobs or situations such as teaching or mentoring. For those who choose teaching as a career, the fact that most TCKs have themselves attended schools with a wide variety of cultural

learning and teaching styles helps them understand and be sensitive to their students' struggles with language, spelling, and conceptual differences. They have every potential of being particularly effective in cross-cultural educational processes—even if it is only with one child in their classroom who has recently immigrated to the area from another country or culture. ATCKs, of all people, should be willing to allow for some differences in writing as well as thinking and learning styles.

ATCKs may also be particularly effective teachers because they have many firsthand stories to augment the facts recorded in geography or social studies textbooks. They may be able to bring life to the textbook's chapter on how the Netherlands reclaimed its land from the sea because they have walked on those dikes. Maybe they have seen the cells in the Philippines where American and Filipino POWs were held during World War II. Whatever countries they have lived or traveled in, they can, one hopes, bring their students fresh ways of looking at the world.

Children who grow up playing and going to school with children of other races and cultures naturally learn that friendship and respect have nothing to do with skin color or cultural differences. Those who have moved often and been the new kid on the block several times over also realize how painful it can be if no one reaches out to a newcomer or, conversely, how wonderful it is when someone does.

Because of their own experience, TCKs and ATCKs can be effective mentors for new students coming to their school or community from different countries or cultures or even from different parts of their own country. They already know some of the hazards of this process and can effectively help others settle in more quickly—and less traumatically—than might happen otherwise.

Sometimes TCKs can be connectors or mediators between groups that are stereotypically prejudiced against one another.

Francisco is a black Panamanian TCK. At age six, he moved to the States while his stepfather pursued a

military career. Initially, Francisco lived in the predominantly white culture in the community surrounding the army base. Here he learned firsthand the shock of being the target of racist slurs and attacks. Later, his parents moved and he went to a more racially diverse high school where he became a chameleon who apparently fit perfectly into the African American community. Eventually most of his friends saw him as Francisco and forgot, if they ever knew, that his roots were not the same as theirs.

One day, however, a heated discussion erupted among his black friends about why "foreigners" shouldn't be allowed into the country. Finally, Francisco spoke up and said, "You know, guys, what you're saying about them, you're saying about me. I'm not a citizen either. But foreigners have flesh and blood like me—and like you." Then Francisco pointed out how this kind of group stereotyping was why he and they as black people had known prejudice. Francisco reminded them that he—their personal friend, a foreigner—was living proof that people of all backgrounds, races, colors, and nationalities were just that—people, not statistics or embodiments of other people's stereotypes.

Observational Skills

TCKs may well develop certain skills because of the basic human instinct for survival. Sometimes through rather painful means, they have learned that particularly in cross-cultural situations it pays to be a careful observer of what's going on around them and then try to understand the reasons for what they are seeing.

One TCK received the "nerd for life" award when, on his first day of school "at home," he carried his books in a brand-new briefcase—just like his dad's. The briefcase served a most utilitarian purpose—keeping

books together in an easily transportable manner. But in this new school, a backpack slung over one shoulder (and one shoulder only) served the same purpose in a far more socially acceptable manner.

Through such experiences, TCKs learn firsthand that in any culture these unwritten rules govern everyone's acceptance or rejection in a new setting. In addition, they have seen how behavior unnoticed in one place may cause deep offense in another. Something as seemingly insignificant as raising a middle finger or pointing at another person has distinctly different meanings depending on the culture. Mistakes in conscious and unconscious social rules—whether eating style, greetings, or methods of carrying schoolbooks—often send an unwanted message to people in the new culture. Observing carefully and learning to ask "How does life work here?" before barging ahead are other skills TCKs can use to help themselves or others relate more effectively in different cultures.

Mariella, a German ATCK who had grown up in India, took a job working for an NGO hospital in Ghana. It wasn't long before she heard complaints from the expatriate staff that the patients often threw their prescriptions away immediately after exiting the doctor's office. That seemed odd to her as well, so Mariella began investigating.

She soon noticed that when the new doctor from Germany dispensed these prescriptions, he always sat sideways at the desk. The patients were on the doctor's left side as he wrote notes on their charts using his right hand. Whenever the doctor finished writing the prescription, he would pick it up with his free left hand and give it to the patient.

This process probably would not have caused a second thought in Germany, but Mariella knew from her childhood in India that there the left hand is considered unclean by many because it is the one used for dirty tasks. Giving someone anything with that hand

is both an insult and a statement that the object being offered is worthless. She wondered if that might be the case in Ghana as well and asked her new Ghanaian friends if the way a person handed something to another person made a difference in their culture.

When their replies confirmed her suspicion that using the left hand in Ghana had the same connotation as she remembered from her childhood in India, Mariella understood why the patients didn't fill the prescriptions! She suggested the doctor turn his desk around so all the patients sat at his right and that way he would naturally give out the prescriptions in a culturally appropriate manner. He followed her advice and the problem disappeared.

Social Skills

In certain ways, learning to live with the chronic change which often characterizes their lifestyle gives many TCKs a great sense of inner confidence and strong feelings of self-reliance. While not always liking change—sometimes even hating it—TCKs do expect to cope with new situations. They generally approach upheavals with some degree of confidence because past experience has taught them that given enough time, they will make more friends and learn the new culture's ways. This sense that they'll be able to manage new situations—even when they can't always count on others to be physically present to help in a crisis—often gives them the security to take risks others might not take. A Belgian ATCK, Helga, planned to go alone on a five-week trip to Australia and New Zealand. Some friends were shocked.

"Do you know anyone there?" they asked.

"Not yet," she replied.

"Well, how can you just go? Aren't you scared?"

"How will you find your way? What kind of food will you eat?"

Actually, she hadn't thought of it. She'd just pre-

sumed one way or another it would all work out. As a teenager and university student, she'd often traveled halfway around the world alone to see her parents each school vacation. Customs and language barriers were no longer intimidating. Lost luggage could be dealt with. She had a great time.

But there is a flip side to this type of confidence as well. While TCKs develop feelings of confidence in many areas of life, there are other times or situations in which they may be so fearful of making mistakes they are almost paralyzed. Paul, an American TCK who grew up in Australia, moved once more as a teenager. Here's what he said about that move.

I changed worlds once more at age fourteen when my dad's company moved him from Australia to Indonesia. But the consequence of switching worlds at that age is you can't participate in the social scene. Everyone else seems to know the rules except you. You stand at the edge, and you shut up and listen, mostly to learn, but you can't participate. You only sort of participate—not as an initiator, but as a weak supporter in whatever goes on—hoping that whatever you do is right and flies okay. You're always double-checking and making sure.

Just as true chameleons move slowly while constantly checking which color they should be to blend into each new environment, so TCKs can appear to be socially slow while trying to figure out the operative rules in their new situations. To avoid looking foolish or stupid, they retreat from these situations in such ways as overemphasizing academics, belittling the new culture, or withdrawing in extreme shyness. Even those who have been extremely social in one setting may refuse to join group activities in the next place because they have no idea how to do what everyone else already can. Maybe they have returned home to Sweden from a tropical climate, never having learned to ice skate, toboggan, or ski. They would rather not participate at all than let anyone know of their incompetence.

Insecurity in a new environment can make TCKs withdraw even

in areas where they have knowledge or talent. It's one thing to join the choir in a relatively small international school overseas. It's quite another to volunteer when you are suddenly in a school of three thousand students. Who knows what might be expected? Who knows how many others are better than you? And so the TCK holds back to wait and watch, even when it might be possible to be involved.

While TCKs are trying to figure out the new rules and if or where they might jump in, people around them wonder why they are holding back. If the TCKs do jump into the fray, it's easy for them to make dumb mistakes and be quickly labeled as social misfits. This can lead to another problem. Because TCKs often don't feel a sense of belonging, they, as did both Paul and Ginny, can quickly identify with others who don't fit in. Unfortunately, this is often the group that is in trouble with the school administration or one in which scholastic achievement is disdained. Later, if the TCKs want to change and make friends with those more interested in academic success, it may be difficult because they have already been labeled as part of the other group.

Linguistic Skills

Acquiring fluency in more than one language is potentially one of the most useful life skills a cross-cultural upbringing can give TCKs. Children who learn two or more languages early in life, and use these languages on a day-to-day basis, develop a facility and ease with language unlike those who learn a second language for the first time as teenagers or adults.

Bilingualism and multilingualism have advantages in addition to the obvious one of communicating with different groups of people. For instance, Dr. Jeannine Henry, an English professor, believes learning different languages early in life can sharpen thinking skills in general and can actually help children achieve academically above their grade level.² Learning the grammar of one language can strengthen grammatical understanding in the next one.

