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From Central Asia to the USA

I am what is known as a “Third Culture Kid.” who grew up in a culture other than their parents' culture, adapted to both cultures while adopting neither, and formed a new culture, a blend of the two, and so have no place to call my own. I have lived overseas my whole life, starting in Pakistan. Although I don't remember any of my time here, as our family was forced to leave when I was two, I am told frequently - about the time I was crawling around on the floor and my mom picked me up and pried a cockroach out of my mouth.

We moved to Kyrgyzstan when I was four. Ten days after our plane landed I was dropped off at Russian preschool or *dyetski sad*, knowing no Russian other than how to say, "I don't understand" and "where is the bathroom?" After a while I knew Russian. I cannot honestly say I ever really learned it: I just didn't speak it, and then suddenly I did. After *dyetski sad* I started school in what we later learned was the accelerated program at the best school in the city. Needless to say, I did not get very good grades (except in English class, where I knew more than the teacher, who nevertheless tried to correct my pronunciation). Most people with grades like mine got kicked out to make room for better students, but my sister and I were allowed to stay since we were the first Americans the school had ever had.

After Kyrgyzstan we lived in Kazakhstan and I attended a school for missionary kids, full of TCKs like me. I had to adjust to the English-speaking world, but after a few weeks of accidentally answering people in Russian and learning the English words for things like fractions, I got used to it. Clearly, going to an international school was quite an experience. Not many people can boast of having had a South African principal, teachers from South Korea, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Kazakhstan, Canada, and all parts of the United States, as well as classmates from all over the world. Some things could be a challenge: playing basketball Kazakhstan-style in the city league, which is basically the equivalent of rugby with a bouncing ball; always having to clarify whether you mean "soccer" or "football"; and having teachers and coaches that do not speak the same language as you, yet still managing just fine (almost). The already daunting task of organizing the high school formal with a five-person student council is only magnified in another country. Simply getting to school on public transportation is trying: leaving while it is still dark to get to school early for leadership development class, cramming onto a bus built for 30 with about 80 others, having it break down in the middle of the road, waiting for the repair man to slowly fix it, then getting off and walking the half-mile in the freezing cold from the bus stop.

A year ago I left all of that and came back to the United States, back to explaining where Kazakhstan is, and how it is that I can speak Russian but not come from Russia. The worst part is trying to answer the

question, "Aren't you glad to be back home?", as if this place I've spent less than a third of my life in can be home. But eventually, somehow, it is. It becomes home just as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan did. I have come to love it, but I know that wherever I live, there will always be another place that I miss.

Being a TCK obviously has its advantages and disadvantages. Few people see past the romance of travel, sight seeing, and exotic foods. But for me it is so much more than that, and while not all of it is good or fun, I am and always will be grateful for my unique experiences and life as a Third Culture Kid.

Sally Schupack November 2005

Guinea-Bissau to Germany; the Weinmeimer Family Re-entry Experience

Praise God we can say that we had **very positive re-entry experience**.

We went to Guinea-Bissau in 1993 with our first child Wera only 7 months old and we left Africa 11 years later with four kids between 5 and 11.

Life in Guinea-Bissau had never been really easy because it is such a poor country and many things just don't work or don't exist. But I had always told our children that **each country and place has good and positive things, but also those that are difficult and less positive**. We need to see and enjoy the good parts and with God's help make the best out of the difficult ones. So with this in mind we always tried to make home wherever we lived.

Before we left Africa for good we had two years to get used to the idea of going home. When the children heard about leaving for Germany they all wanted to go. However, they always want to go where they aren't living. **Their heart is divided between Africa and Germany** and wherever they are they miss half of it. After being in Germany for a while they commented that it wasn't that much better than Africa – just different.

When we prepared for leaving Guinea-Bissau we **started pretty early with sorting out all our stuff**. That was really tough for me: taking every piece of our belongings into my hand and having to decide what to do with it: Sell it – what price? Give it away – to whom? Take it home – packing it away now or later because it is still needed? Throw it away – when? What to leave till the last week because we need it? Etc. etc. Sometimes I wished we had lost everything during the civil war (which was in 1998/99) and it would just all be gone. Now I think all this packing helped me to grieve through the process of saying goodbye, but it wasn't easy then.

