

Arriving Well

**STORIES ABOUT IDENTITY,
BELONGING, AND REDISCOVERING
HOME AFTER LIVING ABROAD**

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Foreword

Culture shock and reverse culture shock are very different experiences, but there is one particular difference, almost never acknowledged or addressed, that makes re-entry an especially troubling proposition: There is no Plan B.

Culture shock is ultimately temporary and time-limited; you go abroad for a predetermined period of time, and it is understood that at the end of that period, you will go home. Among other things, this means that no matter how hard adjusting to and living in the new culture is, no matter how severe your case of culture shock, the clock is ticking and the end of your expat sojourn is always in sight. You just have to hold on a little longer. Or, in the worst case, if the clock just isn't ticking fast enough, you always have the option of quitting early and going back home.

For the majority of returnees, re-entry is not like that. To be sure, many folks do manage to go back overseas (no less than three of the contributors to this volume did), but the majority do not. For these folks, re-entry is for good. Whether you're readjusting comfortably or not, this is where you're going to spend the rest of your life. So if you're struggling and unhappy back home—and if returning abroad isn't an option for you—it's

not a matter of holding on until the clock runs out and you get to move on. This clock doesn't run out.

My guess is most repats are not consciously aware of this—I don't remember ever having that thought—but surely it must help explain the otherwise curious fact whereby most repats, having successfully negotiated one major life change—culture shock—suddenly doubt their ability to negotiate another one: re-entry. Why doesn't having had a successful overseas experience give repats more confidence to face re-entry? Part of the answer must be that at some level repats sense that due to the absence of any realistic alternative, the stakes of failing at re-entry are much higher.

For those many folks who don't go back overseas, I think the finality of re-entry—combined with being caught off guard by the whole experience—also explains why these repats are much more anxious during the early weeks of coming home than they ever were during the early weeks overseas. To put it another way, there is an urgency about re-entry, a drive to adjust and be content as soon as possible, that's just not there for most people when they first arrive overseas. They want to adjust to the foreign culture, of course, and settle into their new life abroad, but they're not desperate.

Arriving Well is a helpful cure for returnee anxiety. As the stories in this collection show, most repats do just fine. You don't have to worry that there is no Plan B, in other words, because Plan A, successful readjustment, is well within your grasp. You will make your peace with home in your own unique way, as these stories demonstrate, but you will cope. And then you will thrive.

Craig Storti, author of *The Art of Coming Home* and *Why Travel Matters*

Introduction

"I wish I'd met you three years ago!"

We ([Cate](#), [Doreen](#) and [Helen](#)) hear this comment frequently when discussing re-entry with people we've recently met who have returned home after living overseas. It can feel totally disorientating. People often muddle through the process, wondering if they're alone in feeling like they're going insane!

The term "re-entry" is used to describe the process of returning and adjusting to life in your passport country. It originally came from the idea of a spacecraft re-entering the earth's orbit. We love that picture—it sums up the concept perfectly. You left your own planet and experienced new things; you've become someone different in ways that you couldn't have imagined; and now you're returning, and there will be some burn-up during the re-entry—it's what happens when you enter the atmosphere of a planet. Things that you had with you get lost along the way. Things you carried with you from the past into your new life get honed and changed. You are basically the same person who went away and yet fundamentally, totally different. And so is your "home."

"Arriving well" after living overseas is a subject that's commonly overlooked, misunderstood, downplayed and dismissed. Re-entry into our native countries is often approached as if it were

a simple logistical challenge, and not the physical, emotional and mental journey it really is. It is now fully understood and expected that companies will provide cross-cultural orientation for employees going abroad on assignment. However for the most part, re-entry coaching is a relatively new field—it's still fairly rare to receive more than just logistical help when going home. Hence people tend to struggle through, learning by trial and error.

Often people are very surprised by how significantly they've changed while they were gone. You have enjoyed transformation while overseas. And then you might find yourself in a new city in your old country, which looks massively different. Or you may be back in your old backyard, and it seems like nothing has changed at all. Friends and family may feel like strangers. The culture that was once so familiar has become alien. And home has morphed—you probably created a new sense of home where you were. Now it seems indefinable and vague—or possibly not to be found at all.

We know for a fact that you are not alone, and that there are many ways to survive—and, indeed, thrive—in re-entry. Each story in this book is an unrepeatable experiment. These short, pithy and sometimes gut-wrenching stories from our authors reveal that re-entry can knock you off balance and yet be full of personal growth. There is no single “right” way to return. In creating this book we sought out a variety of stories that address some of the ups and downs, challenges and triumphs that can occur while in re-entry. As you read, we hope you'll take away some gold nuggets as to how others have learned to embrace the process.

Together we three coaches have lived in eleven countries over a total of forty-two years combined, and have coached others through re-entry for ten years. We believe that re-entry can be

an inspirational journey of personal growth that can catapult us to new lives that are as meaningful, enjoyable and transformational as our lives overseas.

We suggest that you read the coaching commentary at the end of each story, answer the questions for yourself and apply them to your unique journey. Please visit our websites, take advantage of all the complimentary content we produce and join our Facebook groups for more help with your re-entry.

Doreen Cumberford, Helen Watts & Cate Brubaker

Editorial note: You'll notice both American English ("realize") and British English ("realise") variants throughout the book. We made a conscious decision to keep the spelling from each writer's native country, but to make the punctuation consistent throughout the book, so it wouldn't be too distracting.

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CHAPTER 1

Blessings Along the River

DEIDRA RAZZAQUE

“Returning home is not something we do once, or even every time we come back from a trip. It becomes a continual, daily decision to be where we are, when we could choose to be elsewhere.”

From the time I was small, I felt like I belonged in the rest of the world more than I belonged at “home.” Home during my childhood was the suburbs of Detroit, where I was one of only two little brown girls on my street. All the houses looked the same, with their polite brick facades and leafy trees out front. It was a calm setting but there was often mayhem in my heart, because I felt so different from everyone around me.

The rest of the world beckoned and soothed me, though. My father was from a village in Bangladesh, where I knew that the alphabet swirled around itself like fast-growing ivy. Where there were chickens behind the houses, and kids laying in hammocks. Where rain pounded so loudly against tin roofs that no one bothered talking.

My mother’s parents were from Slovenia. My grandmother

taught me Slovene nursery rhymes and old songs. We spent hours painstakingly rolling out thin potica dough across the heavy kitchen table.

So from a young age, I thought of the rest of the world as home, and I knew that I would feel most at home as a traveler. I traipsed across the world in my imagination, through the books I read and through a faded globe.

Eventually I did travel, mainly in Europe and South America, and it felt as magical as I had hoped it would. During college, I lived in central Spain, with its gnarled olive trees surrounded by ancient Roman walls, and storks bravely building their nests in thirteenth-century towers. I learned to eat dinner at midnight, and was amazed that my smiling host mother truly expected me to go out dancing until six in the morning.

Later, I joined the Peace Corps in Costa Rica. I made my way to the heat-drenched forests of the Caribbean coast and worked in youth development, helping young people keep themselves safe and create lives in which they could flourish. My first week in town, I hiked to a waterfall with a sweet local man who could climb and slash his way through jungle trees as easily as I could say my own name. We talked and laughed, and two years later, I married him. We stayed in Costa Rica for ten years. Today my husband, our two children and I make our home in Vermont. My concept of home still includes the vast world, but it also includes feeling comfortable in this place where I've chosen to live—and in my own skin.

Hundreds of years ago, the Abenaki people called the place where I live now "The Lost River," or "The River of the Lonely Way," depending on your translation. But two rivers flow together here. They are not lost at all, and the way for me has not been lonely. Canoeing and swimming in these rivers, and

walking along their shores, has taught me to see and think in new ways. Each year here, when spring thaws the land, both of these rivers are different than they were before. Some years they leave sandy beaches along their shores; others, there are only huge boulders bridging solid land with water.

Learning to feel at home where I am, while the songs of other places echo in my head, has been like navigating an ever-changing river. There is work to do. Sometimes I need to rest. And there are always new wonders to behold.

Water is not land

What you do in water is different than what you do on land. Swimming is not walking, and floating is not standing. If you choose the water you must use different skills than you would use on land. While you gain something, you leave other things behind.

For those of us who are passionate about travel and living in environments that move us beyond our comfort zones, returning home is not something we do once, or even every time we come back from a trip. It becomes a continual, daily decision to be where we are, when we could choose to be elsewhere.

I notice this decision-making most in myself when I'm faced with what feel like dichotomies between where I am and where I've been. In Vermont, when a friend says she'll meet me for lunch at noon, noon is what she means. I know this, so I leave my house at eleven forty-five and arrive at the restaurant by noon. It feels easy and expected.

But while I'm walking into that Vermont restaurant, there's often a movie playing in my mind: I see myself waiting in a

restaurant the first time I planned to meet a Costa Rican friend for lunch. I feel kind of silly sitting there alone, because my friend has not arrived. I wait and wait. I start to think that the language must have tripped me up. I must have misunderstood, and my friend is not coming. But the waitress says I should wait, and so I do. Finally, over an hour after the time we'd planned to meet, my friend shows up with a smile and no excuse for being late. I'm confused, but soon after I start to notice that Costa Ricans almost always arrive an hour later than planned. I discover that there's actually a name for this—Tico Time, they call it.

At first, Tico Time baffled and annoyed me. Later, when I was trying to organize work meetings, it sometimes frustrated me to the point of tears. And later still, when the rhythm of life in my town had lulled me, Tico Time became so ingrained in me that I was always late myself. And truly, I couldn't even think of it as late anymore—it was the understood, expected time.

So now, Costa Rican time and Vermont time are like land and water. Even though my comfort in one came easily, and comfort in the other was hard-earned, I now feel comfortable in both. But one is not the other. In order to thrive, I need to remember my environment, and choose the actions that fit.

In the water you are wet

Even when we've made a conscious decision about where we'll live or how we'll act, it doesn't always feel like a decision. Once you've learned a new way of being, you can't unlearn it. Once you've gone and returned, you can't unknow what you discovered on your journey.