Strong linguistic skills also have practical advantages as the TCK

becomes an adult. Some careers are available only to people fluent in two or more languages. One American ATCK works for a large international company as a Japanese/English translator. She learned Japanese while growing up and attending local schools in a small town in Japan. Another American ATCK works as an international broadcaster using the Hausa he learned as a child in Nigeria.

Even if a career isn't directly involved with language, opportunities to take jobs in certain countries may require language acquisition. There's no doubt that a job applicant who can already speak the country's language will see his or her resume land a lot closer to the top of the pile than those who will have to spend a year in language school along the way. And if the language required doesn't happen to be the one the ATCK already knows, the fact that he or she can obviously learn more than one language improves job opportunities as well.

When we first learn a new language as an adult, the thinking process of our mother language often superimposes itself on the second language and makes learning the new language more difficult. It also inhibits us from fully understanding the thinking patterns of those who use that language. When children learn languages, they instinctively pick up the differing nuances of how people in that culture think and relate to one another. Adults often translate word for word and never understand that the same word can have a different meaning in another language. Ironically, however, learning the nuances for certain words in their adopted language can sometimes keep TCKs from fully understanding the nuances of the translation of that same word in their own mother tongue. This happened to JoAnna.

For years, ATCK JoAnna's American friends told her she was the most guilt-ridden person they'd ever met.

No matter what happened—if a glass fell out of someone's hand, a friend lost her notebook, or someone bit his lip—JoAnna always said "Sorry."

The instantaneous answer always came back.

"What are you sorry for? You didn't do anything."

JoAnna's equally instantaneous reply was also always the same. "I know I didn't do anything. I'm just sorry."

It was a point of significant frustration for both JoAnna and her friends for years. She couldn't get out of the habit of saying sorry and her friends couldn't get over being irritated by it. None of them understood the impasse.

In her forties, JoAnna went to live in Kenya for a year. During a hike in the woods with Pamela, another American, Pamela said, "I'll be glad when I get back to America where everyone doesn't say sorry all the time."

JoAnna wondered why that was a problem. "It drives me crazy," Pamela said. "No matter what happens, everyone rushes around and says *Pole, pole sana* (which means 'Sorry, very sorry'). But most of the time there's nothing to apologize for."

For the first time, JoAnna understood her lifelong problem with the word *sorry*. For Pamela, an American, *sorry* was only an apology. She had never realized in this African context that people were expressing sympathy and empathy rather than apologizing when they used that word. For JoAnna, in the African language she had learned as a child and in the two she had learned as an adult, *sorry* was used as both an apology and as an expression of sympathy. It had never occurred to her it was only an apology word in American English. No wonder she and her American friends had misunderstood each other. They weren't speaking the same language!

Although the linguistic gifts for TCKs are primarily positive ones, there are a few pitfalls to be aware of. These include being limited in any one language, becoming a "creative speller," and losing fluency and depth in the child's native language. As we saw

earlier with Ilpo, no matter how bright the child is, the specialized terminology needed for studying medicine (or fixing cars, discussing computers, studying science, etc.) may be missing if someone is working in many languages. Ultimately, he or she may never have time to learn the more specialized meanings and usage of each. JoAnna's story above demonstrates how idiomatic expressions or nonliteral meanings of common words can also cause confusion in such situations.

Interestingly enough, it's not simply those who work or study in entirely different languages that may find themselves linguistically challenged. Perhaps for the very reason it seems so minor, TCKs who speak and write English find it very difficult to keep American and English spelling straight. Is it *color* or *colour*? *Behavior* or *behaviour*? *Pediatrician* or *paediatrician*? Even worse, how do you remember if it's *criticise* or *criticize* when criticism is spelled the same everywhere? While this may seem a minor irritation, it can become a major issue when, for example, a British student transfers to a school in the United States (or an American-based school in another country), where teachers may not be sensitive to this issue.

These differences in spelling provide a special challenge to schools everywhere that have a mix of nationalities among their students. Many solve the problem by keeping both an English and American dictionary available to check on the variations that come in on assigned papers. With a sense of humor, an understanding teacher, or a spell checker appropriate for the current country, most TCKs weather this particular challenge successfully.

The most serious problem related to learning multiple languages at an early age is that some people never become proficient in their supposed mother tongue—the language of their family roots and personal history. Among TCKs, this occurs most often among those who come from non-English-speaking countries but attend international schools overseas where classes are predominantly taught in English. When that is a boarding school with little home (and thus language) contact for months at a time, language can become a ma-

for issue when the TCK returns to his or her parents, with the supposed mother tongue becoming almost a foreign language. Families whose members lack fluency in a common language by which they can express emotions and profound ideas lose one critical tool for developing close, intimate relationships.

Kwabena is a Ghanaian TCK who faced the problem of never gaining fluency in his parents' languages. His father was from the Ga tribe, his mother from the Anum tribe. Kwabena was born in predominantly English-speaking Liberia, where his father worked for several years. Eventually, the family moved to Mali, where French was the official language. The family could only make occasional visits back to the parents' villages in Ghana, where his grandparents spoke only the local languages. By the time Kwabena reached his teens, he sadly realized he could never talk to his grandparents and ask for the family stories all children love to hear, because he couldn't speak enough of any of their languages and they couldn't speak the English, French, or Malian languages he knew.

Most TCKs we know, however, would count the benefits of having facility in two or more languages another of their greatest practical blessings. What is more, it's just plain fun to watch a group of ATCKs at an international school reunion suddenly break into the greetings or farewells of the language they all learned in some far-away land during their youth. At that moment, language becomes one more marker of all they have shared in the world that now may seem invisible to them.

Endnotes

¹ Andrew Atkins, "Behavioral Strings to Which MKs Dance," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July 1989): 239-43.

² Jeannine Heny, "Learning and Using a Second Language," in *Language: Introductory Readings*, 5th ed., edited by Virginia Clark, Paul A. Eschholz, and Alfred F. Rosa (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), 186.

8

Rootlessness and Restlessness

Being a TCK has given me a view of the world as my home and a confidence in facing new situations and people, particularly of other countries and cultures.

However, it has its negative side [because] Americans and foreigners have a problem relating to me, for I am not a typical American! The hardest question still to answer is where I am from. What is my place of origin?¹

—Response to ATCK Survey

While this writer obviously enjoyed the type of confidence a TCK childhood can foster, he or she also brings up two very common characteristics TCKs often share—a deep sense of rootlessness and restlessness. These are such key aspects of the TCK Profile that they deserve a chapter of their own.

Rootlessness

There are several questions many TCKs have learned to dread. Among them are these two: “Where are you from?” and “Where is home?”

Where Are You From?

Why should anyone dread such a simple question? Consider Erika again.

Like most other TCKs, when someone asks Erika that question, her internal computer starts the search mode. *What does this person mean by "from"? Is he asking my nationality? Or maybe it's "Where were you born?" Does he mean "Where are you living now?" or "Where did you come from today?" Or does he mean "Where do your parents live now?" or "Where did you grow up?"* Actually, does he even understand what a complicated question he asked me, or care? Is he simply asking a polite "Let's make conversation about something while we stand here with shrimp on our plates" question, or is he really interested?

Erika decides what to answer by how she perceives the person who asked or what she does and doesn't feel like talking about. If the new acquaintance seems more polite than interested or if Erika doesn't want a lengthy conversation, she gives the "safe" answer. During college she simply said, "Wisconsin." Now she replies, "Dayton." It's the "where I'm living now" answer.

If Erika does want to extend the conversation slightly or test out the questioner's true interest, she throws out the next higher-level answer: "New York"—still a fairly safe answer. It's where she visited during each home leave and where her family roots are.

If the person responds with more than a polite "Oh" and asks another question such as, "Then when did you leave New York?" Erika might elevate her reply to a still higher level, "Well, I'm not really from New York, but my parents are." Now the gauntlet is thrown down. If the potential new friend picks up on this and asks, "Well, where are you from then?" the conversation begins and Erika's fascinating life history begins to unfold. Of course, if the newcomer doesn't follow up that clue and lets the comment go, Erika knows for sure she or he wasn't really interested

anyway and moves the conversation on to other topics—or simply drops it altogether.

On days when Erika feels like talking more or wants to make herself stand out from among the crowd, however, she answers the question "Where are you from?" quite differently. "What time in my life are you referring to?" she asks. At this point the other person has virtually no choice but to ask Erika where she has lived during her life and then hear all the very interesting details Erika has to tell!

Where Is Home?

While this question at first seems to be the same as "Where are you from?" it is not. In some cases, TCKs have a great sense of "at-homeness" in their host culture. As long as Erika's parents remained in Singapore, "Where's your home?" was an easier question to answer than "Where are you from?" She simply said, "Singapore." Both her emotional and physical sense of home were the same.