Praise God, he helped us to get everything sorted out at the right time. Some things were hard to leave behind: like our piece of furniture, which we had bought from Thomas' grandmother's inheritance. At least I took a photo to take it home. Wera had built a nice big doll's house and we really thought about taking it home by plane, but when we found another missionary family, who had been looking for a doll's house and were really happy to receive it, Wera decided to give it to them.

It was good to take time and travel to the interior as a family and **say goodbye to folks and places** where we had lived before.

Also as a family we used to regularly **speak about things and situations ahead**. The "Questions for times of transition" (see below) helped us a lot, although we never worked through all of them, but it gave

us an idea what to think and talk about. As a family we have **some rituals** such as our evening devotional and I am sure these things help especially in times of transition. We always tried to tell our children beforehand if anything special like travelling, visitors or special events were ahead. (Sometimes now they complain in Germany if they aren't informed well in advance when dad is travelling - which is far more often here than in Africa.)

I guess it was helpful for the children to **continue with their daily school-routine** till nearly the very end of our time in Bissau. Also to have fun in-between, e.g. when we threw all their old school-material away and they could "bathe" in a room full of paper!

When we sorted out their books and their toys we would do it all together and decide what to take and what to leave. If something was really important to one of them, we would take it. The last months we went shopping many times and they bought little **things to take home as remembrance**. Those were things like post-cards, wooden crafts, flip-flops and other typical things. Also each one of the children always had their rucksack whenever we travelled and they could pack in there whatever they wanted. It always included a bottle of water and some food for the journey, but beside this it was their choice what to take. I used to check with the little ones and advice them, but if they wanted to carry stones - well they could. Sometimes we had to compromise: When Jan wanted to take his big old remote-controlled car we promised him a new one, if he left his old one in Africa. He did.

Because of communication problems with the travel agency we finally had to fly two or three weeks earlier than planned. The church kindly did a **very nice farewell-service** for us on short notice and we were so impressed by their love and care for us. So by Sunday everyone knew we were leaving on Tuesday and on Monday we had lots and lots of visitors to say goodbye. Praise God we had watched another family's farewell six months earlier and so we were prepared for that stream of people and could really enjoy it. When our African friends visited they showed their appreciation for us and for the work, which we had done and that definitely helped to **leave with a good relationship**.

Although the earlier travel-date gave us a bit of pressure in Bissau, we could see Gods guidance in it, as the children only missed one week of the new school term in Germany. That definitely helped for their start in Germany. Also during our last two home-leaves we had been living at the same place and have made friends there – especially at church. So it was a bit of **coming home**.

Although all our suitcases arrived only a week later, we found big **parcels with winter-clothes** for the children, which our sending church and my mother in law had sent. So instead of going shopping the kids had to fit on piles of clothes (they didn't like it) and I was very happy that everyone found what was most needed then.

We really had expected problems at school. Wera went into the 7^{thi} grade and life at secondary school was a bit tough. She came into a big class with no free chair left for her and one teacher commented on her coming: "O dear, another pupil; the form is really big enough already." Not a nice welcome, but Wera not only managed to find her way but also had very good results in all subjects. Praise God. - Hanna and Jan went to the 3rd grade at primary school. As they were together in one class they could sit together and help one another. They were really welcomed and the teacher always showed them as the good example for quiet and well-behaved kids to their classmates 😊. Once they could even tell the class about their life in Africa bringing things from there along to school. Especially Hanna made friends and still has contact by mail and email to her classmates there.

After finishing that school term we had to **move again** due to our task at the German Sending Base. I had always presumed that this move would be more challenging than the one before, but even that went better than I had feared. Of course it took (and takes) time to find the right shops, doctors and offices and

it's incredible how many phone-calls, letters and emails it takes to change all your addresses, but we do feel at home here. Our four children enjoy having other kids so close and they also made friends at their new school.

Life is a challenge and even when you stay at one place you have to face changes. **Praise God who so wonderfully has helped us through all our transitions and who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.**

Questions for mobile families in transition.

