

BURN-UP

OR

SPLASH DOWN



surviving the culture shock of re-entry

MARION KNELL

BURN-UP

OR

SPLASH

D O W N

BURN-UP OR SPLASH DOWN

surviving the culture shock of re-entry

MARION KNELL



ATLANTA • LONDON • HYDERABAD

Authentic Publishing

We welcome your questions and comments.

USA PO Box 444, 285 Lynnwood Ave, Tyrone, GA, 30290
www.authenticbooks.com

UK 9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks, MK1 1QR
www.authenticmedia.co.uk

India Logos Bhavan, Medchal Road, Jeedimetla Village, Secunderabad
500 055, A.P.

Burn-up or Splash Down

ISBN-13: 978-1-932805-83-3

ISBN-10: 1-932805-83-4

Copyright © 2006 by Marion Knell

Published in 2007 by Authentic

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knell, Marion.

Burn-up or splash down : surviving the culture shock of re-entry / Marion Knell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-932805-83-3 (pbk.)

1. Missionaries--Psychology. 2. Reverse culture shock. I. Title.

BV2094.6.K54 2007

266.001'9--dc22

2006036997

Cover design: Paul Lewis

Interior design: Angela Lewis

Editorial team: Bette Smyth, Dana Bromley, Megan Kassebaum

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

PART I: GLOBAL NOMADS: SURVIVING THE BURN

Introduction	3
1. Re-Entry: What Is It?	7
Reverse Culture Shock	9
Change and Transition	11
Variables of Re-Entry	15
2. Re-Entry Stress	19
Sources of Stress	21
Signs of Cultural Stress	22
Coping with Re-Entry Stress	30
3. Preparing to Re-enter	35
Educating Yourself and Others	36
Saying Goodbye	38
Knowing Yourself	40
Having Realistic Expectations	42
Evaluating the Experience	43
4. Relocating	47
Identity	47
Employment	48
Finances	52
Housing	53
Family Needs	55
Social Skills	57
Spiritual Needs	59

5. Debriefing	63
Definition of Debriefing	64
The Use of Debriefing	66
How to Debrief	67
The Power of Debriefing	69
Children and Debriefing	70
How to Follow Up	72
Judging the Benefits	74

PART II: THIRD CULTURE KIDS: CATCHING THE WAVES

Introduction	77
---------------------	-----------

6. Who Am I?	81
Definition of Third Culture Kid	82
Benefits of the TCK Experience	85
Challenges of the TCK Experience	86
Discovering Yourself	88
Putting Your Life Back Together	90
Making Choices	93

7. The Emotional Roller Coaster	95
Revisiting the Past	97
Processing Emotions	101

8. Nuts and Bolts	111
How to Fit In	112
Finances, Feasts, and phones	115
Learning the Language	120
Choosing the Right School	123
Stamping Out Worry	129
Helpful TCK Websites	132

9. The Third Culture Community	133
Citizens of the World	135
Bridging the Gap	137
The Voyage of Self-discovery	139
Questions and Answers	141

PART III: ON THE RECEIVING END

Introduction	147
---------------------	------------

10. The Reception Committee	149
------------------------------------	------------

A Warm Welcome	150
A Good Listener	151
Practical Knowledge	153
Social and Cultural Illiteracy	155
Practical Provision	157
Financial Provision	158
Advice from Returning Expatriates	159

11. The Pilgrim Community	161
----------------------------------	------------

Pilgrim's Progress	164
TCKs in the Bible	167
The "Pedestal" Mentality	171
Moving On	175

Notes	181
--------------	------------

DEDICATION

To Siny Widmer and Arie Baak
dear friends and colleagues who have shared my journey

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Marjory Foyle and Dr. Debbie Lovell-Hawker
for their input and encouragement.

Part I

**GLOBAL NOMADS:
SURVIVING THE BURN**

INTRODUCTION

“Houston—we have a problem.” That classic understatement by Jim Lovell, commander of Apollo 13, later echoed by Tom Hanks in the film of the same name, riveted millions of viewers to their television screens. With bated breath the world waited to see if the crew would make it. And would they ever be the same again?

Using the re-entry of a spaceship as a metaphor for re-entry into one’s “home” culture is not a new idea, but it does have special resonance—and not just because of the word. Making a successful splashdown requires getting the timing, the angles, the steering, and the recovery procedures just right. It took years of planning and research and the skills of over two million people to see the Apollo 11 mission successfully accomplished. Apollo 13 made it home only because all systems were shut down, other than those necessary to keep the crew alive and get them back into the earth’s atmosphere.