Other TCKs who have lived in one city or house during each leave or furlough may have a strong sense of that place being home. In January 1987 the U.S. ambassador to Ecuador spoke at a conference about TCKs in Quito and said, "I think every expatriate family should buy a home before going abroad so their children will have the same base for every home assignment. My kids feel very strongly that Virginia is home even though they've lived outside the States over half their lives." This is undoubtedly an excellent idea, and one to be seriously considered when at all possible.

When, for various reasons, buying a house in the home country isn't a viable option, some TCKs still develop a strong sense of "home" in other ways. Often those whose parents move every two years rarely consider geography as the determining factor in what they consider home. Instead, home is defined by relationships.

When Dave Pollock asked Ben, a TCK from the diplomatic community, "Where's your home?" Ben replied, "Egypt." Dave was somewhat surprised as he

had not previously heard Ben talk about Egypt, so Dave asked how long he had lived there.

"Well," Ben replied, "actually, I haven't been to Egypt yet, but that's where my parents are posted now. They moved there from Mozambique right after I left for university, so when I go home for Christmas vacation, that's where I'll go."

For some TCKs, however, "Where is home?" is the hardest question of all. *Home* connotes an emotional place—somewhere you truly belong. There simply is no real answer to that question for many TCKs. They may have moved so many times, lived in so many different residences, and attended so many different schools that they never had time to become attached to any. Their parents may be divorced and living in two different countries. Some TCKs have spent years in boarding schools and no longer feel a close attachment to their parents. In fact, they may feel more emotionally at home at boarding school than when thinking of their parents' home. Paul Seaman writes,

"Home" might refer to the school dormitory or to the house where we stayed during the summer, to our family's home where our parents worked, or, more broadly, to the country of our citizenship. And while we might have some sense of belonging to all of these places, we felt fully at home in none of them. Boarding life seemed to have the most consistency, but there we were separated from our siblings and shared one "parent" with other kids. As it grew colder, we could look forward to going home for the holidays. We were always eager to be reunited with our families, but after three months of separation from our friends, we were just as eager to go back. Every time we got on the train, we experienced both abandonment and communion.²

No matter how home is defined, the day comes for many TCKs when they realize it is irrevocably gone. For whatever reasons, they,

like Erika, can never "go home." Now when someone asks Erika where her home is, she simply says, "Everywhere and nowhere." She has no other answer.

Restlessness—The Migratory Instinct

In the end, many TCKs develop a *migratory instinct* that controls their lives. Along with their chronic rootlessness is a feeling of restlessness: "Here, where I am today, is temporary. But as soon as I finish my schooling, get a job, or purchase a home, I'll settle down." Somehow the settling down never quite happens. The present is never enough—something always seems lacking. An unrealistic attachment to the past, or a persistent expectation that the next place will finally be home, can lead to this inner restlessness that keeps the TCK always moving.

Inika had waited for what seemed like forever to return to her host country, Guatemala. She finally found a job which offered her the prospect of staying there for many years, possibly even until she retired. Two weeks after arriving, however, Inika felt a wave of panic. For the first time in her life, there was no defined end point. Now she had to be involved with the good and bad of whatever happened in this community. She wondered why she felt like this so soon after reaching her goal. Then she realized that throughout her life no matter where she had lived, any time things got messy (relationships with a neighbor, zoning fights in the town, conflicts at church), internally she had leapfrogged over them. There was always an end point ahead when she knew she would be gone—the end of school, the end of home leave, or something. Suddenly, that safety net had disappeared. For the first time in her life Inika either had to engage completely in the world around her or start forming another plan to leave.

Obviously, it is good to be ready to move when a career choice mandates it, but to move simply from restlessness alone can have disastrous effects on an ATCK's academic life, career, and family.

Without question there are legitimate reasons to change colleges or universities. Sometimes TCKs who live a continent away must enroll in university without having the opportunity to visit beforehand. After arriving, they discover that that school doesn't offer the particular courses or majors they want. Perhaps they change their interest in a career they want to pursue and this school doesn't offer concentrated studies in that field. In such situations, there is no choice but to change. Some TCKs, however, switch schools just because of their inner migratory instinct. Their roommates aren't quite right; the professors are boring; the weather in this place is too hot or too cold. They keep moving on, chronically hoping to find the ideal college or university experience. Unfortunately, frequent transfers can limit what TCKs learn and inhibit the development of their social relationships.

Once through with school (or after dropping out), a TCK who has moved often and regularly may feel it's time to move even when it's not. Some ATCKs can't stay at one job long enough to build any sort of career. Just as they are anticipating a position of new responsibility and growth, that old rolling-stone instinct kicks in. They submit their letters of resignation, and off they go—again always thinking the next place will be "it."

Sylvia raced through life. In the ten years following her university graduation, she acquired two master's degrees, had seven career changes, and lived in four countries. One day it struck her that while she had a vast amount of broad knowledge and experience, her career was going nowhere. And she wasn't sure she still wanted, or knew how, to settle down.

Some feel almost an obligation to be far from their parents, siblings, or even their own children. When it is possible to live closer, these adult TCKs choose not to. They have spent so much time separated

from family that they don't know how to live in physical proximity, or don't want to. Others, like Bernie, have learned to deal with interpersonal conflict—including family conflict—by separating from the situation. He said, "I loved growing up with high mobility. Every time there was a problem, all I had to do was wait and either the people causing the problem left or I left. I have handled all of my life's conflicts the same way." Peggy is another example of how this restlessness works.

Peggy, a foreign service ATCK, attended twelve schools in sixteen years all around the globe. Now, every two years, an internal clock goes off that says, "This assignment is up. Time to move." She has either changed jobs, houses, cities, and—twice—husbands in response to that message.

Unfortunately, her migratory instinct has affected Peggy's children. Although she has noticed their insecurities developing as she perpetually uproots them, Peggy appears powerless to settle down. The overt reason for change always seems clear. "I don't like the neighborhood we're in," or "My boss simply doesn't understand me," or "I have a nasty landlord." It never occurs to her that she is replaying a very old tape that says, "No place can ever become permanent. Don't get too attached" or "If you have a problem, just leave." Nor does she realize it might be possible to replace the old tape with a new one that plays a message that could serve her better.

Some TCKs have an opposite response to their highly mobile background. They have moved so many times, in so many ways, and to so many places, they swear they will find a place to call their own, put up the white picket fence, and never, ever move again. Lorna, a non-TCK married to an ATCK, told us,

When I met Dwight, I think I fell in love with his passport as much as I did with him. I was intrigued with all the places he had been and everything he had

seen. I envisioned a life of worldwide travel and living in all sorts of exotic places. Unfortunately, I assumed wrong. When my father surprised us with an old farmhouse for our wedding present, Dwight was thrilled. That was the first time he shared with me how he had always dreamed of finding a place to call his own and settle down. This was it. So I'm still reading my travel magazines and dreaming.

Now we take a further look at how the TCKs' experience, including this rootlessness and restlessness, shapes the patterns of their relationships.

Endnotes

- ¹ From Ruth E. Van Reken, unpublished original research on ATCKs, 1986.
- ² Seaman, *Paper Airplanes in the Himalayas*, 8.

Relational Patterns

Multiple separations tended to cause me to develop deeper relationships quicker. Also, when I was with family or friends, we tended to talk about things that matter spiritually, emotionally, and so on. I still become impatient with [what I see as] superficiality.¹

—Response to ATCK Survey

Because TCKs often cope with high mobility by defining their sense of rootedness in terms of relationships rather than geography, many TCKs will go to greater lengths than some people might consider normal to nurture relational ties with others—be they family members, friends with whom the TCKs have shared boarding school years, or other important members of their third culture community. Unfortunately, that same mobility can result in relationships being a source of great conflict and pain as well. The cycle of frequent good-byes inherent in a highly mobile lifestyle not only creates strains on specific relationships—such as parents and children, when it's time for the kids to fly an ocean away for school—but it can also lead to patterns of protecting themselves against the further pain of good-byes that affect relationships throughout their lives. Here, within the context of relationships, is another example of both the gifts and challenges of the TCK experience. Through relational patterns we

can see even more why the TCK life can be a rich source of meeting our basic human need for relationships for many, while making it very difficult for others.

Large Numbers of Relationships

TCKs usually develop a wide range of relationships as they or people around them habitually come and go. New friends enter their lives, while old friends become another entry in their burgeoning address books.

"I could travel to almost any country in the world and stay with a friend," Tom bragged after one transition seminar. This may sound like an exaggeration, but for many adult TCKs it's the truth. With friends from their childhood now in countless places, TCKs build a rich international network that is useful for all sorts of things—from finding cheap room and board while traveling to setting up business connections later in life.