Before I lived in Costa Rica, I didn't appreciate my body. Too big, too curvy, too brown, I thought that I fit neither the stereotypes

of beauty I saw in US media nor my family's or classmates' opinions of who was beautiful.

The first day I stepped off the bus in Talamanca, I was struck by how many women looked like me. They looked like me, and they were wearing vibrant, gleaming clothes that celebrated their exuberant personalities, their curves, and the space they occupied. I took a deep breath and felt all of those skinny-celebrating images I'd been fiercely holding onto but could never embody clatter to the ground. I began to breathe differently, and to feel as beautiful as the women around me.

One thing that made me nervous when I returned to the US was the idea of once again feeling less than beautiful. And it's true that sometimes it still feels more challenging for me to accept myself here.

But now I know that my challenge is less about the messages I receive today and more about old beliefs that are no longer true for me. There are many standards of beauty, even in this country. And wherever I live, I get to choose which standards I accept and uphold. Because I learned to step outside of those beliefs that kept me looking down and feeling bad about myself, I can think and act in ways that nurture me, wherever I am.

Ecosystem

In a river, the water does not exist on its own. Its chemical makeup, its appearance, even its course would be different without the fish, the beavers, the myriad other creatures that inhabit it.

Having a spouse from a country other than my own means that we regularly clarify our perceptions and negotiate our actions in ways that friends with spouses from the same culture don't

need to. Even after ten years in the United States, even though my Costa Rican husband feels comfortable here, there are ways in which “home” for me is always time abroad for my husband. Daily, in order to be together in one place and to raise our children together, we navigate questions of identity and cultural values. And we have to balance our decisions so that they work for all of us, not just one of us.

In Michigan, I grew up believing that eating dinner as a family was one of the most important things we did. And today in Vermont, I still hear this, often coupled with dire warnings that if we don’t do this one particular thing, our children won’t confide in us and our family will disintegrate.

But when my husband and his seven siblings were growing up, large pots of food were usually left simmering on the fire. People came home from work and school at different times, and each person ate when he or she felt hungry. For my husband, eating a meal, alone or with others, is mainly about fulfilling a physical need. He feels none of the pressure that I often put on myself to use the meals I’ve created and the time we spend eating them to show love and to bond—because he does those things in other ways.

So in our home today, we juggle these two ways of thinking about meals—sometimes we eat together as a family, and sometimes we don’t. Our children are learning early that they can look at more than one way to do something and make choices that are right for them.

Different in different seasons

There are so many moods to a river. Force, depth, color, temperature—all of these affect the appearance and the feeling of being on water. The river shapes the things around it. And

the things around it fall or drift into the water, changing it in turn.

Sometimes I'm delighted to be where I am. I feel peaceful, lucky, and like I belong. But sometimes I feel tired of my tiny community, or disgusted or embarrassed by US policies and overwhelmed by the weight of history.

I know some people who immediately leave when they feel fed up with a place. But I've found that, for me, there are benefits to wading through the challenging feelings of not wanting to be where I am. I have to ask myself hard questions, and I discover resources that I'd forgotten I have. Being unhappy with outward circumstances usually leads me, eventually, to greater inner understanding, creativity and humor. Sometimes that might result in making art or writing. Sometimes it leads me to plan a community event or take action regarding a cause that's important to me.

Having lived abroad and seen my country at least partially through the eyes of others means that I no longer take things here for granted. I see double: I see the way things looked before I left home, and the way they look after time away.

Properties of water

We can see and feel water flowing. We know the coldness of ice. But we don't often think of the water vapor that hovers, how it condenses and shifts. And on a river, we don't always know exactly what we're looking at. How solid is a frozen spot? How deep is a swimming hole?

Returning home has helped me become more patient with experiences and feelings that aren't easily shared or understood. When people hear that I've lived in Costa Rica,

they usually talk on and on about what a paradise it is, and tell me that they can't believe I didn't stay. Even if they have traveled there, the people who rave like this rarely recognize that Costa Rica, like every other place, is complex—yes, there is great beauty, but there are also challenging social and familial issues that made my husband and me choose to raise our children elsewhere. During these conversations, I need to be patient with the people I'm talking with—and with my own competing feelings about the choices I've made.

Flow

Change is the nature of a river. The current is always shifting something. One spot might be calm, the water barely moving. In another place, the water surges over rapids and pummels the shore. Adaptation is just what happens on a river.

Having lived abroad and come home again has increased my awareness that there is always another way to do practically anything. This awareness means that, although I can't always control what happens, I am responsible for my life. I must take ownership of the choices I make. Even, or maybe especially, when I have mixed feelings about those choices.

In some ways, moving to where I live now and settling here has been like coming full circle. For one thing, my own kids are cute and brown, and we live in the second-whitest state in the nation. When I realized how this mimicked the neighborhood where I grew up, I worried that my children would feel as isolated as I did when I was a child. But we're in a community that values, and actually gets excited about, diversity in many forms. So my family and I talk and learn about ourselves and the world. My children's experiences of place and culture are different from mine.

Sometimes I consider traveling full-time. There's a part of me that would be kicking up her heels and whooping for joy if I did that. But I choose not to, because I want my kids to know what it's like to put down roots and know people, and a place, for a long time. I want them to know what it's like to be part of a community as it changes, and as they change.

So this is where I am now. It's where the current has brought me.

Reflection

The shimmer of light on the water changes the quality of everything the water reflects. When I study the image of trees in the water, what I see makes me look differently at the actual trees along the shore.

For me, re-entry is another word for mindfulness. Coming home after years abroad has taught me to be both actor and witness in my life, to notice what I'm thinking and feeling, to gauge the energy in a room, to savor each experience. Like an art historian reading a painting, I notice how what happened before is woven into this moment.

The ebb and flow of traveling and coming home again have increased my gratitude. What I've experienced before infuses my love for where I am now.

Long ago, Deidra K. Razzaque broke open a cookie whose fortune read, "You are the joymaker." She aims to incorporate that idea into her daily life, her travels and her work as a writer, an artist, a transformative travel coach with At Home in the World and a trainer for the University of Vermont.

Mini Coaching from Cate, Helen & Doreen

Deidra's story beautifully raises two important points about re-entry. First, arriving well isn't a one-and-done experience. Rather, it's a continual, daily decision to be open to learning and to harness opportunities for growth. Second, there are tremendous benefits to intentionally processing the challenging feelings of not wanting to be where you currently are. Doing so can lead to a greater inner understanding and peace, as well as stronger relationships and a clearer path forward.

Reflection questions:

- What am I learning in re-entry?
- How am I growing?
- What might I be resisting?

[Click here](#) for more re-entry help and resources.

CHAPTER 2

Why I Should Have Won Repatriation

JERRY JONES

“Moving back was more than just a location change and the adjustments that come with it. For me, living abroad had become a huge piece of my identity.”

Going “home” was one of the most successful failures of my life.

Not that repatriation is a competition, but had it been the summer I moved back, I would have been a shoo-in for the win.

I had two clear advantages.

One, I teach this stuff. For several years before we even considered moving back, it was my job (literally) to help people leave well. Every spring, when the expats were getting ready to exit in herds, I would travel around China and help people build a solid process for “leaving and landing well.” I got to hear

their hearts and watch as story after story unfolded. I was well-versed in the full range of “normal” emotions and the power of intentional eye contact. I paid extra-close attention as I did my rounds the year it was our turn, and if anyone in the world could ever be ready to do this right, it should have been me.

My second advantage was that we had great people waiting on the other side. I call them “safe havens” when I teach about this and I spend a lot of time trying to pound the significance of this one thought into repatriating brains.

“You need people. People who get you. People who don’t even smirk when you ask the stupidest questions and who will stand in the gap between you and the ‘normal’ masses who don’t understand why you’re melting down in the cereal aisle.”

Our havens were the safest. They were, in fact, the best I’ve ever seen.

We had met the Kennedys at our pre-field training three weeks before we’d both moved to China. We went through the messiness of becoming foreigners on the same timeline but in different cities. We shared American Thanksgivings together and connected at any chance we got. They had returned to the US after three years, which put their repatriation about four years ahead of ours. They knew how we felt but they were stable. They had muddled through their own messy stuff and were prepared to walk with us through ours.

Safe havens like that are a rare species.

They invited us to come live in their city (a city we’d never even visited before) and find community (the kind we’d had in China). They constantly asked what we needed. They helped me look for work and ultimately gave me a job.

Did you catch that?! My friend gave me a job in the company he had built from the ground up.

Tip of the iceberg.

They rented an apartment for us, paid the lease for five months, stocked it with furniture, food, silverware and all of the other simple necessities that you don't even think about until you need them. They even hung our family picture on the wall so we would instantly feel "home." They met us at the airport with homemade "Welcome" signs (made specifically for every member of our family, including the cat). They made it crystal clear that they were on call around the clock but wanted to give us all the space we needed to breathe, adapt and melt down in the cereal aisle.

Seriously. It never happens like this. I know because I teach this stuff—but you can't even teach it like this.

We were the hopefuls—favored to win repatriation by a landslide. The move "home," for us, was smooth. Maybe as smooth as it could possibly be.

It was painful though, to discover that "smooth" and "easy" are not the same thing.

The inevitability of incompetence

I still remember the conversation we had on Dan's couch, because it was one of those moments that gets tattooed on your brain. I was taking full advantage of the offer to stress out, fall apart and verbally vomit and he was smirklessly holding up his end of the bargain.

I whined, "This is the part of transition that I hate. For the first time in seven years I can read fluently. I can say words

that people understand without fake sign language. I'm home, for crying out loud, but I can't find the grocery store unless someone shows me the way.

I was feeling surprisingly claustrophobic. It all made perfect sense (on a technical level), but somewhere along the line I had convinced myself that it wasn't supposed to apply to me. If you know it's coming you should be exempt, right? If you've got your safe havens, you should be good.

I didn't even really have words to describe the frustration, but Dan was there for that, too.

"It's hard to feel incompetent, isn't it?"

Yep. That's the word. It echoed for a while. Maybe it still does.