However, many returnees would say the analogy doesn't go far enough. They don't just feel like a returning spaceship—they feel like aliens on a flying saucer from another planet! The conversation goes something like this:

“So how does it feel to be coming home?”

“What do you mean *home*?”

“How long has it taken for you to feel settled?”

“What's this word *settled*?”

“How do you feel now that you're back?”

“When does the next plane leave?”

They feel like they're floating in space, never to feel truly part of any one place, never knowing how or where to settle. And they feel as if they are totally on their own in this.

While people anticipate that going overseas will require major changes in their lifestyles and thinking, few anticipate the difficulties they will face upon return. Companies and mission agencies may run preassignment orientation programs, but not postassignment programs. This book is intended as a survival manual for those undertaking the journey. It is designed to help people plan for departure, develop coping strategies, and unpack the experience of living overseas. Because children growing up overseas have a unique experience, there's one whole section devoted to their needs.

You *can* make it back into whichever part of the earth's atmosphere you're destined for. There *are* people around who speak your language, who have survived the impact. But you need to have the heat shields in place, the life-support systems working, and a good reception committee on the other end, steering you back.

Happy landings!

“Their trajectory may be off; their thrusters may be frozen; their guidance systems may be malfunctioning; their heat shield could be cracked; their parachutes may be three blocks of ice. Clearly there are some obstacles to be overcome. (*Apollo 13*, the film)

— 1 —

RE-ENTRY: WHAT IS IT?

The following was written by someone who was evacuated in a crisis situation:

Perhaps my experience of rapid re-entry is more common than once it was—as with re-entry from space, too rapid a descent is likely to cause more damage. There was a deep sense of being out of control and driven by circumstances, and the questions of the moral rightness of leaving when national colleagues could not. A debriefing meeting with all staff and agency representatives within ten days of return was very helpful, though the sense of disorientation

and uncertainty continued. It was only when I moved on to new ventures that I began to feel really settled.

Is that experience confined to those who have to leave their place of employment and residence at a moment's notice? By no means. Even those who had plenty of advance notice of an imminent return (six to twelve months) spoke of "frustration;" "being stretched all the time;" "feeling confused," "disoriented," and "out of things."

The use of the word *re-entry* makes the assumption that this is a return to something familiar, something you left and desire to return to. The crew of a spaceship leaves the shores of their homeland, makes a journey into the unfamiliar territory of space, and then re-enters the orbit of the world where they came from and where they belong. The expatriate who has lived overseas for a significant period of time—this can be as little as two years—may expect to be turning the clock back, only to discover that there is nothing familiar or repetitive in the experience. Rather, they are entering a new world, not re-entering the old. Someone has described it this way: "We were told before we left that we would be cloud-shaped forever. Coming from round holes going to square. We would not fit in either world comfortably ever again. There are no short cuts to feeling comfortable." It should be noted that some people have no significant problems with their transition and manage it successfully in spite of the differences.

Most employees are given some sort of cross-cultural orientation course before being sent on an overseas placement. They, therefore, anticipate that they will be faced with major differences in customs, values, and social mores. What many fail to realize is that upon return to what they presume will be famil-

iar—home—they will encounter culture shock similar to that which they experienced when first arriving overseas. This has been termed “reverse culture shock.”

It may happen for two reasons. The first is that things have changed in their absence. Neighborhoods, currency, banking systems, and recreational pursuits all undergo regular overhauls. When you’re living in a society, some changes are almost imperceptible; but, even if they are major changes, day-to-day encounters with them breed familiarity, so that they become part of the fabric of life. Moreover, the speed of change is such that you have only to be away for a short time for huge changes to take place. The acceleration of technology, in particular, drives the rate of change.

Second, the expatriates themselves have changed by virtue of living in another cultural context. And that change is likely to have gone unnoticed by them. They return home, feeling they are much the same people who went away and expecting to slot back into their place in the family and society. But not only have they changed, their friends and family have changed and moved on too. The gaps they left in people’s lives have closed up and been filled by other people and other activities.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Most people going overseas are familiar with the concept of culture shock. In 1970, Philip Bock in his book *Culture Shock: A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology*, defined culture shock as: “Primarily an emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control and predict another’s behavior.”¹

John Cox, in his *Handbook for Overseas Doctors*, said: “Culture shock represents a complex gamut of feelings that may follow the abrupt change of environment after a move to a new country. Needless to say, various other factors influence this reaction. Feelings of confusion and disorientation similar to bereavement may emerge.”² The term “reverse culture shock” indicates the re-emergence of the same culture shock symptoms on return home as were experienced on first arrival overseas. There are several reasons for its emergence.