The problem with having this many relationships, however, is that eventually they simply can't all be maintained. Renee learned this the hard way.

ATCK Renee's personal address list grew to over eight hundred names. No matter how hard she tried to keep up with her correspondence, she couldn't. The stack of letters to answer always exceeded the time available—especially since many of those missives came from friends whom she thought deserved long letters in reply. Eventually, Renee had to resort to a yearly Christmas form letter, but it still took a month of constant work, as she always added personal notes before mailing them off. One year Renee was simply short of time. Presuming her friends would understand, and hoping they would rather have some news than none at all, she mailed the letters with no personal notes.

Four months later she attended a wedding and met an African friend from her five years in Malawi. When

Renee rushed to greet him warmly, his response was exceedingly cool.

"Seems like you've forgotten us," he said.

Renee was dumbfounded. "How can you say that?"

"Well, you haven't called for months, and when you sent out your Christmas letter there wasn't even a personal note on it. My wife and I have been wondering what we've done to offend you."

Renee finally had to accept the sad reality that she wasn't going to be able to keep up with every wonderful person she had ever met.

Deep and Valued Relationships

Relationships everywhere move through various levels of communication as people get to know each other. While this happens in different ways in various cultures, here is one common pattern for how relationships are established.

1. *Superficial level:* This involves conversation generally referred to as "small talk"—How are you? Where are you from? The weather or today's headlines.
2. *"Still safe" level:* This is an exchange of no-risk facts. Where did you go on vacation last year? What sights did you see?
3. *Judgmental level:* Here, we begin to risk a few statements about our opinions on politics, religion, or other matters about which our new friend might disagree with us.
4. *Emotional level:* We begin sharing how we feel about life, ourselves, and others (e.g., that we're sad, happy, worried, or depressed).
5. *Disclosure level:* We reveal our most private thoughts and feelings to another person, confessing secret dreams as well as painful failures. This stage involves an honesty and vulnerability that lead to true intimacy. Most of us only have a few people in our lives with whom we share at this level. Some people have no one to share such a place.

One common complaint from at least Canadian and U.S. American TCKs is that they feel people in their home cultures are "shallow." Conversations with peers seem boring, and the TCKs long for the good old days with their international friends. Why is this such a common complaint? It has to do with these levels of relationships. People in different cultures not only enter but move through the various levels at different paces. Some cultures jump past the small talk quickly and treat strangers like long-lost cousins, inviting them to stay the night, eat what they want, and come as often as they wish. In other cultures nobody bothers to go next door to say hello to the family that just moved in from who knows where.

For various reasons, TCKs seem prone to passing quickly through levels one and two and moving immediately into topics that fall into level three. In other words, while others are still at the polite stages, TCKs are offering opinions on and asking what others think about such topics as how the president's term is going, what the government should do on its immigration policy, or whether the United Nations should intervene in some new world crisis. When others either don't seem to care about such things, or don't want to express their opinions, TCKs deem them shallow—and who knows what these others think of the TCKs?

Why do TCKs often jump into these at least supposedly deeper levels of communication faster than others? There are a number of reasons. One of these is cultural habit. On an Internet list serve for TCKs, this matter of relational levels became a hot topic of discussion. An interesting response came from a Dutch ATCK, Ard A. Louis, who grew up in Gabon and now lives in New York.

At least among educated Europeans it's very common to discuss politics or other potentially divisive topics upon a first encounter. In fact, sometimes we look for something to argue about on purpose. Part of being "educated" is being able to talk about art, philosophy, politics, and so on.... and argue your points if need be.

This is very different with Americans, who seem always to look for points of common interest. For

example, how often when you meet someone do they ask where you're from and then try to find some point of commonality like "I've been there" or "Do you know so and so?"

Another very common topic of discussion is pop culture, especially movies/TV shows most people have seen. (Pop culture is the great unifying factor in the U.S.—and being well versed in its history helps tremendously in fitting in.) Thus, a very common first impression of Europeans arriving in the U.S. is that Americans are superficial because they seem to have no opinions about even their own political situation, let alone what's happening in the rest of the world.²

Ard's point is that the methods and styles of relating to one another differ from culture to culture according to cultural habit. When we discuss entering relationships at a "deeper level," perhaps this is only in comparison to particular cultures, as in the case above—U.S. culture. In reality, discussing politics in some cultures may be no closer to true intimacy than talking about the weather in other cultures. This, of course, calls into question the universality of how the levels themselves are defined.

Another ATCK recounted how this mix-up of culturally appropriate relationship levels and styles caught her unaware:

I'd never met this Israeli businessman before that evening, but during supper I asked him how the political situation in Israel was doing.... Another American eating with us almost spit out his food and instantly changed the subject of conversation. When we finished that new topic and I went back to my original question, the American had the same reaction. Afterwards he told me how horribly rude I'd been to ask such a question of someone I barely knew. Frankly, I was stunned. Here was a guy with lots of information about key world issues and this American thought I shouldn't talk about it. So I asked him why. He told me in his family you were never allowed to talk about

religion or politics because that always caused trouble.

Until I heard about these different levels of communication and personal relationships, I couldn't understand why I shouldn't start with political questions.³

There are three other reasons TCKs may jump more quickly than others into what we are calling deeper levels of relationship.

1. *Practice*: Many TCKs know how to get into relationships fairly quickly simply because they have had to start so many. They have learned to observe the dynamics of a situation, ask questions that can help open a door, hopefully be sensitive to cultural cues of what is or is not appropriate for this group, and respond appropriately when others approach them.

2. *Content*: The store of knowledge and experience they have acquired feeds into many different topics, so they often think they have something relevant to say. Because of their parents' careers, TCKs often grow up in homes where discussions on a current political crisis, starving children, religious views, or solutions to the economic woes of the country are standard fare. To express opinions on these topics is normal, and people around seem interested because the TCK's firsthand insights may help others understand the complexity of issues in the newspaper or on television that are happening a world away.

3. *Sense of urgency*: TCKs may also jump into deeper levels of communication quickly because there is little time to develop a particular relationship. They understand that if something doesn't happen now, perhaps it never will. TCKs routinely meet people of incredible diversity who can teach them so much about their part of the world. Why waste time in small talk? In one sense, almost everyone can be an instant friend. Because they have connected at a relatively deep level, many of these quick relationships do become long-term friendships—or at least part of that bulging address book for occasional telephone calls and yearly letters.

In *Military Brats*, Mary Edwards Wertsch talks about the "forced extroversion" the military lifestyle fosters because time is too short to wait to make friends. She says one technique she used to break in to new groups was the "confessional impulse." In quickly spilling family secrets (a level 4 or 5 disclosure), she sent a message that she wanted to invest in a new friendship. Often her confession was met by a mutual confession from the new friend. Wertsch also says that military kids might be more willing to be open than their civilian counterparts because they probably won't be around to deal with any negative consequences from these confessions.⁴

Non-TCKs, who are used to staying at the first or second level of relationship for relatively long periods, may misread TCKs who jump in at a deeper level. This type of confusion happened at a camp where Dave Pollock served as a seminar leader.

Several days after camp started, a group of fearful, non-TCK young women sought Dave out. They felt completely confused by actions of the TCK males. A young man would engage one of these young women in, to them, deep and meaningful conversation, and she would think he was interested in her. But the next day he would do the same with someone else. After three days the young women were confused, angry with each other, and angry at the young men.

When Dave spoke to the guys, they were shocked that these girls thought they had even considered anything more than a friendship for this week at camp. The TCK young men said they had no romantic presuppositions whatsoever. They just wanted to get to know these young women, find out what they thought about life, the world, their faith, and other assorted interesting topics. It seemed like a perfect chance to understand more about Americans. But the seriousness of the conversation communicated a level of warmth and relationship that meant something quite different to the young women.

TCKs usually place a high value on their relationships—especially those from their TCK world. Often the style and intensity of friendship within the international third culture are quite different from the types of friendship they have in their home country. Most expatriate families live far from relatives and tend to reach out to one another as surrogate families in times of need. When there is a coup, for example, it's the friends in this international community who band together in the fear, the wondering, the packing, and the leaving. Without doubt, a great deal of bonding that lasts a lifetime takes place at such times.

Relationships—both with friends and family at home as well as with friends from their third culture world—are also valued because they give the TCKs a sense of connectedness. These relationships offer the one place where TCKs can say, "Do you remember when....?" and someone actually does!