I despised feeling incompetent, but at least in China it had been expected. One look at my face set the bar incredibly low and anything I did to surpass that was met with shock and high praise. My actual competence was miserably lacking, but I could always play the foreigner card.

This new relationship with incompetence was stretching me. I didn't like it. Not one bit.

A Foot in Two Worlds

I can't count the number of people I've warned about going home for Christmas in their first year abroad.

It's such a false reality.

Right smack-dab in the middle of the worst part of adjusting to being an incompetent foreigner, people choose to fly home for two weeks to be in a place where all the people they've been

missing the most throw gifts and money at them, feed them ridiculous amounts of their favorite foods, relive all their best childhood memories with them and sing songs about faith, joy and happiness with jingle bells and flashing lights.

Then they go to the airport and fly back to incompetence.

It doesn't always kill their adjustment, but it definitely stretches it out. Transition just takes longer when you take breaks along the way.

Something else I teach but still had to learn.

I gave up my cross-cultural training business when I left China, but held on to one contract that allowed me to go back twice a year. Each trip was a whirlwind: six cities in two weeks, a full-on, nonstop people extravaganza from morning 'til night.

I got to relive all my favorite things about China and talk every day with people who were experiencing it for the first time.

It was Christmas . . . twice a year.

I was loving my new American life but really mourning my life abroad. Every time I went back to China I ached to be living there again.

One full year into our transition I dropped the bomb on my wife. Turns out it was a time bomb.

We were road-tripping after spending two weeks in New York, training another batch of newbies on their way to China. The internal dialogue and bargaining had been building for months and I was finally at a breaking point. The kids were asleep in the back seat and we were enjoying some well-earned conversation time. The time seemed right.

"I think we should move back."

She listened patiently while I gushed and vented and dreamed and laid out a plan that would have us back in China by January. It was therapeutic for me.

For her—not so much.

Three days later the bomb exploded.

"That was really not fair! We said that we wouldn't even talk about moving again for three years. I can't even process another move right now."

She was right. I'd needed to vent, but the personal implications for her and for our family were too much. I promised not to bring it up again.

Losing My Identity

My vow of silence was the starter pistol for the most isolated phase of my transition.

I knew from dozens of conversations with people in the same boat that grief was an inescapable part of this process. The losses of transition are real. I'd expected that, but I wasn't really clear on what those losses would be.

I mourned China, of course.

I mourned our amazing community.

I mourned the end of the adventure.

The airports.

The food.

All of that made perfect sense.

The part that caught me off guard was the sense of mourning that I felt for the missing chunk of myself.

Moving back was more than just a location change and the adjustments that come with it. For me, living abroad had become a huge piece of my identity. I got to train people to do it well. I wrote a blog about crossing cultures. Every day was an experiment in bumblng that I got to turn into a story or a lesson for someone else.

I still hadn't updated my blog header, which read:

"I'm a husband, a dad, a trainer, a writer, an expat, a foreigner, a Chinese faker and a culture vulture who loves having a front-row seat to watch the world turn."

I was still a husband and a dad. Those were the biggest pieces of me that would be true no matter where we lived. Apart from that, everything had changed.

I still got to do some training and writing, but I felt like my credibility was on a timer. I knew that my stories were destined to become outdated and stale. There was nothing I loved more (professionally speaking) than spending a day with a group of people and connecting deeply over their most heartfelt cross-cultural frustrations. I felt like I was moving from "the guy who understands how it feels" to "the guy who used to do this." I feared for my relevance.

To say that I WAS an expat, in the past tense, hurt. My biggest anxiety was that living abroad had just been a chapter, and we had turned the page.

The overwhelming desire to go back—or go somewhere—anywhere—was not going away.

The only thing that had changed is that I'd promised my wife I wouldn't bring it up.

She came home from Costco one day with a six-pack of Colgate toothpaste and I freaked out. Not verbally (because I'd promised). Internally, though, I was about to bust.

"We are NOT going to live in this country long enough to go through SIX TUBES of toothpaste!"

Rationality wasn't really my strong suit at the time, but my processing options were limited. To bring up anything related to my frustration felt like a breach of trust and a manipulative ploy. My most natural second outlet would be my buddy Dan—the one who'd given me a job and paid my rent and invested enormous emotional, relational and familial capital into me doing this well.

It would be a slap in his face to say, "Hey, thanks for everything. I want to move away again."

We had great friends. We were connecting with great people and building great relationships. We had a great church and our kids were in great schools.

Nothing wasn't great about our new lives. It was, by every definition and compared to every other person I had watched go through this, the most successful transition I had ever seen.

Except.

Every day—with increasing intensity—I wanted to live abroad again.

So I started listening to Chinese radio—something I'd never done in China unless I was stuck in a taxi.

The questions I can't answer

Sixteen months in, I took my third trip back to China. Halfway into that trip my family met me in Beijing and we returned to our former "home" city for a two-week visit. The trip sparked a surreal mix of emotions.

My son, who was five at the time, caught a whiff of the airport bathroom and said in his typical, over-expressive tone, "Man! It smells SO GOOD!"

I think the word he was looking for was "familiar," but he'd accidentally summed up the way I'd been feeling all along.

The trip was like that for all of us—a reminder of the parts that were stinky but oh-so-familiar. We saw our old friends, took our old walks and watched the kids play between Building 2 and Building 3. Midway through our time there, my wife and I were lying in bed, exhausted from the non-stop peopling. We chatted about the day and just how good it was to see these people again.

She paused for a good long while and grabbed my hand.

"You want to live here, don't you?"

I took her question as an invitation to break the vow of silence.

"I really do."

Another starter pistol. This time, for the final failure of the most successful repatriation ever.

The next eight months was a familiar roller coaster of downsizing our worldly possessions, challenging announcements, intentional eye contact and painful farewells all wrapped in the exhaustion, anxiety and excitement of what was about to come.

Just over two years into our return home to America, we returned home to China.

The successful failure

Repatriating wasn't what we'd thought it would be.

We'd thought that it would be our "re-entry"—the end of a season. We'd thought that we were moving back to our homeland to settle in, reestablish our lives and plant some roots. We'd thought that we would build community with eyes that had been enlightened by our overseas experience. We'd thought that we would work through the process that I talk about, teach about and write about.

From that perspective, I failed pretty miserably.

I never worked through the adjustment dip. I never loosened my hold on the past to embrace the new. I never settled in.

The irony was pretty thick. Mr. Leaving-Well Seminar couldn't make it stick.

However—there is another perspective.

I got to wrestle through a part of transition that I had never experienced before. I got to feel the things I'd been teaching about. I got to see what our family looks like in America. My stereotypical TCKs [third culture kids] got to spend two years connecting with their passport culture. We got the gift of two

Christmases with grandmas and grandpas. We got to hop in the van and run to the park. We got to do Saturday morning donuts and go to yard sales and feel the beautiful pain of a full family addiction to Chick-fil-a.

We stayed longer than the “quick trip home,” which is something we hadn’t experienced since we moved away and would never have known otherwise.

And.

We got two full years of doing life with some of our best friends on the planet.

I got to see my friend’s business from the inside out. We got to sit on the back porch and watch our kids jump on the trampoline. We got to do coffee in the mornings and meet for lunches and have family dinners. We got to sit around a fire and talk about faith and politics and the funniest things we’d seen on YouTube. We got to worship with them, go to school with them and genuinely know them on a deeper level.

We also got to watch how to welcome people home and send them off again.

You can’t pay for that kind of training.

Scratch that—we paid a ton—but it was a great investment.

I changed my blog. It now reads:

“We are slowly discovering that wherever we are, we are home—and missing it at the same time.”

What I took away

You don't go through two massive life changes in two years without learning something. At least, you shouldn't. Here's what hit me the hardest.

First, I learned that clichés are true.

Every wise philosopher, great leader and clever poet from Confucius to Pope Francis to Aerosmith has waxed eloquent with some variation of "life's a journey, not a destination." I discovered that this is especially relevant for the repatriate.

Repatriation, for me, was supposed to be the finish line.

"Done. Got that out of your system. Good run."

That made the insatiable desire to keep running really confusing (for me and everyone around me). I'd been viewing expatriation as the grand adventure, but now it was time to get back to the real-world stuff.

Settle in.

Put down some roots.

Get a real job.

It was counterintuitive but refreshing to recognize that our time back "home" was simply the next leg of the race—and if that was true, I hadn't failed after all.

I also learned that expats are a special breed.

There is something unique in us that not only allows, but actually drives us towards, transience. It's crazy (for normal people) to think about bubble-wrapping everything you own

and hauling it to a different part of the planet with kids in tow so you can experience complete incompetence.

But for me, that IS normal.

So much so that I long for it again and again. That may make me different from the masses, but I'm certainly not alone. In fact, I've found that I fit best in the Tribe of Transients. We'll never be the pillar of any community, but it doesn't mean we're not building something solid.

We're more like bricklayers who lay a new brick every two to five years but in the end will have an incredible wall.

It feels dysfunctional and unnatural if you think you should be a pillar. But I've seen the proof: people now in their 70s and 80s who have NEVER settled in, but have a beautiful, solid life to show for it.

And finally...

I learned that if smooth doesn't equal easy, then hard most certainly doesn't equal bad. Repatriation was hard, but it was so rich and so good. It was reminiscent of, but entirely different from, expatriation—which was also hard and good. I'm now three years into re-expatriation and it becomes more and more evident every day that, at least for me, "hard" and "good" not only travel together but they walk at the same pace.

Transition (coming, going or staying) is hard because it is good.

Re-entry was completely different than I thought it would be.

It was harder.

It was better.

And all things considered, I still kind of feel like I won it.

Not that it's a competition.

Jerry Jones is a cross-cultural trainer and coach who lives with his wife and two children in Qingdao, China. He works as a transition specialist with Leadership Development International, serving the staff of seven international schools in China and the United Arab Emirates. He loves exploring the joys and challenges of crossing cultures and helping people start, stay and leave their international assignments well. Jerry writes about transition and life abroad at www.thecultureblend.com.