Re-entry is a period marked by a lack of signposts, things that give meaning and shape to everyday life, such as the locality, the corner shop, the school gates, the daily routine, the places, and the people who are woven into our lives. Suddenly, everything is whipped away. And it is sudden. In the days before air travel, people had a two-month unwind period while they sailed home. Today they may get a few hours on a plane, so the change is immediate and abrupt. There is no instant cure for the loneliness, homesickness, disappointment, and grief felt at departure.

A retired, North American missionary said: “My first re-entry experience was very painful. I had been in North Africa for over four years. The decision to return for the summer came suddenly because of the 1967 war and my father’s illness. I was not at all prepared for the need to readjust to life. No one had mentioned that my family, friends, church, and I would all have changed during those fifty-two months of my absence.”

Reverse culture shock is also reinforced by the clash of values many people feel returning to their homeland. After some years living in a different society with different values and priorities, the expatriate subconsciously, or in some cases consciously, adopts many of these values. For those who have been in a

people-intensive culture, the independence, impersonal nature, and time-conscious quality of Western society may arouse considerable antagonism. Far from embracing the culture that they left, they find themselves interrogating it, judging, and, in many cases, condemning it.

On their return from Nepal, one couple said: “We can’t read the cultural signs any more. We want to stop and chat, to pass the time of day, just to have some human contact. But we need to be processed efficiently and coolly so that the next consumer can be dealt with. And if it can be done by a letter, e-mail, or phone, it will be—a personal visit is just not possible.”

Reverse culture shock also sets in because *home* has been idealized and cannot possibly meet unrealistic expectations. The passage of time tends to dim our memories of the bad things and accentuate the positive. Most parents can remember how cute their babies were but tend to gloss over the sleepless nights. If the period overseas has been a particularly difficult one, the expectations tend to be higher.

CHANGE AND TRANSITION

Change as a process is external; it refers to an alteration in the environment, a different context for living. Transition is internal and it takes time.

Dr. David Pollock in *Third Culture Kids* identified the following five stages of cultural transition:³

1. **Involvement.** A state in which you feel you belong in a place and society; people know you; you are

committed and have meaningful relationships and responsibilities.

2. **Leaving.** A time when you celebrate, grieve, and say farewells. You withdraw from responsibilities, commitments, and relationships. It is a stage marked by a mixture of emotions, such as excitement, anticipation, grief, and guilt.
3. **Transition.** The period when you first arrive in the new situation. It is best defined in the word *chaos*—feeling frustrated, confused, purposeless, and ignorant, not knowing people, places, and social skills. This can affect mental, physical, and spiritual health.
4. **Entering.** The moment when things begin to come together and make sense again, when you discover the route map. This is a constructive phase, when a new sense of control is developed, a sense of significance and security. At this point, a person is willing to experiment, to try out some of the newly acquired skills and experiences.
5. **Reengagement.** The point when the person feels secure and involved again, accepted and belonging. Re-adaptation has occurred, and a sense of personal security and identity has been reestablished.

All of this takes at least one year. We tend to want to invest our time and energy in beginnings, but we need to tackle endings first, to give ourselves time to acknowledge our emotions and deal with them.

T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding* said:⁴

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

The following is a list of questions I often use with returnees to help unpack the nature of change and their responses to it. You might like to use it for yourself if you are in a time of uprooting.

- Complete this sentence: “Change is . . .”
- Of all the changes you have been through, which one do you think you handled the best? Why?
- Complete this sentence: “The best thing about change is . . .”
- What is the toughest change in your life so far? Why?
- What is the best advice for someone in the midst of change?

Returnees came up with a wide selection of adjectives to complete the first sentence. “Change is: exciting, tiring, constant, unpredictable. . . .” The response is of course determined, in part, by the current stage of transition. Someone who has just arrived may be caught up in the honeymoon period, the time when everything is exciting and new. If it is their first taste of bacon in two years, or the thrill of hot running water, then it is a pleasurable experience. Or it may all be *so* new that they feel overwhelmed, out of control. A woman who had been abroad for four years and

was on her first visit home recalled: “I was met by my family and couldn’t keep my eyes open for the two-hour drive from the airport. My mother had baked a cake to celebrate, and all I could do was go to bed!”