A TCK's wedding is usually quite a sight. When Robin married Kevin, her high school sweetheart from boarding school, you would have thought you were in Africa rather than in New York. Papier-mâché palm trees framing a painted mural of a tropical beach decorated the reception hall. Kevin and his groomsmen all wore flowing robes from Sierra Leone. Robin's dad wore a country-cloth chief's robe as he walked her down the aisle. Friends came from far and near, filling the pews with equally colorful attire. The wedding had turned into a minireunion. Watching these TCKs chatter unceasingly throughout the reception was like watching long-lost family members reunite. There was no question about how they viewed their relationships from the past.

Effects of Cycles of Multiple Losses on Relationships

While many TCKs jump into relationships with both feet, others approach any new relationship with caution. In a 1986 survey of

three hundred ATCKs, 40 percent of the respondents said they struggled with a fear of intimacy because of the fear of loss.⁵ Too many close friends have moved away. Frequent, painful good-byes make some TCKs unwilling to risk emotional involvement again.

Often these TCKs are labeled as quiet or shy. They never take available opportunities to be deeply engaged in their schools or communities. Even TCKs who are regarded as gregarious, open, and friendly because of their skill at jumping into the second and third levels of communication often refuse to move on to the fourth and fifth levels of true intimacy. They manage to erect walls, usually without realizing it, to keep out anyone trying to come closer.

When Karen became engaged to Jack, she couldn't believe that someone would actually be with her for the rest of her life, so she prepared for what seemed the inevitable loss by presuming Jack would have a fatal car wreck before their marriage. When that didn't happen, she feared it would happen on their honeymoon. After safely returning from their honeymoon, Karen worried whenever Jack was a few minutes late coming home from work. On their first anniversary, he was over two hours late due to an electrical failure in the mass transportation system. By the time he got home, she had started crying with an "I knew it would happen" despair, had begun to plan his funeral, and was wondering how long you had to be married before you didn't need to return the wedding gifts.

Although Jack is living to this day, for a long time after the wedding, Karen couldn't understand why she always seemed to fuss over insignificant details—like whose turn it was to take out the garbage—just when she and Jack felt especially close. She finally realized that deep inside such closeness terrified her because she still feared losing it. Fussing was her way to keep up a wall of safety. Karen had been losing people she loved dearly since first separating from her parents at

age six, when she left for boarding school, and it took a long time for her to let her guard down and dare to believe Jack would be staying.

As we saw in our discussion on the stages of transition, people try to protect themselves from the pain of losing a precious, or at least valued, relationship in various ways. TCKs are no different. Some try to limit their vulnerability to impending grief by refusing to acknowledge they care for anyone or anything. In the end, however, they know a pain of loneliness far greater than the one they are running from. The independence they have been so proud of turns into a profound isolation, which keeps them prisoner until the day they become willing to once more feel the pain of loss in order to know the joy of closeness.

A second common response for people trying to avoid the pain of losing a relationship is called the "quick release." When friends are about to leave, or when TCKs think they themselves might be leaving, their response is frequently to let go too soon. Friends quit calling each other and don't visit, play together, or go out for lunch. Each wonders what he or she did to upset the other one. A "quick release" also happens at points where some kind of temporary separation is about to occur. Many ATCKs talk of how easily they have an argument with a spouse the night before one of them is leaving for a short business trip the next day, in an unconscious attempt to let go.

Some ATCKs who have commonly used anger themselves (or had it used by those they were separating from) as a shield against future pain may see any type of anger as a precursor to separation and emotionally detach at the first sign of it.

Garth and his new bride had their first argument. He told us later, "I knew right then she was going to leave me." Inside, he went stone-cold toward her. Let her leave. I don't care. I don't know why I married her anyway, he thought. When he finally realized his wife had no intention of leaving, he began to think through

his reaction and what had happened. He remembered frequent arguments with his parents just before he left for boarding school, probably each of them unconsciously trying to make the leaving easier. Garth began to realize that because of that previous pattern, he made automatic assumptions that any conflict meant the impending loss of a relationship.

Refusing to feel the pain is a third common response of TCKs to the multiple losses due to the high mobility of their lives. Even when TCKs feel intensely about leaving a friend or relative, some refuse to acknowledge the hurt to others or to themselves. They say they don't like messy good-byes and, in fact, refuse to say them. Becky and Mary Ann were two ATCKs caught in this pattern.

Becky and Mary Ann met at a Global Nomads International conference. For both of them, this was the first time they had consciously reflected on how their pasts as TCKs had affected them. Each had basked in the joy of discovering another person who understood her deep, inner, secret places. They had laughed together, cried together, and talked incessantly. Suddenly the conference was over, and that inevitable moment of saying good-bye had come.

Becky and Mary Ann stood by the elevator as Mary Ann prepared to leave for the airport. Chances were great they would never see each other again; they lived an ocean apart. As they looked at one another, each knew she had let the other into a space usually kept off-limits. What did they do now?

After a brief, uncomfortable stare, both broke into wry smiles of understanding.

"So what do we say?" Becky asked first.

"I guess there's not much to say but the usual," and Mary Ann paused, bent her right arm up so the palm of her hand faced Becky. Like a windshield wiper making one sweep across the windshield, Mary Ann moved

her forearm from left to right while saying, "Byebye."

"I guess you're right, Mary Ann. So Byebye," and Becky mirrored the perfunctory farewell wave Mary Ann had just made.

Then they laughed. For some, this might have seemed an incredibly cold way to say good-bye after they had shared their lives so intensely. For them, however, it was a moment of recognition, of understanding how each had learned to avoid painful farewells. They simply didn't acknowledge them! But in another way, it also represented the sum of all they had shared that needed no verbal explanation.

Unfortunately, however, not all who exercise the protective mechanism of emotional flattening realize it as poignantly as Mary Ann and Becky did at the moment of farewell. Even more unfortunately, this flat emotional response can be transferred from avoiding the pain of farewells to all areas of life. Sometimes what is praised as confidence and independence among TCKs may actually be a form of detachment. In his book *Your Inner Child of the Past*, psychiatrist Hugh Missildine cites the work of John Bowlby and says that whenever there is a prolonged loss of relationship between parent and child, for *whatever* reason, children go through grief, despair, and finally, detachment in trying to cope with that loss.⁶ Certainly, many TCKs have known profound separation from their parents at an early age. But in addition to that, some have separated so repeatedly from friends and other relatives, they simply refuse to let themselves care about or need anyone again. The sad thing is, when pain is shut down, so is the capacity to feel or express joy.

This response can be devastating in a marriage. The ATCK's partner feels rejected because there are too few external demonstrations of love from the ATCK. Conversely, no matter how many romantic gestures are offered to the ATCK, nothing seems to spark a warm response.

It can be equally painful for the child of such an ATCK. Some ATCK parents seem genuinely unable to delight openly in the pure

joy of having a child, of watching that child grow, of playing games together, or of reading stories at bedtime. Not only do the children miss the warmth and approval they long for, but the ATCK parent also loses out on one of the richest relationships possible in life.

On the other hand, however, we have seen how TCKs who learn to deal in healthy ways with the cycle of relationships they face become richer for it. They do, in fact, have a wealth of experiences to share and rich diversity among those they have met, and they have every possibility for making truly deep friendships that last across the years and miles. As TCKs become skilled at going through the process of transition in healthy ways, they can learn to enjoy each relationship they have, whether it be a long- or short-term friendship. Because all people lose relationships at one time or another, they can share the transitional skills they've learned for themselves to help others cope during their life transitions as well.

Endnotes

- ¹ From Ruth E. Van Reken, unpublished original research on ATCKs, 1986.
- ² Ard A. Louis, e-mail letter on MK-Issues, August 1996, used by permission.
- ³ E-mail letter from MK-Issues, August 1996, used with permission of author.
- ⁴ Wertsch, *Military Brats*, 263–65.
- ⁵ Van Reken, original research.
- ⁶ Hugh Missildine, *Your Inner Child of the Past* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 245–46.

10

Developmental Issues

Sometimes I think the cement of my being was taken from one cultural mould before it cured and forced into other moulds, one after the other, retaining bits of the form of each but producing a finished sculpture that fit into none. At other times I think of myself like the fish we caught [while we were] snorkelling off Mewak. My basic shape camouflages itself in the colours of whatever surroundings I find myself in. I am adept at playing the appropriate roles. But do I have a colour of my own apart from those I appropriate? If I cease to play any role would I be transparent? To mix metaphors, if I peeled away the layers of the roles I adopt would I find nothing at the centre? Am I after all an onion—nothing but the sum of my layers?!

—Sophia Morton

In her powerful essay, “Let Us Possess One World,” Sophia is reflecting on the basic question we have been talking about that TCKs (and all others) must ultimately answer, Who am I? What does it mean to be human, and what does it mean to be *this* human—me?