I. before the departure

- 1. What do I like best about going to the passport country?*
- 2. What worries me most about the passport country?*
- 3. What do I expect to be different about the passport country?*
- 4. What are the likely difficulties that I could have in the passport country?*
- 5. What are the good things that could happen in the passport country?*
- 6. Who do I look forward to seeing? How have they changed since I last saw them?*
- 7. How can I make new friends?*
- 8. How has my passport country changed since I have been here?*
- 9. What will people in my passport country find strange or funny about me?*
- 10. What can I do when I don't understand a situation?*
- 11. What can I do when I have a problem?*
- 12. What feelings do I have about saying good bye?*
- 13. Who will I miss during my home leave?*
- 14. What am I going to miss about my host country?*
- 15. What are the different ways of being polite and courteous in the passport country?*

II. One week after arriving in the passport country

- 1. What's my best experience back here? Why?*
- 2. What has been the most difficult back here? Why?*
- 3. Are we financially better or worse off than before?*
- 4. What have I experienced that people here haven't experienced?*
- 5. How are my values different to those of people here?*
- 6. Who are my friends?*
- 7. Do I feel that I belong to a group?*
- 8. Name things that others do that you don't understand.*
- 9. Name some things that make you happy.*
- 10. It annoys me if people.....*
- 11. Did I expect that I would be treated differently or in any special way here? How?*
- 12. Did I expect people to be interested in my experiences? Are they interested?*
- 13. Are things better or worse than I expected?*
- 14. Do I see things realistically?*
- 15. How do I feel about living here now?*
- 16. How do I feel about the community of people here?*
- 17. The best thing in school is?*
- 18. The worst thing about school is?*
- 19. The best day of the week for me is....., because....*

(If you'd like this in the original German, just contact us on SteveGill@mkea.freeseve.co.uk)

From the Philippines to Singapore

This article is put together using extracts from the testimony of a Singaporean MK just a few months after re-entry to Singapore. Every effort has been made to maintain the original thrust and intent of the testimony. It has been reprinted from the WEC MK Manual published in 2002.

It has been three years and three months since I left my country of origin to become a Singaporean. I am a typical MK, born in Japan and attended Chefoo School in Japan for the first half of my life. Then I went to Faith Academy in the Philippines, flying home during the holidays. That continued until I was sixteen years old, when I was uprooted and brought to Singapore.

Every effort was made to prepare the MKs at Faith Academy for the 're-entry experience'. After all that preparation, re-entry was not even a bit dramatic. Teenagers did not notice if I was any different from them, apart from the minor details ('where did you get that cute accent?') Grown-ups did not recognise me as Mel and Sylvia's kid, and anyway, I was past the age where they pinch your cheeks and cluck, 'my, how you've grown!' (That was a relief)

I guess we MKs were spoilt with a lot of attention when on the field, so I was a bit surprised that no one cared where I had been for the last sixteen years. I am not saying that we were ignored. A lot of people came to our aid, helping us with deciding on schools, moving house and even giving us extra tuition in a few things to prepare us for the new school system (ugh). The Sunday school students befriended me, showed me around and made me feel at home. So, the transition was all very smooth.

Culture shock itself is not a big deal here as I suppose it might have been if I had gone to a Western country. After all, I have been in Asia all my life and one country is not so different from the others. Drugs, drinking, violence and sex - I had been heavily warned about but found them to be non-issues among Singapore's high school student population. I found myself to have more in common with Singaporeans than I did with people in Faith Academy where the majority of the students were American. Even so, there are times I felt alone and unique. Of course, no one is exempt from the occasional cultural muddle and I had my fair share. *Singlish* was also a bit of a problem but even worse was the Chinese language which people tend to automatically switch to in mid-conversations.

I also have to admit that Singaporeans are much more filial and obedient to parents than me due to the difference in Western and Chinese thinking. I also think that swearing is wrong. My friends don't even consider what they say to be swear words because they use them so often. Commitment is very important with all my friends and they tend to be very dedicated to whatever they participate in. I had never really thought about it before. It all boils down to different upbringing.