Mini coaching from Helen, Doreen & Cate:

Jerry had good things going for him in re-entry. He had a lot of training and experience to rely on. As he came to realise, though, knowledge and understanding aren't everything. He had some safe people that he could rely on when he arrived. They had gone before him, understood the process and could help him work through his re-entry. To have people like that in your life is a massive plus (whether local or at a distance).

He learned that expectations aren't always the same as reality. Unmet expectations are one of the biggest sources of frustration and disappointment, and you have to be careful with them as you change country. And he was challenged to the core of his identity about who he was now and what it meant to be who he was, where he was. Changing identity plays a massive part in any transition, and grappling with it is one of

the most important things you will ever do to help you move forward.

Reflection questions:

- Who can be my safe people in re-entry?
- What expectations do I have, and are they realistic?
- How do I want to redefine myself in re-entry?

[Click here](#) for more re-entry help and resources.

CHAPTER 3

Bridges and Anchors

MICHAEL POLLOCK

“But it wasn’t home anymore. Rather than feeling like a part of what was going on, I felt more like a really well-informed spectator.”

The highlands of Kenya—the land of red clay, fragrant jacarandas and acres of tea—were my childhood home from age eight to twelve. It was along the escarpment of the Rift Valley that I became a third culture kid (TCK).

Born on Long Island, in New York, I moved with my family of six first to New Jersey, then to Vermont, then on to Kenya, then back to Vermont (a new town), and my parents moved again as I entered college. Eleven different houses, six schools. My first significant time away from home was three months in South Africa at age fourteen. At twenty-two I married my college sweetheart, Kristen, who was born in Sierra Leone and grew up in North Carolina and Iowa—mostly Iowa. During college we’d each spent a semester overseas—she in France, and I in Kenya.

Those are the bare facts. Those who've travelled those miles and moved those moves know some of what's buried between those facts: the losses, the grief, the life gifts, the celebrations, the stories. So many stories.

So when Kristen and I came to our life together and our decision in 2003 to live and work in China for two years (which turned into nine years), we had already laid some groundwork; we didn't think we were rookies. And that was the most dangerous assumption—that we didn't have a great deal to learn.

Fast-forward to 2012, winter, our final year in China, with everyone in our company working through their plans and announcing their decision to stay or to go. It was a time every year fraught with weighing, consulting, considering, praying and trying to peer into the future to see what was best for each person in each family. Once our decision to go had been made, there were more decisions to make: with whom to share the news, and when and how. It was a relational mine-field and it didn't matter that we had been through the process with friends eight times already. At times we danced the "leaving waltz" with some grace, but we also misstepped, even on others' toes.

The complexity of unraveling our lives from the community in Tianjin, my foreign and domestic colleagues in six other cities and the Chinese communities with whom we lived and worked was staggering. I remember dinners with close friends in Tianjin at Korean barbecue, our feet tucked up on the heated floor, rolling bulgogi meat into fragrant leaves while reminiscing over how we'd met and the adventures we'd had. That winter we also flew three thousand kilometers and then drove five hours into the mountains to spend time with villagers in Yunnan province who'd become dear friends.

It wasn't just the scope of the geography but how intertwined our communities had become that made the process challenging. My core work team had become very dear friends with whom we also shared worldview and faith. We played futbol together, wrote curriculum, worshipped and prayed together, travelled and delivered services to various schools, went on vacations with each others' families to the seaside town of Bei Dai He, shared our hopes and dreams and our challenges. We had to figure out how to deliver the news that all these things were ending; we were going to transition to a new life. How does one acknowledge all those ties, affirm those connections and yet, at the same time, look forward to the realities of life twelve thousand miles away on the other side of the planet? It was painfully affirming to look at all the close ties one has made as they are being severed; we did not have the words. It was *tai nanguo* (too miserable).

Each community and relationship had its own characteristics and culture to address. That spring I returned to the Yunnan communities, without my wife, leading a group of high school students and staff. The village of Haba is nestled into the side of Haba Snow Mountain, and our hosts— ethnically Zhuang though most were Muslim, known as Hui—raise yaks, horses and donkeys, chickens, hemp, walnuts, corn, barley, apricots, peaches and the unusual Sichuan peppercorns known as “numbing peppers.” The extended family gathered in the dining area of a beautiful wood and stone lodge. We had eaten a delicious meal and were now in comfortable chairs drinking *hua cha*, or flower tea, around a large iron wood-burning stove used for cooking and heating (which is appreciated in June at eight thousand feet above sea level). Word had spread that this was my last year to lead this trip and to visit these hospitable friends.

Over the six years that I had known the family, we had worked,

learned and laughed, celebrated and adventured together. They'd taught me to milk a yak and churn butter; I'd convinced them that "stream climbing" the steep, icy cold local waters was actually fun for foreigners. Our team had constructed a road made of stone to Lao Ye's (Grandpa's) specifications and helped build a kindergarten building. We had planted corn together, helped winnow barley and played intense, high-altitude basketball with the local men. They'd invited us to evening celebrations where we traded stories and learned to dance in Hui style. Sitting in the now-crowded room of over twenty-five people, the air tinged with Lao Ye's cigarette smoke, they asked why I was not coming back. I explained that my work was ending and we would now have two children in university in the US. After talking quietly among themselves in Zhuang, they made an offer in Mandarin. Too complex for me, my assistant translated.

"They want you to come here. They are saying that they have some land and they can build you a house." Then, with tears in her eyes, "Oh, I think they really love you and don't want you to leave." The room was quiet and there were many eyes on me. I blinked back the unexpected moisture in my own, swallowed the lump in my throat and tried again.

"My mother is a widow, as my father passed away in 2004. She is getting older now, almost seventy-five, and I need to be closer to her. She visited us in Tianjin and really loves China, but she is too old to come and live here, so I need to move back to Mei Guo, 'the beautiful land,' where she lives." As this was translated, the room suddenly became animated; there were heads nodding and gnarled farmers' hands waving, almost like a benediction. Suddenly I was not abandoning our friendship but doing exactly what they would do in my place: being a dutiful and responsible son.

“Will you come back?” Several in the family asked. All I could say, truthfully, was, “Wo bu zhi dao...dan shi wo qi wang!” I don’t know, but I earnestly hope so.

Those moments, seemingly hundreds of them, with scores of faces, sights, smells and tastes, were some of the invisible luggage that we packed up with us when we left our apartment and turned in the keys.

“How is your RAFTing?” friends asked us? (RAFT is the model my father David had created in the 1980s for healthy transitioning, standing for Reconciliation, Affirmation, Farewells and Think Destination: it had become a standard tool for thousands of expats to cope with transition.) We said we thought we were doing great. We had planned out the steps, reconciled relationships that needed it, affirmed friendships and contributions to our lives, said our farewells bravely and thought through our next steps. We were ready.

But it turns out that we were not. With one flight over the Arctic Circle (three movies and a second-rate tray of chicken and rice) our world flipped and everything not tied down went spinning into the ether.

The first shocks were not unexpected, but were jolting nonetheless. We were no longer affluent. Setting down in the outskirts of Baltimore, Maryland, twenty miles from the top three wealthiest counties in the US, we realized we were on the upper reaches of poverty, and that this community that had been home for twelve years BC (before China) was not one we could afford to rejoin. The second shock was the realization that even though we had visited friends and family at least once a year over the last nine years, people had moved on and lives had changed, some of them drastically—such as that of the friend who’d lost his wife to cancer, or of the family from our

old school who'd lost a son, our son's age, to suicide. Thomas Wolfe's words, "you can never go home again", hit us with a ringing slap.

We were no longer "from Baltimore." Yet, how could we deny the relationships, the familiar sights, sounds and culture? My wife reveled in the fact that she could navigate around the city without referring to a smartphone or, more likely in her case, a physical map. Want us to pick up some groceries at Trader Joe's off Towson circle? No problem. Want to meet up at Sherwood Gardens for a picnic among the tulips? We'll be there in twenty minutes. There's a festival at Cromwell Valley Park after Sunday services at Faith Christian Fellowship? Sure, we'll take The Alameda to Loch Raven... We could grab bagels at Greg's, or crab soup at Belvedere Square; we'd smile when the waitresses at Towson Diner called us "hon". And we got peripherally excited when the Baltimore Ravens began driving towards what would be a Super Bowl victory.

But it wasn't home anymore. Rather than feeling like a part of what was going on, I felt more like a really well-informed spectator.

Worse, when people asked what I would be doing next, it was complicated to explain to someone without a background in cross-cultural living and adjustment. When I explained at a reunion gathering, between delicious bites of Maryland Silver Queen sweet corn, that I was working with TCKs, I quickly added, "Third culture kids—you know, children who've grown up across cultures." After the somewhat blank, "Uh huh," response I added that they were like our own three kids, and the children of missionaries and overseas military families, kids of state department staffers, international business people, international NGOs... As the person's eyes got that slightly glassy look, warning lights and bells went off in my head, even

as a small voice somewhere in the back of my brain suggested sarcastically reminding the person that we had been working with this population for the past nine years... "Hello! Where have you BEEN?" it said. And again the warning lights, with a new message: "Pull out, pull out—you are on a crash trajectory!"

Changing course, I tried to explain that my "clients" were young adults with diverse and rich experiences and some steep challenges who simply needed informed care, strategic encouragement and re-equipping. (Good, I thought, this is a business-oriented group, getting the word "strategic" in there will save the day.) And indeed, I could see the person re-engaging and preparing an answer—encounter saved! "Well, we have lots of these kids who are struggling and could use that kind of guidance. Did you know that Mark Smith and Jim and Sarah's boy... What's his name? Jack! Yeah, they've really gone off the rails and are causing their parents all kinds of pain... You should talk to them..." My turn to mumble something agreeable and wander off in search of more iced tea.

Disconnected. Or rewired. That's how the process felt, a bit like when I accidentally plugged my 120-volt printer into my 220-volt Chinese wall socket with the wrong adapter. There were a number of interactions in that first year that "plugged in" only to end with a quick burst of sparking emotions, silence and the smell of something burned.