Developing Personal Identity

In 1984 Sharon Willmer, an ATCK and therapist for TCKs, spoke at a conference about TCK issues and said that one of the greatest challenges she faced among her clients was that few of them had any idea what it meant to be a person. In particular, they had little sense of their own personal identity. During her talk, Sharon explained how every person—regardless of race, nationality, background, economic status, educational experience or lack thereof—has been created with specific, legitimate needs.² These include the need for strong relationships; a sense of belonging, of being nurtured and cared for, of internal unity, of significance; and a feeling of knowing ourselves and being known by others. Every human also has the need to express in one way or another the emotional, creative, intellectual, volitional, and spiritual aspects of his or her being. These needs are what define us as human, and to deny any of them is to deny something precious and important about ourselves as human beings. Furthermore, it is the specific mix and manner in which we meet or express these universal needs that lead to our sense of unique, personal identity.

So why is that such a particular problem for TCKs? Obviously, this is an important issue for non-TCKs as well. At first glance, it may seem that finding a sense of identity is difficult for TCKs simply because of all the cultural or national confusion we've talked about: "Am I an Austrian or a Brazilian?" "Do I fit better in a village setting or a city?" they ask themselves. But having a strong sense of who we are is more than just knowing our nationality or culture, though that is part of it. It's a matter of answering these questions: What is a person? Who am I as *this* person? What are my gifts, my strengths, my weaknesses? Where do I fit or belong? We seek answers to these questions in any culture.

How does that relate to TCKs any differently than non-TCKs? Throughout the preceding chapters and as we complete our look at the TCK Profile in the next chapter, it is becoming clear that the

TCK lifestyle itself affects how TCKs meet these fundamental needs that help them develop a strong sense of personal identity. In the formation of a sense of personhood and identity, the TCK experience has the same paradoxical potential, as we have been discussing, to be either a source of rich blessing or a place of real struggle. Often it is both. Many ATCKs tell us they have felt very nurtured and cared for—by biological parents, dorm parents, other expatriates, their friends among the host nationals, and friends and relatives at home. An Indian TCK raised in the United States said she felt more nurtured than most of her American peers because all the gatherings at the local Indian community center included the children as well as adults, while few American parents included their children in the same way for their social activities. Other TCKs, however, use the word *abandonment* when they reflect on their childhood. For whatever reason, the sense that parents were too busy for them, or were physically or emotionally absent, has left a chronic feeling of emptiness. Nothing and no one else seems to be able to fill this need.

For now, however, we want to look at the first two personal needs we mentioned above—a need for strong relationships and a sense of belonging—and see how the TCK experience presents special challenges as well as opportunities for fulfilling those needs.

Each of us has a strong need to be in relationship with other human beings. "No man is an island" is more than a trite phrase by some ancient poet. Babies who are left alone without human touch will die, no matter how often they are fed. Solitary confinement is considered the worst punishment next to death for a convicted criminal. In relationships we can share and begin to discover many aspects of ourselves. It is also where we receive the love and support we need as the foundation for living a life that is rich and meaningful. But for those things to happen, we must have lasting relationships in our lives, ones in which we don't need to constantly re-explain ourselves and our history. When a person moves continu-

ally, however, it's not easy to establish the ongoing relationships that fill this basic human need.

A sense of belonging is the second need we must all have filled to live fully. That can mean belonging to a family, a group of people, a culture, and/or a nation. Certainly it is an extension of our need for relationships, but it's also feeling secure in knowing how a place and people work and how and where we fit into the larger picture. This sense of belonging gives us the freedom we need to continue developing rather than having to repeat the basics constantly. Without that security, it seems we almost go in circles, continually repeating the same lessons of life rather than moving on to new ones.

Now that we know more about the need for relationship and belonging, we can focus a bit more closely on particular developmental issues TCKs may face while they are continuing to sort out their personal identity—a pattern of uneven maturity and delayed adolescence.

Uneven Maturity

People often tell TCKs, "I can't believe you're only fourteen (or whatever). You seem much older." Equally often (and probably behind their backs), these same people marvel at the TCKs' lack of sophistication or social skills. TCKs feel this discrepancy too and soon begin to wonder which person they really are: the competent, capable, mature self or the bungling, insecure, immature self? That's part of the problem in trying to figure out who they are: in many ways they're both.

Early Maturity

It's not only others who see TCKs as "more mature." They often feel more comfortable with older students than with fellow classmates when they begin college or university back in their home countries, probably for several reasons. Among them:

1. *Broad base of knowledge.* TCKs often have an "advanced-for-their-years" knowledge of geography, global events, and poli-

tics in other countries and are interested in topics not usually discussed by younger people in their home cultures. Many have learned unusual practical skills at a very young age as well—such as how to set up solar energy panels to keep computers going for translation work in the Amazon jungle.

2. *Relationship to adults.* TCKs generally feel quite comfortable with adults because they have had lots of experience with them. Generations usually mix much more in third culture communities than often takes place in the home country. Why? Because, at least traditionally, international expatriate communities are often small and quite communal—that is, most of the kids attend the same school; parents appear at the same international or organizational functions; many may go to the only international church in town; and people bump into each other in the one or two grocery stores that carry foods imported from their particular homeland. Since the children may already be friends from school, families visit as families rather than as adults only. In certain situations, some spend more time with adults than other children and almost come across as "mini-adults."

3. *Communication skills.* Children who speak two or more languages fluently also seem like mini-adults. How could they have learned to speak like this so soon in life? Multilingual TCKs generally feel at ease using their languages to communicate with quite diverse groups. In fact, TCKs often serve as translators for their parents—again, a task usually reserved for adults. All this continues to increase their exposure to, participation in, and comfort with a world of culturally diverse adults as well as other children and gives them an unusual air of maturity.

4. *Early autonomy.* In certain ways, many TCKs have an earlier sense of autonomy than peers at home. By their early teenage years, they literally know how to get around in this world and enjoy functioning in quite diverse ways and places. This may be a result of traveling alone to boarding school or having the

opportunity as young children to explore their surroundings freely by trikes, bikes, and hikes. A reliable, safe public transportation system in some countries adds to that sense of autonomy. Many TCKs in Japan take the train to school for two hours each way, every day in early elementary grades. When Paul lived in Australia, he took a ferry and bus by himself to school every day at age eleven, while his friends back in the States were going to the corner of their street and waiting for the school bus to pick them up.

Delayed Adolescence

Ironically, while there are many ways TCKs seem advanced for their years, there are also many ways they seem to lag far behind. In a survey of nearly seven hundred ATCKs, Dr. Ruth Hill Usem and Ann Baker Cottrell observed that it wasn't unusual for TCKs to go through a delayed adolescence, often between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-four, and sometimes even later.³ TCKs who have never heard the expression "delayed adolescence" have still sensed that they are definitely out of sync with their peers but can't figure out why.

The first question then is—What does *delayed adolescence* mean? The second is—Why is it a characteristic of many TCKs?

Every person must go through certain stages of life successfully in order to function as an independent adult. At least in Western culture, it is during the teenage years that several of these critical developmental steps take place. Each of these tasks relates to a core need of human beings, and going through this process properly is one of the major ways we form a clear picture of who we are—that is, our identity. Below are some of these critical developmental tasks.

1. *Establishing a personal sense of identity.* This is what we talked about earlier in this chapter: the need to figure out—Who am I? What makes me *me*? Where do I fit in my family and group?

2. *Establishing and maintaining strong relationships.* Young children may be bonded to their immediate families, but the teenage years are when relationships with the larger world of peers become critical.

3. *Developing competence in decision making.* Competent decision making is based on the assumption that the world is predictable and that we have some measure of control. In an ideal situation, adolescents learn to make decisions under the protection of the family and then move on to making their own choices.

4. *Achieving independence.* When we have the stability of knowing what the rules of family and culture are and have learned to make competent decisions, we can begin moving toward the independence of adulthood. We realize that not only can we make choices for ourselves, but we are also now accountable for the consequences of our decisions. We—not someone else—become responsible for whether or not we accomplish our goals.

For TCKs, this developmental process may be delayed for a number of reasons. The first one relates back to why cross-cultural transitions and high mobility *during developmental years* are so significant. If establishing a personal sense of identity is a major task of adolescence, how do we do it? One critical way is by taking the cultural rules learned during our childhood and testing them out during adolescence. Often this involves the type of direct challenges teenagers' parents around the world know only too well: Why do I have to be in by midnight? Who says I can't wear my hair like this? After the testing is a period of integrating the cultural practices and values we decide (often unconsciously) to keep. We then use these to make decisions about how we will live as autonomous adults rather than continuing to live as children guided by external, parental rules alone.