Three months after arrival school started. That was a whole new experience in itself. I was sucked in by the intensity of everything; activities, friends, outings, sports, clubs... Schoolwork, of course, was the last thing on my priority list. Luckily for me, that was the general attitude of the student population so we were all in the same boat. I found to my surprise that the academic standard was not as high as they made it out to be and so did not have a big problem keeping up, except with French which I particularly disliked. Anyway, it was a fast, busy and fun two years. I found school was time consuming - I guess I should have exercised some restraint in the amount of activities I took upon myself. But that is hard when you are a teenager.

Well, that is all over now, I sat for my 'A' levels ... and the results were amazing. All credit for that should go to God and the excellent educational foundation I got overseas. I am really lucky I went to the schools I

did because aside from studies, I learned such a lot about the world as well as got to experience so many things that some people can only dream of.

People say things all the time about how ‘they love their children too much to give them up’ and send them away from home. It makes me angry, because I know mine love God enough to put Him first and they love me and my brother enough to do what was best for us. I am proud of being an MK. It distinguishes me from all my peers even though outwardly we all act the same. So, it is a very high distinction. God has blessed me richly.

Contact us with your story of re-entry if you would like to share your experiences (good, bad or indifferent!) with the wider Educare readership.

Something for your reactions and comments???????

A question has been buzzing in a gentle sort of way in the back of my mind that I wondered if I could bounce off you – or your readership if you think it’s of interest. It’s whether MKs tend to be less ‘sophisticated’ than their home-based peers? And does this matter? Is there an age at which it starts to matter?

What set me thinking was that our two boys, who are 11 and 6, play together happily almost the whole time (Lego and imaginative games, or drawing 4WD vehicles!). I really appreciate the qualities in our older son that make him such a good companion for his younger brother. But I wonder what some of his friends at home would make of it! Does that matter? Our daughter is 9 and loves her one special doll dearly. Again, I value the qualities in her that make her a caring person. But I wonder how many of her peers still play with dolls. There are no other MKs in Bangui.

As I see it, the freedom to have a longer childhood and not be forced to grow up by the world and its standards is a great plus of the missionary life. But I don’t want my kids laughed at by others back home!

Judith Sawers, Bangui

Our thoughts about this issue

We would agree that many MKs are less sophisticated and that it is great that they are allowed to be children rather than forced into a pseudo-mature, “streetwise” mould by peer pressure and the media. It does depend where they are; we regularly hear from families working in the West where all of the technology and mod-cons of the “developed” world are available, and the children are exposed to similar levels of negative peer pressure and media influence that they would encounter in the passport country. The ever-increasing availability of the internet and satellite television is changing the picture, even in some isolated places. Some would argue that it helps to keep in touch and be aware of the world outside, while others lament the erosion of the simplicity that came from not having to cope with the media. Even if the parents choose to have less media contact, many children will come across increased exposure and changing attitudes in school from other TCKs who are their classmates.

In West Africa we saw a big difference between TCKs who grew up in bush towns and villages compared to the city kids where there is a sizeable expat and MK population. The rural children were generally less sophisticated as described above and less complicated. It was interesting to observe the different reactions to certain facets of African life, in that the children from small towns and villages coped much better with basic conditions and complained much less (if at all) than the city children. To me the flip side of less sophistication is a more caring and more mature child. One illustration is of a 13-year old who was

being taught about “night-life” as part of a geography unit on tourism. He had not heard of the clubbing scene, the sort of ‘night life’ experienced in the West. Consequently, his answers about owls and badgers indicated a lack of “streetwise” indoctrination which he now finds comical, yet the same boy had experienced evacuation, very basic living conditions and much more and so had (and still has) a great empathy with the poor and suffering. In our preparation courses for new workers we often use the catchphrase “less sophisticated, more mature” as one of the potential advantages of growing up as a TCK.

Re-entry for them though can be thornier as the gap between what they know now and what they will go to is wider, so good re-entry preparation is vital. Families need to plan well in advance. Those from more isolated placements and/or situations where they are more integrated with the host country need to gradually phase in more exposure to passport country influences as the children get older and approach the re-entry time.