A returnee’s reaction is also shaped by previous experiences of change. A person’s experience of one move will very much influence attitudes toward the next move. If the last move was a positive experience, then the anticipation for the next will be that things will be fine. A negative experience leaves people with feelings of apprehension and anxiety, anticipating and dreading the problems.

Change is a normal part of life for everyone, and this is particularly true of any transition. Stress invariably accompanies change. A certain amount of stress is good for us because it keeps our lives in tension and motivates us to meet responsibilities. Knowing our sources of stress and likely responses to them helps us cope in demanding situations. The next chapter will look more deeply at re-entry stress.

The amount of stress a person in transition feels is intensified by two things: (1) the period of time involved (the shorter the time, the more painful the experience), and (2) the differences between the point of departure and the point of completion. Apart from the rapid nature of re-entry already referred to, in most cases, there is a world of difference (often literally) between the point of departure and the point of completion.

When it comes to re-entry, we must factor in the culture a person has lived in and the degree to which the person has identified with it. The closer the identification and the more rigid the cultural mores of that society, the harder it will be to readjust to

life back in the passport culture. This is particularly significant for children who have been born and brought up overseas. Their sense of identity is put under intense pressure when they return, at whatever age.

VARIABLES OF RE-ENTRY

Several variables affect the ability to cope with the stress of re-entry. The variables we will consider are timing, reasons for re-entry, economic standards, preparation and support systems, and personality traits.

Timing

A crisis evacuation is obviously loaded with a lot more anguish than a planned withdrawal for whatever reason. Rapid re-entry denies the person the opportunity to say goodbye to people and places and bring closure to the period spent abroad. It prevents adequate plans for disposing of belongings and making provision for an appropriate place of reception.

It is generally acknowledged that people withdraw from a situation six months before they actually leave. So a person needs at least six months to make preparations for departure and arrival. Given that the individual has both a life cycle and a career cycle to consider, and family life has its own cycles and seasons, deciding when to make the move becomes critical. Juggling school years with job responsibilities and deciding financial terms and replacement staff can be a harrowing task. It is hard to get it just right for everyone. The right time to move for one child may be

unfortunate for another. If possible, moves should be made at the best time for the one who least likes change.

Reasons for Re-Entry

Many folk ostensibly come home for their children's education. I say *ostensibly* because children's education is often given as the acceptable reason for quitting a post that is not suitable for other reasons, such as location, team dynamics, and social incompatibility.

Another reason for re-entry can be retirement. In this case, the person is not only giving up home and friends but also, for many, their identity as well. This is reinforced by Western society, which begins by asking a new acquaintance, "What's your name?" and follows it up with, "What do you do?" Our identities are vested in our social roles and, for many, the absence of a role creates a confusion of identity. After thirty years overseas, one returnee reflected: "I was sad at leaving my friends who were loved and relationships and situations that were part of my life. I was perplexed at my new identity and what I was supposed to be doing, a sort of detachment and inertia, a feeling of uselessness, some fear at suddenly realizing I was getting old and that life had taken a major turn."

Some choose re-entry and some have re-entry forced on them: the firm decides their services are needed elsewhere; a national is promoted to take over an operation; funding for a project is withdrawn; or the death of the wage earner means the rest of the family can no longer stay. In such cases, there is sometimes a sense of being a victim and needing to find someone to blame. This immediately sets the stage for conflict upon re-entry. The

desirability of the change colors the perception and the attitude toward the process.

Economic Standards

The difference in the standard of living between the place left and the place of arrival can also be enormous. Areas of the world where it is normal to have a live-in maid at very little cost are a world away from suburban Europe or the United States where the cost of housing is sky-high and help, if it can be found, is exceedingly expensive.

Similarly, the expatriate worker can find himself or herself moving from being a big fish in a little pond to being a little fish in a big pond. This can affect self-esteem and coping strategies as well as the ability to take on new responsibilities.

Preparation and Support Systems

The degree to which someone is prepared or has the opportunity to do preparation before returning can immensely improve the process. Similarly, the situation to which someone is returning will obviously help or hinder. When war erupted in her country of service and she had to leave immediately, one nurse wrote: "I was returning home to nothing and to no one. Everything I owned had been stolen."

Two things play significant roles in a returnee's readjustment: how much he or she has answered the "What next?" question and how much help is available in navigating the course.

Personality Traits

Finally, and not least, a person's disposition shapes his or her attitude toward change, feelings toward what awaits, and tolerance levels toward strange and sometimes unacceptable behavior. "Know yourself" is a helpful adage when it comes to coping with change and transition.

“We do not see things as they are; we see things as we are. (Talmud)⁵