When the cultural rules are always changing, however, what happens to this process? This is, again, why the issues of cultural balance and mobility—and the age or ages when they occur—be-

come very important. Often, at the very time TCKs should be testing and internalizing the customs and values of whatever culture they've grown up in, that whole world, its familiar culture, and their relationship to it can change overnight with one plane ride. While peers in their new (and old) community are internalizing the rules of culture and beginning to move out with budding confidence, TCKs are still trying to figure out what the rules are. They aren't free to explore their personal gifts and talents because they're still preoccupied with what is or isn't appropriate behavior. Children who have to learn to juggle many sets of cultural rules at the same time have a different developmental experience from children growing up in one basically permanent, dominant culture that they regard as their own.

Some TCKs experience delayed development because of an extended compliance to cultural rules. In certain situations, TCKs are not as free as peers at home might be to test cultural rules during their teenage years. For instance, some TCKs need to comply with the status quo in a given situation for their own safety and acceptance. Instead of freedom to hang out with friends in shopping malls or on the street corners, many TCKs find themselves restricted, perhaps for safety reasons, to the military base or missionary compound. If they don't want to be kidnapped or robbed, they must obey regulations that might not be necessary in the home country. Also, some TCKs belong to organizations with fairly rigid rules of what its members (and their families) may and may not do. An embassy kid doing drugs or a missionary daughter who gets pregnant can result in a quick repatriation for the family. In such cases not only might the parents lose their jobs, but the TCKs might also lose what they consider to be home. This adds pressure to follow community standards longer than they might otherwise. When TCKs aren't as free as their friends in the home country might be to make some of the decisions about where they will go and what they will do, they must often wait to begin the normal adolescent process of testing parental and societal rules until a later period in life than usual—often to the shock of their parents.

As we saw with "The Delusion of Choice," the fact that life is often unpredictable makes it hard for many TCKs to make decisions. It's hard to make a competent decision if the basis used to decide something is always changing. Also as mentioned before, a TCK's lifestyle in many third culture communities is frequently dictated by the sponsoring agency. If the U.S. Navy assigns a parent for a six-month deployment, it doesn't matter what the TCK does or doesn't decide about it—that parent will be going. For these reasons and probably more, some TCKs don't learn to take responsibility for the direction of their lives. They are more prone to just "letting it happen."

TCKs who are separated from their parents during adolescence may not have the normal opportunity of challenging and testing parental values and choices as others do. Those who were separated from their parents in early years find themselves wanting to cling to parental nurturing to make up for early losses. They don't want to move into adulthood yet. Still others who have spent years away from home may idealize their parents in almost fantasy form. To challenge anything about their parents would call that dream into question. In situations such as these above, we've seen many TCKs delay the normal adolescent process of differentiating their identity from that of their parents until their late twenties, or even into their thirties.

Incompatible educational and social factors also contribute to at least the appearance of delayed adolescence. The Danish TCK who graduates from an American-based international school may return to Denmark and discover that she must do two more years at the secondary level before moving on to university. Suddenly she is grouped with those younger than herself and treated as their peer. This is especially traumatic if she's become accustomed to being seen as older than her years.

The social slowness discussed earlier can contribute to delayed adolescence by severely impeding the normal developmental task of establishing and maintaining strong relationships—particularly with peers and members of the opposite sex. Judith Gjoen, a Dutch

ATCK who grew up in Indonesia and is now a clinical counselor in Norway, wrote about the difficulties Europeans face on their return home after attending a predominantly international school.

Dating is very American. Scandinavian ways of interacting between the sexes are much more informal. There is much more flexibility in the sex roles. All boys learn to knit, all girls learn carpentry. Furthermore, a young person's identity is not so strongly connected to "dating status." From a Scandinavian perspective, the American way can be slightly overdone and hysterical. You are not prepared for the European way of being together [males and females] when you are socialized into an American system.⁴

The development of other social skills may also be delayed by not knowing the unwritten rules in the TCK's age group back home or in the new culture. How loud do you play music? How long do you talk on the phone? When do you engage in chitchat and when in deeper conversations? How do you behave with a friend of the opposite sex? When the rules around them have changed, TCKs sometimes retreat into isolation from others rather than try to cope.

Sometimes the very maturity noted earlier coupled with the sometimes more hidden delayed adolescence may lead to unforeseen problems. The initial attraction of a young TCK to older, more mature people may result in the choosing of an older marriage partner. Unfortunately, while the "early maturity" of the TCK may make such a match seem like a good idea, the deeper delay in development may scuttle the relationship later on. Sometimes the TCK isn't as ready for the responsibility or partnership of marriage as he or she appeared to be because the issues of personal identity, good decision making, and ability to build strong relationships haven't been resolved. Other times, as in any marriage, when the younger partner goes on to develop a deeper, truer maturity, the older spouse doesn't always continue to grow at the same rate. This can leave the younger partner disappointed, disillusioned, or dissatisfied.

Uneven maturity offers almost paradoxical benefits and challenges, as do all other TCK characteristics. The very reasons for some of the delays in adolescence are rooted in the greatest benefits of the third culture experience. Once they are aware of and understand the process, however, TCKs and/or their parents can guard against a certain smugness or sense of elitism they sometimes exhibit about how "mature" they are, while at the same time not panicking about areas where they still need to catch up. Given time, the maturity process will sort itself out into a more even flow as they, like others, move on through adolescence—delayed or not—into adulthood.

Delayed Adolescent Rebellion

A delayed adolescence is painful enough for the TCK who keeps wondering why he or she can't be like others, but even more painful—not only for TCKs but for their families as well—is a delayed adolescent rebellion, a time when the normal testing of rules either starts unexpectedly late or becomes exaggerated in an all-out, open defiance of nearly every possible convention the family and/or community holds dear and extends far beyond the adolescent years. Obviously, this type of rebellion also occurs in families that don't live abroad, but we want to look at some specific reasons for a delayed rebellion in some TCKs and then at why it often continues later than the normal teenage years.

1. *Extension of delayed adolescence.* In any journey to adulthood, there are always those who, in the process of testing the rules of their upbringing, decide they will avoid adults' expectations, no matter what. For whatever reasons, they assume an "anti-identity." This process of rebellion is often an offshoot of normal adolescent testing of cultural norms. When the time for that normal process is delayed for all the reasons mentioned above, the rebellion that often comes during that time will also be delayed.

2. *End of the need for compliance.* Sometimes it seems that young people who have been forced to comply with a fairly rigorous system throughout their teenage years decide to try everything they couldn't do before, once they are finally free from those external restraints. Rather than the usual process of testing rules a few at a time while still under a parent's watchful eye, they go off to university and seemingly "go off the deep end."

This form of rebellion may actually be a positive—though slightly misguided—move toward independence. In these situations, parents and others may need to understand the reason for the behavior and be patient in the process, while also pointing out (when possible) that some of this behavior may be counterproductive to the goal of independence they seek.

3. *Loneliness.* Sometimes the rebellion is a plea for help. We have met many TCKs who have tried to express to their parents that they need a home base; that they feel desperately lonely when vacation time comes and everyone else goes home and they stay in the dorm because their parents are still overseas and relatives in the home country seem like strangers; or that they are struggling in school and want to quit. But the parents never seem to hear. Instead, they send e-mail messages with platitudes like "Cheer up," "It will get better," or "Trust God"; or they explain once more why they need to stay in the job they're in.

Eventually, some TCKs finally scream, through their behavior, the message they have not been able to communicate verbally: "I need you to come home—to be near me." When they get arrested for drugs, or get pregnant, or try to commit suicide, they know their parents will come—at least for a short period. Unfortunately, the parents who didn't hear the earlier verbal or nonverbal messages often don't understand, even at this point of major rebellion, the deep loneliness and longing their child is experiencing. They judge the rebellion without

understanding the reason, and a deeper wedge than ever is driven between parent and child.

At that point, the TCK's behavior may become more extreme than before, and whatever form the rebellion takes—drugs, alcohol, workaholicism, some esoteric cause—becomes a way in itself to numb the pain of longing for some type of security and home base. The sad thing is that until the loneliness and longing are addressed, the TCK will stay walled off, often in very destructive behavior, fulfilling the worst prophecies made about him or her.

4. *Anger.* One of the common manifestations of unresolved grief, anger, may erupt in this time of rebellion and intensify it. The anger may be directed at parents, the system they've grown up in, their home country, God, or other targets. Unfortunately, once again people don't always stop to find out what's behind the explosion. The judgment and rejection of the TCK's experience increases the pain and leads to further anger and rebellion.