We would really like to hear your reactions and your thoughts on this issue, so please e-mail us on SteveGill@mkea.freereserve.co.uk

Crisis re-entry and helping families through

Sudden removal from the field can happen for a variety of reasons: illness, terrorist activities, expulsion or unexpected visa refusal, military conflict and political instability, family reasons and many more. This article is by Jean Barnicoat and continues our series on living with restrictions and their consequences. (Jean was our predecessor in the WEC International MK Office)

Tasks of the helper

One of the first tasks of those trying to assist people is to try to stabilise the situation and the person or family as quickly as possible. If possible, the person should be given some clear reasons as to why this happened, so they can make sense of it. Any time there is a sudden disruption, the natural response is to review the event again and again. People wonder if they could have done something differently. Was there something they didn't understand? It's a natural part of the process.

A second task is to restore some sense of control or predictability. At any time when there is a sudden loss, particularly if it's a violation of the person in some way, there is a tremendous sense that he or she has lost control and that life has become completely unpredictable.

The third task is to determine what the person's practical needs are so that they can begin a good process of transition that will lead to a successful outcome from the sudden removal.

Crisis vs. transition

In order to understand sudden removal, we need to examine two particular areas. One is the nature of crisis, and the other is the nature of transition. The two are very closely related, yet very different. Crisis is what begins the process that is initiated by the unexpected. Transition is what completes a normal human process. The crisis is the trigger; the transition is the completion.

Sudden removal is not very different from other types of crisis. It is important to understand that the severity of the crisis is not determined by the objective nature of the event itself, but by people's interpretation of the event. One couple from SE Asia who lost their entire household twice did not particularly interpret their loss as a severe crisis. They were able to adapt to it as within the normal range

of events. Other people might return from home leave and find some important items missing, and it's a crisis. It's the interpretation of the event, not the event itself that makes the difference.

In a crisis such as a sudden removal from the field, however, things seem to continue as normal and then are suddenly just closed off. You feel lost because you don't know how to predict things or how to control or influence what happens. There is a gap between the time your ongoing activities come to a sudden halt and the time you can pick up and begin to make a more orderly transition. That in-between period of time is very critical in helping the person who has experienced sudden loss.

There are common features associated with sudden removal; disruption and its effects, loss, requirement for adaptation and the fact that the experience may produce growth. The important thing to remember when assisting someone who has experienced sudden removal is the sense of loss - no matter what is the cause of removal. There is loss of much more than just the work. There is the deeply personal loss of a sense of esteem. There is the loss of hope. There may be the loss of confidence, even the loss of competency, or inner stability. The more people are prepared by grounding themselves in the Word, the easier they will be able to make the required adaptation.

We all have things happen to us in our lives - beautiful things, terrible things, and we need to think about them and process them. While they are happening there isn't the time to ponder them. We need to sort them out, arrange them on the shelves of our minds. Someone who has been on the mission field and experiences sudden removal needs the time to review those experiences - to recapitulate the memories and arrange them on the shelves of the mind.

The most critical task in helping someone who has been suddenly removed from the field is to listen to their pain, to hear their story. We need to be patient with their process and to be there in such a way that we become Christ's person for their gradual steps toward restoration. Many of us, unfortunately, want people to be busy and accomplish things when what they need most is simply somebody who will be there and listen and help them through the crisis and transitional process.

First and foremost, our task for those who have been suddenly removed from the field is a relational one. In a relational context, whether through a programme or an individual, we can help them grapple with some of the spiritual or theological questions they inevitably ask. We can help meet practical needs and thereby enhance the process of restoration. We can help to meet needs for meaning and understanding. Finally, we can help them be restored.

Reference article

1. Sudden Removal from the Field; Wyckstrom; pages 111ff Raising Resilient MKs, ACSI; mail order only from ACSI at www.acsi.org

General re-entry reference material

1. The Art of Coming Home; Storti; NBI publishers; ISBN 1 85788 2970
2. Families on the move; Knell; Monarch; ISBN 1 85424 5236 (UK) 08254 60182 (USA)
3. Third Culture Kids; Pollock & Van Reken; NBI publishers; ISBN 1 85788 2954

(All 3 are easily available from bookshops or from Amazon.)

Educare is a ministry of WEC International; Reaching the unreached for Jesus