The gifts of that year-long sojourn, besides the comfort of things once familiar, were the relationships that transcended the gaps, those people who were deeply connected to us through blood, time, depth of shared experiences, values and deep heart issues. Some of the anchor relationships held all of these things. These were people who would go the distance with us and, barring a relational catastrophe, remain "our people."

Two of these were my wife's older sister and her husband, a doctor and researcher at Johns Hopkins and part of an urban renewal community known as Sand Town. Deeply and broadly connected to the community, they shared many of our values; our children had grown up as fast friends, and they'd lived abroad as well: besides Suzanne's childhood in West Africa, their family had spent a year in Kampala, Uganda. They were, and remain, anchor relationships—no matter what issues and circumstances we navigate, we will remain bonded to each other. (This past Thanksgiving, they opened their home to our growing family and twenty of us gathered to celebrate our heritage and connectedness.)

Although Suz and Dave did not share "our China" or even our East Asian experience, they connect us to part of our identity, and assure us that, odd as we feel at times, we belong.

MaryAnne was, and remains, another gift. As neighbors and fellow worshippers at our church home in the city, our two oldest children and her two had grown up together. We'd been part of a small group fellowship together, celebrated birthdays, New Year's holidays, Fourth of July, marathon completions and piano recitals together. Our children had laughed together and played LEGOs together and remained friends even though they attended different schools. What cinched the deal was that they had visited us in China. We'd eaten hot-pot, jiaoza, da bing ji dan and a spicy, scrumptious Uigher dish of chicken and peppers we had fondly named "chainsaw chicken." At the base of Tianjin's tall tower, they'd joined us in the local game of ice-sledding, in which you pole yourself around at speed with two spiked clubs. Nathan had even joined into the TCK game of ice-polo, where goals and a wicker ball were added to the mix, and he had the scars to prove it. They knew our life in Tianjin; they could relate to our stories. MaryAnne, Liza and Nathan were living proof that we were not making it all up—that we really had lived in China.

Being with them affirmed our identity and belonging both here and there. They are what I call “bridging relationships.”

A whole year after we’d returned to the US, still in the grip of “liminal space”—that place between solid platforms where one hangs in space, hoping that a trapeze bar will appear in one’s hands, that the grip will be true and that another platform, solid and dependable, will be waiting on the other side—we headed for Michigan. On the way, we stopped to help my mom close down the house she’d lived in for the past twenty-three years and resettle in a new home. That shook me a bit, saying goodbye once again to something familiar—the house, the lilies in the yard, the blueberries, the visiting deer and raccoons who made nightly raids.

And yet the very fact that we were there, helping her sort through hundreds of books, each, seemingly, with its own story, and touching the artifacts of my youth and our family history reaffirmed a set of roots that, although mobile, could still nourish.

Resettling in Michigan was not the smooth process we had anticipated and planned for. Our “for sure” house was delayed a month, our oldest children had to return to college before we settled in, and the moving company called to tell us that although it had never happened before, they had lost our “pods”—basically, the bulk of our earthly goods and our treasured memories from China. Faced with yet another loss, we consoled each other in our key anchors: our faith, our love for each other, our friendships scattered across the continents, our strong memories and our determination to weather whatever came.

The company found our pods. Our older children settled into college. We moved in and registered our youngest for school.

Exploring the local dunes and waves of Lake Michigan, we appreciated the sun sparkling on the water, the clean air, the fluffy clouds and the gorgeous sunsets. We breathed in, then out.

Eventually we began to find bridging relationships here, people who could connect with some aspects of our experience and us with them, such as the former missionaries to The Gambia, and one to the Philippines; the repats who had been in the State Department; families that had also adopted children from China; TCKs from local colleges, folks who worked with immigrants, families who had highly mobile backgrounds and those who liked to explore other cultures, foods and languages. There were more connections than we expected, and yet, why not? We are all human beings after all. And in time several people have asked, "So, what's your story?" And the process of "being at home" has begun among this new community of Americans. I expect, that in time, we may prove to be each others' anchors.

Michael Pollock is an adult TCK educator, author, cultural transition coach and TCK care consultant, advocate and provider. Having lived and worked in five countries, he is still learning about repatriation and might just be ruined for mono-geography.

Mini coaching from Helen, Cate & Doreen:

Michael's story gives us some important pointers for making re-entry work. He learnt to reframe his story so that he could tell others about what he does (and did overseas) in ways that resonated with other people. He built deep connections with

others—especially those who had been overseas themselves and understood the re-entry process. And he held onto and reminded himself of the things he knew would remain the same, despite the many changes that happen during re-entry. For him, those were his faith, the love his family members had for each other, key friendships, memories and determination to get through.

Reflection questions:

- How can I tell my story in a way that makes sense to others back home?
- Who are the people I want to build deeper friendships with?
- What in my present life do I want to hold onto despite all the other changes?

[Click here](#) for more re-entry help and resources.

CHAPTER 4

Homeland?

MELISSA DALTON-BRADFORD

"Home is the people I love. And they're everywhere."

Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is the stuff of Currier and Ives paintings, give or take a few telling details (give a few SUVs; take the one-horse-open-sleighs). It's a modern version of an implausibly pristine swath of historic Americana: two-hundred-year-old farm houses and covered bridges, snaking stone walls encircling horse farms and the horses themselves draped in garnet and green blankets, their glossy heads wreathed with puffs of steam. Everything throughout this landscape bespeaks ease, comfort, home.

Terre riche, or rich soil, I had told our neighbors in Croissy-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, when I explained where, exactly, we were moving in the US. I then listed some of Bucks County's noted local authors and artists, like James Michener, Margaret Meade, Pearl S. Buck, Oscar Hammerstein. If Bucks had been good enough for the likes of them, then surely...

Did I maybe have a few niggling concerns? Ten years is a long time, I realized, to live outside our homeland. During that decade, our family had integrated deeply in Norway and France. Of our four children, only the two eldest had been born in the US, and they had been toddlers when we'd left the New Jersey Turnpike for the Nordic tundra. We'd schooled them in Norwegian and had all learned fluent Norwegian. The youngest two, born in Oslo and Versailles, had been in the French school system, and we had all learned to speak fluent French.

Now, were we settling? Our passports said we were going back to our native country, but it was a country our children didn't know. Would they eventually come to know it? Would we parents know it? And, as important, would it know us?

"Welcome to the neighborhood!" A spry brunette, dressed in an oversized Phillies T-shirt, certainly seemed happy to get to know us. Handing me a plastic container of oven-warm brownies, she appeared at my front door the same hour the moving crew pulled up, and chattered as if we'd known each other for years. "You got all you need here: Blue Ribbon schools and Blue Ribbon beer," she reassured me. (Did I look bewildered?) "Don't worry, I can show you the whole area," she said, "since I've lived here in the same three-hundred-mile radius practically my whole life—kindergarten to senior prom! Went down to Temple for college," she hardly took a breath, "but honestly? Couldn't wait to get back home."

Here she was, living proof of so many qualities that, when living abroad and sticking up for the States in conversations with my non-American friends, I'd cited as our pluses: our unbridled energy, youthfulness, informality, warmth, our trademark arms-flung-wide welcome. As my neighbor spoke, however, I felt a few prickling stings of discomfort. I had left "senior proms"

behind long ago. And “miles.” “Blue Ribbon” what? And brownies. And Tupperware. And chewing gum.

What’s more important is that beneath that stinging discomfort was an uneasiness that this woman, nice and bubbly as she was, assumed I understood all those cultural cues. That I still owned them. That they were mine. That they were me.

“You’re gonna just love it!” she chirped, and on “love” she clapped her hands, gave a little hop, then she jogged away, calling back over her shoulder, “There’s no place like home!”

Home. From the first week, this new world was the Land of the Home. After moving from rental to rental our whole married lives, we had now finally bought a home. Our home. Our American home. Then we threw ourselves headlong into renovations: floors, walls, shelving, a fence, even an updated kitchen. All of this was an overt tactic to bind ourselves to one place. A house, our theory went, would make us at home.

“So, what did those places have that the States don’t?” our electrician asked from under his baseball cap with its American flag embroidered on the brim. I’d made the mistake of mentioning that, although everyone was welcoming us “home,” I didn’t yet feel like I was quite, you know, there. He peered at me a bit askance, wanting to know what would make me “desert my homeland” and become, in his words, an “ex-patriot.”

This was the time frame, mind you, during which US military troops had invaded Iraq. And the world we’d been living in had not been unanimously behind that policy. France (and Norway, and virtually all of Europe) had been vociferously opposed to US intervention, still waiting for those weapons of mass destruction to turn up, and in response to that international criticism, some Americans had turned French fries into freedom

fries, or poured French wines into the gutters. At a time when you were either with the US or against, we kept our voices low when we spoke anything but English in public.

Parker was immediately called “Frenchie” at a middle school that had a two-percent rotation rate, meaning people were born there, schooled there and, like our kind brownie-bringing neighbor, either never moved away or did so only for school, returning afterwards to raise the next generation in the same zip code.

Our children were caught unprepared when everyone but they knew to stand in perfect formation at the beginning of the school day and recite in unison, “verbatim, Mom,” Claire said later through gritted teeth, an “allegiance chant,” Parker cut in, all gluey and sullen. “I had to lip sync, Mom,” he went on. They had never heard it. Never even known it existed. And how would they have?

Then the girls on the elementary school playground were tittering about someone named Lizzy; her clothes, her hair, the way she talked, what she’d done this week and the week before, and what she might do next week. And Claire, a month into this new world, interrupted to ask, “So . . . who’s Lizzy? Is she new here at school, like me?” At which all the girls stared. And laughed.

“Lizzy McGuire, Mom,” Claire told me later, not crying, but looking stern, like an anthropologist who’s just spotted a member of an endangered species. “Lizzy M-C-G-U-I-R-E. We have got to get American TV.”

Even second-grader Dalton was having his own adjustment issues. And Luc was forgetting his playground French while learning Spanish at preschool.