There is another situation that may be the cause of anger. TCKs who have spent many years physically apart from their parents may, as we said, unrealistically idealize them. As young adults, these TCKs begin to discover their own imperfections, realize their parents aren't perfect either, and not only become angry at the loss of their fantasy but also begin to blame their parents for the lack of perfection in *themselves*. "If I'd just lived a normal life or had better parents, I wouldn't be struggling the way I am now." While anger against parents for imperfections in ourselves is probably a normal part of the developmental process for everyone, TCK or not, when parents remain overseas, working through it can be difficult for all concerned.

The bottom line is that no matter what the reason for the anger, it's often turned against the parents and may be expressed in an almost punitive rebellion—the TCKs want to hurt those whom they feel hurt them.

A major problem with delayed adolescent rebellion, however, is that rebellion in the mid to late twenties may have a destructive effect far beyond that of teenage rebellion.

Pierre was a diplomat's son from Switzerland, who grew up in four different South American countries. During his early twenties, when friends asked how he had liked his nomadic lifestyle, he always replied, "Oh, I loved it! It never bothered me to pack up and move. We always knew there was something very exciting ahead. I've lived in nine different countries."

After marriage and three children, however, the story changed. Certain job situations didn't work out. He became tired of trying to find ways to support his wife and children. In the end, he became totally disenchanted with family life and the attendant responsibilities and simply walked away from everything he'd apparently valued before. "I've spent my life," he replied to those who questioned him, "doing what everyone else wanted me to do and I'm tired of it. Now I'm finally going to do whatever I want to do."

We stress that this type of rebellion is neither desirable nor necessary. The TCK as well as parents, family, and friends are all wounded in this process. Being aware of some of the reasons delayed rebellion occurs may sometimes prevent it, or it may help the family deal with delayed adolescence in its early stages, so they aren't held prisoners to destructive behavior. Perhaps the best preventive measure parents and other adults can take against this type of rebellion is to make sure, even in situations where their TCKs are raised in a strong organizational (or family) system, that there are opportunities for the children to make real choices in matters that don't compromise their safety or the agency's effectiveness. Most important, TCKs and ATCKs who read these lines and recognize themselves need to know they have the choice to take responsibility for their own actions and find help for their behavior rather than continuing to blame others for how awful their lives have been or become. (See chapter 18 for further help in this area.)

Identity in a "System"

TCKs who grow up in the subculture of the parents' sponsoring organization have a few extra factors to deal with in this process of establishing a sense of identity. Although in reality these issues are extensions of what we have already talked about, it's important to understand how growing up in what is often a fairly structured community can be one more factor in a TCK's developmental process.

There can be many strong benefits to living in a carefully defined system. In many situations, the whole system of the sponsoring organization serves to some extent as both family and community. It provides materially as a good parent might, with air travel paid for, housing provided, and perhaps special stores made available. In many cases, as mentioned earlier, it also provides specific guidance or regulations for behavior.

An organizational system is one of the places where the need for belonging can truly be fulfilled because there are clear demarcations of who does and doesn't belong. Some TCKs have a deeper sense of belonging to that community than they will ever have with any other group and feel secure within the well-ordered structure of their particular system.

Other TCKs, however, feel stifled by the organizational system in which they grew up. They may be straining at the bit to get out of what they see as the rigid policies of the system. They realize that they have had almost no choice in countless matters that have deeply affected their lives—such as when and where their parents moved, where they could go to school, how to behave in certain common circumstances, or how they could express their inner passions. They see their organization as an uncaring nemesis and they feel intense rage at a system that requires conformity to rules and regulations regardless of individual preferences. Some blame the system for ruining their lives.

Certainly anyone who grows up in a clearly defined system is very much aware of how the group expects its members to behave. Failure to conform brings great shame on the TCK or the whole

family. In many cases, the rules of these systems are a higher priority than the rules of the family, superseding decisions parents would normally make for their own children—such as when and where the children go to school.

What might make the difference in how or why an organizational system seems so positive for one person and restrictive for another?

At the risk of oversimplifying, and recognizing that there are many differences in how each agency may be run, we have identified four basic ways TCKs relate to the system in which they grew up—from the perspective of their own personal makeup, gifts, and personality. Understanding this picture can help us answer the above question.

1. *A TCK who fits the system.* Feeling comfortable is relatively easy for those whose personality and interests fit pretty well within the structure or rules of the system under which they have grown up. It might be an easygoing military kid who never seems to question authority, a pragmatic missionary kid who doesn't see the point of the fancy accessories in a Lexus, or a diplomat's kid who is an extrovert and thrives on meeting new people. They can go along with how life works in this system, and it doesn't conflict with how they think, what they like to do, what they want to be, or, most important, who they are by their very nature. There is room in this system to express who they are. It's a pretty good match.

2. *A TCK who doesn't fit the system but attempts to conform.* Other children don't match the system as well. Secretly, they prefer rap, while others around are denouncing it as junk. They long for color and beautiful decor but live in a plain, brown, adobe-type home within a system that feels it isn't spiritual to focus on worldly beauty. They find crowds of new people frightening, but they paste on a smile and act cordial to the dignitaries at never-ending receptions. They have learned not to reveal their feelings or desires because they learned early on that it was

wrong to feel or think that way. Instead of being able to explore the mystery of their own personality and set of gifts, they feel ashamed of this secret longing and try harder and harder to be what they perceive the system says they should be.

The major problem for members of this second group is that their sense of identity comes almost totally from an external system rather than from who they are deep within. If this type of conformity doesn't change at some point, people in this group may become more and more rigid over the years in adhering to the system that now defines them. They fear that if they let any part of it go, they will lose themselves because they don't know who they are without this structure to hold them together.

3. *A person who doesn't completely fit the system but doesn't realize (or at least doesn't seem to mind) it.* People in this group go ahead and listen to rap—not to be rebellious but because they like it. It doesn't occur to them—or worry them—that others might disapprove. If told that others might disapprove, they would likely respond, "That's O.K. If they do, I'll use my earphones." They stay in their rooms and read—not because they're rejecting the social scene, but because they love to read. They make decisions that don't quite match those of everyone else—not for the sake of being different but simply because they prefer the way they've chosen. They don't feel compelled to be exactly like everyone else but are happy to join with others when they do share an interest. Perhaps they have the inner security to be independent because many of their foundational needs for relationship and belonging have been well met in early years within their family. Maybe it just happens to be one of the attributes of their personality. Either way, they are discovering and operating from who they are inside rather than letting their environment define them.

4. *A person who doesn't fit the system, knows it, and spends his or her life proving it.* People in this fourth group like to think of themselves as members of the group just discussed, but they're

not. For whatever reasons, they learned early on that at least parts of them didn't fit the system. Perhaps they cried their first night at boarding school and were told to be brave—but they couldn't stop crying. Maybe they honestly wanted to know why things should be done one way rather than another but were given the unsatisfactory reply, "Because I said so." Still, the burning question inside wouldn't go away. Unfortunately, as they keep bumping into something that doesn't fit them inside, some TCKs finally decide—consciously or unconsciously—to throw out everything the system stands for. They'll be anything *but* that system.

The irony is that these outwardly rebellious TCKs actually get their identity from the very system they're rejecting. People who are determined to prove who they are *not* rarely go on to discover who they *are*.

It's important to remember that it's not wrong to be part of a strong organizational system. An organization is an efficient and necessary way of forming a community into functional groups, usually for the purpose of accomplishing a common goal. We can relate to it, be part of it, and even have some of our core needs of belonging met by it. But it's not, by itself, who we are.

Once that's understood, TCKs and ATCKs can take a better look at their group and determine which parts of the system do or don't fit with who they are, keeping in mind that they don't have to reject or retain an entire system.

By the time we sort through these many challenges, it's easy to wonder once again how any TCK can survive. Dirk, a German TCK who grew up in Taiwan and went to university in the United States, has learned to live with the challenge of many cultures and places by living fully in whichever one he is currently in while not denying the others are also part of his life. He uses a computer metaphor to describe this phenomenon.

I just build windows. When I'm in America, I activate the American window. When I'm in Germany, I activate the German window and the American window goes on the back burner—and so do the people in it.

In summary, when thinking about TCKs' identity and development issues, don't forget the interweaving of challenges with great benefits. TCKs find in their experience numerous opportunities for fulfilling their basic human needs in the most profound ways of all, and they often emerge with a very secure self-identity. We have seen that TCKs who dare to wrestle through the hard questions of life can develop a deep and solid sense of purpose and values that go deeper than those who are not forced to sort through such questions to the same degree. In addition, the exposure to philosophical, political, and social matters which are almost part and parcel of the TCK experience means there is every potential for substantive intellectual development. By its diversity alone, a TCK's world creates questions to ponder. This is one aspect of personhood that has every potential of being filled to overflowing for TCKs. Of all the TCKs we have met or worked with, very few would ever exchange the richness of their lives to avoid the inevitable challenges they have faced along the way.