At thirteen-going-on-fourteen, Parker would probably have been riding the plate tectonics of an identity crisis anywhere, but here in the US he was trying on wardrobes and body postures and accents to fit in. When folks asked where he was from, he never mentioned a word about his real upbringing, and would no longer speak anything but English with us although we had always hopped from Norwegian to French to English in our home, in our private conversations and to keep secrets as a family when outside. It seemed he had made an overnight decision to be a new person.

"Where, Parker? Where'd you just tell that guy at the gas station you were from?"

"Fully" he tipped his head, on which he now wore a flat-rimmed cap tilted strategically to one side. "Fullydelphia."

My son—the one who had once paraded in traditional embroidered costume on Norway's National Day and learned colloquial French from his buddies at Versailles Club du Basket—had morphed in the course of exactly zero-point-six minutes into a boy from the hood. From the Fully hood.

After writing an essay for entrance into an honors English course for his school, Parker reported to me how it had gone.

"So, ça va, mon cœur? How'd it go?"

"S'alright, I guess. I finished the thing. Wrote three full pages."

"Sounds good. What did you write on?"

"Eve."

"Eve? As in Eve . . . Adam and Eve—Eve?"

"Yuh. Eve."

He adjusted the cap and let his oversized pants bunch sufficiently around his untied basketball shoes as he climbed out of the minivan and strode through the garage and the mud room door. My boy from Fully. I watched him from behind. Where'd this kid materialize from?

"As in, you wrote about the Bible story? Or, uh, what?" I kept smiling, trailing him, nodding to remind him to remove his shoes, which had never been a question in our past homes, but now was just "one more thing," the kids said, that made us "weird." Taking it easy, I unloaded groceries on a card table, since the kitchen counter had been removed for the re-do. I knew that I was now in a country where the separation of church and state is at times maybe a bit smudgy. But . . . Eve?

"They gave me three choices to write on," Parker said. "And I picked, 'Describe the life and accomplishments of your favorite First Lady.'"

"And Eve . . . She was the—"

"The First Lady." The only one he knew of.

We contacted an intercultural integration specialist.

"Part of the trouble is that we feel like aliens," I told the woman in our first phone interview. "Five months on home soil and we are still invisible aliens."

"Invisible aliens?" she asked.

"Foreigners. But no one can see that."

And how could they? Didn't we sound American? Look

American? Carry American passports, pay American taxes? Couldn't we sing, at the drop of a hat, the theme song from *The Brady Bunch*? Weren't we American?

"Well, aren't you Americans?" the consultant pushed just a bit. Her laugh had a hard edge.

"Of course. Um, yes, of course! I...I guess," I added. But I was confused. I no longer knew what that meant. It was then I realized that expressing a deep connection to, or even a preference for, aspects of another culture besides my American one seemed, to those who didn't feel the same, pretentious, or worse, traitorous.

Hold on, though. We'd been "amerikanerne" and "die Amerikaner" and "les Américains" for so many years, representatives of our homeland when outside of it. This put us on the outer edge of the native center of any culture we lived in. No matter how perfectly we rolled our "r's" or pinched our vowels or sucked raw shrimp eggs right from the tail. No matter that we could rattle off every Charles or Louis since Charlemagne. No matter that we knew the origins of every cheese at the local fromagerie. We still hadn't been born there, weren't native.

The odd thing was, we knew how to be that kind of American in that setting. We knew how to be internationalists, those people who speak with accents and are always figuring out the mechanism of a new place. Always, to one degree or another, peripheral, displaced. But this? Homogeneity? We had no idea.

"Maybe it will help to talk about what you missed from the States when you were abroad," the integration expert suggested. "Most people in your situation have been aching to get back home, even if just to small things, certain people,

favorite places, or something as simple as snack foods. Let's start there. What were you homesick for?"

"I wasn't."

"Ah. Okaaaaay." (I could hear her taking notes.) "But your kids. I'll bet they—"

No. Nothing, even speaking with each of us, children included, individually and at length, seemed to help her help us adjust. In her defense, I'm convinced no one could have. Because the truth of that matter is that we weren't coming "home."

I focused my intensity (which, for ten years, had been revving on all cylinders due to all the demands of living in new cultures) on our children, volunteering and the house project. For eight months, spanning the dead of winter, I oversaw everyone's cultural adjustments as well as structural house renovations, all while serving up frozen pizzas zapped in a microwaved rigged in the garage. Late March marked eight months in the Homeland. The winter had just thawed. The sawdust had just settled. And on a brisk morning I found myself hanging planters of red geraniums around the front porch. Like Luther pinning up his ninety-five theses, I pounded in a dozen support hooks, pinning us permanently—even sacramentally—onto the local map. Around me was Pennsylvania at her most promising, no longer a Currier and Ives winter wonderland, but the spring version, with its slow, loamy explosion of greening and more greening. Tapping the hammer, I ticked down the list of pluses: the neighborhood kiddie soccer leagues. The drive-through food, pharmacies, photo shops, post offices. The two- (or even three-!) car garages and the expansive redwood decks. The cheerful and efficient grocery store cashiers and the pimply teens who pack your load and accompany you all the way to your trunk. The Phillies, Eagles, Flyers and Sixers fans who come bearing

brownies. The Main Street parades. A phenomenon called Costco only a twenty-minute drive away. The undeniable traction that a societal system has when there are ample funds and oodles of optimism. America's abundant pluses, including her magnificent energy and enterprising people, her head-spinning convenience and collective casualness. A world and quality of life that would make just about anyone melt into one long, cleansing sigh.

And sigh I did. But it was a cry-sigh. That morning, until afternoon, under the eaves of our porch, with my back to the cul-de-sac so no neighbors could see my face, I pounded in those planter hooks one by one. Pound, pound, pound. Sniff, sniff, sniff. With each successive strike, I struck a nerve that grew more tender. My whole soul was wincing.

Just that morning, I had been hunting in the checkout line for a hint—any hint, anywhere—of a foreign accent. In the aisle walled in on both sides with boxes of cold cereal, I was still pining for the musty smell of a tiny corner market run by a cranky Moroccan, for pungent cheeses sold by someone who knew me by name and a bakery that closed every day at noon for an hour-long lunch and all day long every Sunday. I was searching for something that smelled like home, sounded like home, felt like home.

I stepped inside my home. Nose to the air, I whiffed. There was the smell of new kitchen. I saw each of the Norwegian touches. French touches. Provençal pieces and Italian pottery. An old Swiss cow bell holding back the hand-me-down Scandinavian linen drapes. The setting was modest, tasteful and, most importantly, trying to tell the story of who we were—tell our intense, boldfaced, far-away-from-here story.

Then I knew it: "That. Story. Is. Over."

I wanted to sob.

But I couldn't. Because the phone rang.

"Hon, can you meet me at the bottom of the hill? I'm almost home. Come alone."

From my journal:

The hardest moment was in our bedroom tonight. We'd already told Parker by himself, which was a good move. We knew he'd be ecstatic. But C just finished doing Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man* and just last week we promised her a dog. Finally, the dog she's waited a decade for. For D and L, we would just announce the choice when we'd made it—not discuss it, so we didn't involve them at first.

P and C were sitting on our sofa. We told them we had big news but wanted to discuss it. This isn't final, kids, we said. Want to get your reactions. And when we told C, she immediately glazed over and then her eyes welled up. P put his arm around her, and she just started crying, crying. "I don't want to go back. We just got here!" And she fell into P's arms, bawling. I think I gave R an evil look, and I know I lipped to him, "This means No Go."

We kept trying to reassure her. We haven't said yes to a thing, we said. We've just been asked if we could go back to take over another position, middle of Paris this time, and we are free to say no, we said. We'll never do something that makes all of us miserable and that we feel no spiritual confirmation about. We walked around and around the backyard, next to the split-rail fence barely six months new, past the new shed with that shiny copper weather vane standing so silently up there like a rooster afraid to cock-a-doodle-doo. Our sweet, distraught C we held between us, our arms wrapped around

her shoulders, listening as she cried out all the reasons why back-to-France was all bad, all wrong. "All bad, all wrong," she kept crying, stopping to catch her breath, to bend over and then shake herself upright. It broke my heart. I wanted to weep, too, but held it in. I believed her. I felt how selfish it would be to pluck them out of this American dream, and dang it! All those geraniums on the wraparound porch, gorgeous! Why would we ever head to where things were, as Claire knew, much harder. The edges, harder. The expectations, harder. The language, harder. The traffic and school and rules and sky and air and everything, she said, HARDER.

What happened when Claire went alone into her room is something Randall and I didn't ask or even hope for. We sat, nauseated and sweaty, conflicted and brokenhearted, hands between knees, rocking back and forth on the edge of our bed. So what? we said to each other, if the company has an "acute and special" need? So what if that need is, as they assert, "tailor-made" for Randall's expertise? So what if this would only be "a couple of years" and then we could come right back to the home, yard, cul-de-sac on the hill, corporate headquarters?

So what? I said. So what? he said. So what?

And then Claire knocked on our door. "Mom? Dad?"

She came with news that was a turning point and a landmark to which our whole family, years later, still refers in whispers. She sat between us on our bed. She folded her hands in her lap. She looked at us both, eyes red and puffy. She told us she'd run, while holding back tears, to her girlfriend down the road. That friend (whose parents were in the middle of a horrible divorce we had not known about) had reassured and comforted Claire, and listened as her new friend cried. When Claire had dumped out enough of her sadness that her shoulders weren't heaving

under the weight, her friend promised Claire she'd give her a Phillie Phanatic T-shirt as a souvenir. ("I guess they don't have them back in Paris, right?") Then she sent Claire home with one of her mom's brownies. To curb the hurt.

Claire had then come back home to her snug corner bedroom, the one we'd decorated to her specs in soft lavender and custard yellow. She told us she had knelt at her bed—the one for which we'd found bed sheets with small embroidered Eiffel towers. And she'd prayed. Not for an answer—to move or not to move, that was not the question—but for simple comfort in this challenging moment.

It was then that she felt warmth and heat wrap around her twelve-year-old shoulders and a voice (she felt it, she didn't hear it) told her clearly that though this would be hard at the start, over the long run it would be the best thing for the family.

Yes, she should, we should, we would all move back to Paris.

==

That was well over fifteen years ago. We packed up the week school ended, moved to an apartment in the heart of Paris, and rented out the freshly renovated American home to US expatriates returning from three years in Asia. Only a couple of years later, and without much discussion or deliberation, we quietly sold that American house.

Because we knew where we were at home. Home was the road. From Paris we moved to Munich. And from there, to Singapore. And from there, to Geneva. And from there, to Frankfurt. All the time paying American taxes. All the time participating in American elections. All the time being identified as American. But not the homegrown variety. We are American globalists,

who never returned to corporate headquarters, nor to the weather vane, the geranium hangers, the sweet lavender-yellow bedroom, the Homeland. Claire went on to university studies, during which she spent extended stretches living in Africa and Italy, and it was there where she met her Italian husband. She, like her brothers, went on to embrace the world as her home.

“So then, uh . . . where is your home? Exactly?” The kids get that question a lot. They’ve learned to say, “Home is the people I love. And they’re everywhere.”

Maybe “where is home” is itself an inadequate or altogether wrong question to ask in the first place. Home means something more than a where. It’s not a structure, not an address, not a city, not even a country. I’m beginning to wonder if home is even a place at all.

Home, perhaps, is a disposition of the soul, an acknowledgment that I share with another soul a certain intimate narrative. That narrative, that story, twists and curls and splutters and flows, folding back on itself defying conventional chronology, suggesting timelessness while weaving the strands of our most consuming questions and even exploring those questions for which we have no language yet.

Home, then, might be the nexus of many individual narratives, not a fixed port, but a portal through which lives have passed and are passing, seeking definition and connectivity. Home, for me at least, has come to mean that sense of intertwining, of unity and comfort, a state of being where you no longer need to tug at the seams and hemline of your spirit to feel at ease. It’s when you feel something deep and native within you expand, enlarge, illumine.

This year, my husband and I crossed over that telling meridian that marks more years lived outside of our native country than within it. After 26 years of creating so many homes in so many countries, you'd think we would be tired, ready to settle on one place, one home. Well, we have, I think. And it is the world.

Melissa Dalton-Bradford is an author, poet, polyglot, international consultant on intercultural integration, a founding member of two nonprofits, mother of four children (three of whom are living), and a committed world citizen. She's married to Randall, with whom she's shared over a quarter-century living in Scandinavia, central and southeast Asia and central Europe. Melissa currently resides in Frankfurt, Germany, where, besides writing every day, she volunteers teaching German to and documenting the firsthand stories of Middle Eastern and African refugees.

Mini coaching from Doreen, Cate & Helen:

Melissa's story reflects many of the challenges that individual family members can face when an entire family returns together. Each person was in a unique situation and the adults were called to not only process their own re-entry but also support their children simultaneously. Melissa and family sought out expert advice by hiring an intercultural integration specialist who asked some difficult questions. Melissa also kept herself narrowly focused. She chose three primary interests to focus on during re-entry: the children, her volunteering and engaging in projects around their home.

When faced with relocating once more, she and Randall were

committed to finding a resolution that felt right for their entire family. They were willing to wade through emotions and stress and to live inside the question until the answer was evident for all to see.

Reflection questions:

- What two or three things can I / we focus on that will make my / our re-entry simpler?
- What support do I / we need and where can I / we find it?
- As a family, what guiding principles do we need to agree on?

[Click here](#) for more re-entry help and resources.

CHAPTER 5

Finding the World in My Hometown

LUCILLE ABENDANON

“Returning home deepened my connection to my country, and added a kaleidoscopic layer to my international life.”

I’ll never forget the day I first learned the term “repatriation.” I was in the living room of our apartment in Istanbul, playing with my two-year-old son, when my husband Berto clattered through the front door with a wild look in his eyes like a hunted deer in the split-second before flight.

“They’ve offered us Durban,” he said excitedly, the words rolling off his tongue and into the air where they hung, heavy and intrusive.

I stood up slowly, my heart constricting, “I’m not moving back home,” I replied, “I don’t care how good the offer is—going home is not an option.”

Turns out, going home was absolutely an option, and one we ultimately accepted, bringing twelve years of expat life to a resounding halt. "Home" for me is Durban, a laid-back town on the east coast of South Africa, surfer's haven, holiday-maker's dream, adventurous expat's nightmare. Durban is the unassuming younger sibling of vivacious, beautiful Cape Town, and ambitious, smooth-talking Johannesburg: forever in their shadow, never quite measuring up, doing its own thing at its own pace but not really making any progress. I'd left Durban when I was eighteen and spent six life-changing years in the university town of Stellenbosch, near Cape Town, earning an MA in international studies. During those years, the world loomed large and I began to suspect I was not to live out my days on African soil.

By the end of university I was champing at the bit to go out into the world. I longed to do something different, something worthwhile, something that would give a small-town girl a big-time purpose. Adventure led me to London, Saigon, Bangkok and Istanbul. I married my intrepid husband, whom I'd met years before at university, and we started a family. Never, in all those years, did I give a second thought to Durban. It was firmly in my past, a fond memory, a place that had witnessed my childhood but had nothing to do with my future. For years my mantra had been "I'll never go back to Durban."

As the plane descended and I gazed out at the sea of sugarcane on one side and the Indian Ocean on the other, I couldn't help but feel a growing sense of anticlimax. All I could see was what wasn't there: no ancient history, no exotic temples, no street food carts, no excitement. Looking back at that time, I feel bad that I didn't give Durban more of a chance. My hometown deserved the benefit of the doubt. It has many fantastic things to offer: beautiful weather, rich cultural diversity, a comforting simplicity, and so much space. But I had forgotten all that and

had no interest in remembering. We settled into a beautiful open-plan house close to Umhlanga Rocks, an upmarket resort town north of Durban. We had an infinity pool and a panoramic view of the ocean. I had so much to be grateful for but instead found myself holding onto everything I had left behind.

I was detached, disillusioned and withdrawn. I felt utterly foreign in a place where I was supposed to fit in. It was so confusing, because I had loved this place once. I'd come of age here; I'd learned how to drive on these roads, grating the gears down well-worn routes; I knew what the air smelled like after a summer rain storm; I knew how noisy the frogs were at night, their cacophony piercing the inky stillness; I'd spent countless evenings on the beach, being lulled by the sound of the waves crashing onto the shore, pushing my toes into the cool sand and gazing up at the vast canopy of stars overhead. But most of all, this place had been a witness to my early adulthood, that fleeting time when you feel invincible and the richness of possibility extends endlessly before you, each day bursting with velvety potential. I had ridden those waves of possibility far and wide; they had taken me out into the world, tossed me about, shown me wonders and now deposited me back where I'd started. But instead of familiarity and richness I felt nothing but resentment, as though I'd returned to someone who had known every part of my heart, but during the years of my absence had forgotten about me entirely.

The familiar was boring; the ordinariness was stifling; the heat, suffocating. Before, I had looked out to sea and felt the sizzle of adventure, the enigmatic pull of the world, but now that shimmering azure expanse was nothing more than a rude reminder that the world was out there and was going on without me. I felt trapped, boxed in, tied down; my energy levels plummeted and I couldn't find even a glimmer of excitement in my daily existence. I realize now, with the benefit of hindsight,

that I was experiencing re-entry. Like a sailor who gets sick on land, or an astronaut who experiences the dizzying force of gravity after months of weightlessness, I found myself disoriented; the bizarreness of normality was crippling. I longed for the spicy chaos of Bangkok, the haphazard collision of smells and sounds of Saigon, the magisterial ancientness of Istanbul. I missed the magic of living abroad, the thrill of breaking out of my comfort zone, of feeling the sense of vulnerability and pride that comes with living everyday amidst the unfamiliar. I missed my friends: those wonderful, liberal, like-minded women who knew how I felt without my having to explain, who brought a richness to my life through their myriad languages, cultures and experiences. I missed the international environment where a simple dinner with my girlfriends was a veritable United Nations, a babble of languages and always a heated debate about local culture, motherhood or mothers-in-law.

I was deeply hurt to discover that, back home, my stories were things to be endured, not shared. My experiences were dismissed rather than welcomed; it felt as though I had gone to warmly embrace a friend but been slapped hard instead. Many of my stories started with “when we lived in...,” and before I’d even finished eyes would begin to glaze over, attention flicked in the opposite direction. I hadn’t meant to sound entitled, but I’d lived abroad most of my adult life—how could I be myself without that context? Did fitting back in mean that I’d have to compromise myself entirely? Could I live like that? My international life had defined me for so long, I didn’t know who I was without it, and the defiant part of me refused to relinquish it. I would spend hours on Instagram scrolling through people’s picture-perfect lives on the beaches of Dubai, or the magnetic metropolis of Hong Kong, the laid-back streets of Buenos Aires, and I would just be sad that I didn’t live that life anymore. Some

mornings I'd be up before dawn, sitting in my kitchen, watching the sun rise over the ocean, searching for property around the world, researching schools, expat communities, trying to imagine my life elsewhere. My body was in Durban but my heart was anywhere but there.

It became wildly obvious that something had to change. We were home for the foreseeable future, so I knew fleeing back abroad was not an option. I knew I couldn't change the people around me—their attitudes and prejudices were firmly entrenched—and I knew that happiness did not lie in changing myself. I began to wonder if the answers were maybe to be found in Eastern philosophies, ancient wisdoms or platitudes about accepting what you can't change. Was the mystery of acceptance and peacefulness to be found in meditation or yoga, or the teachings of the Dalai Lama? I felt helpless, like I was casting about for answers that were not forthcoming. I kept on reading things like, "Change your attitude, change your life," "Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference," "Create the reality you want," and just felt more frustrated. These concepts were not new to me, I am generally a positive person, but during that time I felt nothing but apathy and disinterest. I felt like a captive tiger pacing its cage, if only I could escape I'd show the world how strong I could be.

One morning, as I sat with my laptop open, sipping my coffee and watching the sky slowly turning pink, its color gradually bleeding into the ocean, I found myself thinking about the wonderful international stories both my kids have, and the dots suddenly connected in my head: My first son was born in Istanbul, he has Dutch and British passports, and he lives in South Africa. My second son would be born in South Africa and have Dutch, British and South African passports, and one day he may live in Singapore, or Budapest, or Rome. I myself was born in one country, grew up in another and have lived

around the world. These are our stories. This is our history, and we carry that history with us everywhere we go. Our current circumstances cannot undo that history; it stays with us no matter what. And in a flash I realised that I had been looking at returning home in completely the wrong way. I had viewed it as the end of my international life, as a return to normal, as a reset. I saw it as an act of relinquishing rather than deepening. But what if returning to a place I knew well was not an ending but merely a continuation of my life story? Durban is an exotic African destination to many travelers—what if I began to view it in this light? Could I do that? Was it even possible? Could I see Durban as a part of the world at large, and not disconnected from it?

Somewhere deep inside I felt a flicker of optimism, of hope igniting, and I knew that I was onto something. Over the previous twelve years I had learned how to be an expat, how to build a life from nothing, how to land in a country knowing no one and create a rich and fulfilling life. I'd done it four times, and knew the drill. What I needed to do was apply those skills here in Durban. I needed to put myself out there, to be open to providence and make an effort to build something worthwhile. I had to be proactive instead of reactive. As I fleshed out the ideas in my mind, I began to see that there were two aspects that I always focused on when starting life in a new country: people and my environment. Connecting with people can make or break an experience abroad—why should it be different here at home? I needed to meet people with whom I could build a shared history, people with whom I had something in common. When you make friends abroad your foreignness unites you—the fact that you're different makes you the same. Any actual similarities in interests or personality are discovered later. The opposite is true for making friends at home: You need to find the similarities first; the differences can be explored

once a history has been created. I realized that by leading with my international life I was alienating new people here at home. I needed to find firm footing on common ground before introducing that part of me. People are a lot more accepting when they're invested in a friendship. That had to be my focus.

A familiar environment creates comfort, this much I knew. The problem with Durban was that it was too familiar. There was nothing left to discover. Or was there? I remembered how I would walk around my new neighborhood in a new country. In doing so, I was establishing familiarity, but also connecting closely with my environment. There is something about being physically present, rather than behind the wheel of a car, that makes all the difference. The connection is much greater. Perhaps what I needed was to reconnect with Durban in a new way, on foot, with no barriers.

Having identified these two prongs of attack, I set about thinking of ways to make them a reality in my life. The first thing I did was to find a mom and baby group. I had a toddler and a baby on the way, so meeting other moms was a great start. Google only gave me one promising lead, and that Friday I nervously walked into a hall of women and shrieking kids and was welcomed by a smiling and gracious mom whose name was Tara. We quickly discovered that we shared a dry sense of humor and a Pinterest obsession, and we've been best friends ever since. The following Friday when I arrived at the hall there were a table of gifts, a foot spa, and tea and cake. Tara had organized a baby shower for me; these women had come together for me despite hardly knowing me at all. When my second son was born a month later, those same wonderful women brought cooked meals to our home every day for a week.

I said yes to every invitation, every play date and every offer of

coffee. Tara's son and my son ended up in the same class at school, and my social circle grew organically from there.

I began walking around our neighborhood with my boys, stopping to show them interesting stones and pretty flowers, and sometimes to watch the troop of grey vervet monkeys that passed through on their never-ending hunt for food, bounding across rooftops or venturing down to street level when something caught their eye. This was not the area I had grown up in, and whilst I knew the streets well, I found that I enjoyed getting to know the minute details of where we lived: an interesting tree, a friendly dog, a humorous post box, a smiling gardener who'd laugh with the boys and say, "Hey bafana bafana"—which means "the boys" in Zulu, but is also the name of South Africa's football team—which delighted my sports-crazy son.

Durban has a strong running culture. Three times a week, starting at five-fifteen a.m., four-hundred or more runners gather on a street corner in a leafy suburban neighborhood called Durban North to run a pre-designated ten-kilometre route. The runners fill the narrow streets, setting off car alarms and dogs as they go. It's wonderfully social, and uniquely Durban with its warm mornings and luminescent sunrises. Once my husband and I joined this group my quality of life changed immeasurably. Being outdoors, pounding the pavement foot after foot, discovering new roads and routes, chatting to new friends, pushing my body to be fitter, greeting the sun with gratitude and the feeling of being proactive, combined to banish all traces of doom and gloom.

One day Berto took me running along a beach trail in an area called Umhlanga, close to our house. The trail is a thin dirt track, which passes across a lagoon and then twists and turns its way down to the beach. Running it is tricky, as you have to look

out for branches overhead and gnarled roots that may trip you up. The whole experience was utterly exhilarating for me, and I became hooked on trail running. We found a group which met twice a week and ran one of the many nature paths and trails to be found in and around Durban. On the weekends we'd head out into the sugar cane fields, along the beach or across the rickety bridges above the mangrove swamps. We'd hear fish eagles calling at the river mouth and see monkeys in the trees above us, but luckily never any snakes! Sometimes we'd head out into the bush reserves for longer runs and be greeted by zebra or springboks grazing idly. Running planted my feet firmly on the ground in Durban, and tethered my heart there, too. As my heart opened, inspiration came flooding back and I began to write about my international life and raising global children.

I felt engaged and involved, as though through rediscovering my connection to Durban, I was rediscovering myself. I remembered what I used to love about my hometown—the sunshine, the laid-back vibe, the tropical heat and the red earth—and gradually I became less resentful about having to live there. My boys spent their early childhood barefoot and on the beach, eating fruit straight from the trees, and experiencing racial, ethnic and religious diversity in a richer way than they ever will again. Durban's outdoor lifestyle and beautiful nature make it a paradise for children. So often when we long for change all we experience is sameness, yet when we calm our wandering hearts and find peace in a place, the winds of change blow with greater force. I had found my peace in Durban, but we soon discovered that Berto's next role would be in The Netherlands. As I sit here in frosty Holland, the African sun a shimmering memory, I wonder if we were crazy to leave again. My kids certainly think so.

I look back at our time in Durban and recognize it as the gift it was. My sons connected with their roots; they experienced

first-hand the zest for life that South Africans have. They spent three years naked and free, learning about wild animals and witnessing immense natural beauty. That would have been enough to make me love Durban again, but in those three short years my hometown crept under my skin and became a part of me. Became, perhaps, the most cherished part of my story thus far. Returning home deepened my connection to my country, and added a kaleidoscopic layer to my international life. When I'm in Durban, I carry the world within me. When I'm in the world, Durban is always in my heart.

Lucille is a writer and mother of three who grew up between worlds in the UK and South Africa. As an adult she has lived in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. She repatriated to South Africa for a short time, where she finally realized just how strong Africa beats in her heart.

Mini coaching from Cate, Doreen & Helen:

Lucille did three very important things to make re-entry a positive experience. First, she was honest about how she felt—detached, resentful, trapped. She didn't minimize her feelings or sweep them under the rug. Second, she reframed re-entry from the end of her international life to a deepening of it. Third, she applied the same strategies for creating a satisfying life abroad to her new life at home. Not only did she become proactive in finding common ground with new people in order to build a shared history, she also set out to rediscover her familiar environment in a new way: by foot. Doing these three key things helped Lucille find confidence and connection on her own terms in re-entry.

Reflection questions:

- How do I feel in re-entry? How do I want to feel?
- How can I reframe re-entry?
- Which strategies that I used to create my life abroad can I use in re-entry?

[Click here](#) for more re-entry help and resources.

Conclusion

Let's return for a minute to the image of the spacecraft speeding towards planet earth. During your time abroad, you've built and established new experiences, new perspectives and new memories. Some of it, you need to leave behind, and other parts will continue to exist. Though you can do calculations and have certain expectations, the exact nature of the burn-up as you enter the earth's atmosphere won't be known until much further down the line when enough time has passed to examine it all properly.

You've seen this concept time and again in the writings of the authors in this book. We're grateful to Deidra, Jerry, Michael, Melissa and Lucille for sharing their stories with us in all their rawness and glory. You've read that re-entry can be smooth, but it definitely isn't easy. Astronauts are often prepared for the logistics of the return home, but the emotional and psychological effects of the re-entry take more time to emerge. If you are facing re-entry sometime in the coming weeks / months / years – or if you're already in it—know that you are not alone. Many have navigated this path before you, and every single person has done it in a different way. There are no right or wrong ways—just your own path. In Jerry's words, "if smooth does not equal easy, then hard most certainly does not equal bad."

Our aim in putting this anthology together was to normalise talking about re-entry. To get it on the table. To let you know that anything goes. And of course to let you know what you can do to help the process along, so that you don't have to just "muddle through." We're here to help you – there's an appendix following the conclusion that lists resources for you to take advantage of. Get in contact with one of us so that we can help you through this challenging experience. Use re-entry as a time to go deeper—and seek help, whether in the form of an online group, a coach or a therapist.

One final thought: You may decide to return abroad again—many people do—but don't go in order to escape the pain of being back. Make sure you deal with the issues that arise before you leave again, or the likelihood is that they will keep coming up. Take advantage of the richness available to you through seeing your native country with new eyes and deepening your connection with it and with yourself. It may take some time and effort, but you will come out the other side! And you'll be better for it.

If you have an interesting re-entry story, do get in touch—we would love to have more stories to share with the world.

Wishing you a safe arrival and exciting onward journey.

Helen Watts, Cate Brubaker & Doreen Cumberford

Resources

We're here to help you! Below you'll find just a few of the resources we offer. Get in touch anytime!

Cate Brubaker, PhD:

Small Planet Studio, LLC

Email: cate@smallplanetstudio.com

Website: <http://www.SmallPlanetStudio.com/start> here

Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/smallplanetstudio/>

Re-entry workbook: *The Re-entry Roadmap: Find Your Best Next Step After Living Abroad*

<http://a.co/epWhW7l> (available on Amazon)

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Online re-entry course:

From Apprehensive to Quietly Confident—guiding you through finishing well in your expat location and preparing you to return to your home country: <http://wattsyourpathway.thinkific.com/courses/quietly-confident>