Strangers in Their Own Land

How Americans raised abroad adjust to returning to their own culture

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Chuck Ball recently came home to Longview, Wash., although he's not sure what "home" means. His passport says he is an American, and English is what he speaks.

But after living for 17 years in Kenya, where his parents were missionaries, Mr. Ball knows he is neither American nor Kenyan.

Ball is what's known as a TCK, a "third culture kid," a youth with tenuous roots in two cultures, but an international outlook. The US State Department estimates that there are 3.2 million Americans living abroad. Tens of thousands of these are children and teens like Chuck Ball - living with missionary, diplomatic, military and corporate parents - growing up with attitudes and values molded by two or more cultures.

In the best of all possible outcomes, TCKs grow up to be the prototype multilingual citizen and ideal worker of the future, sought after professionally as markets and jobs expand globally.

But for many youths that first return "home" to American soil after years away can be a jolt. Unsure of their identity, they can feel disconnected and different.

With a new driver's license, and a part-time job, Ball now attends a community college in the Northwest, where there are plenty of adjustments. For example, he finds the open discussions about sex disconcerting. "People are so blatant at the college in their talk about sexuality," he says. "They don't really hold anything back, and that gets to me after a while," he says.

Although he is white, the faces on campus seem odd to him. "It's really strange to see all these white faces. It just doesn't seem right. It's not the black skin I miss, but the great personalities [of] my black friends."

Linda Bell, who lived in Africa for years, and is the author of the book, "Hidden Immigrants: Legacies of Growing Up Abroad," says, "It can be like quicksand when TCKs return because they want to fit in, but most don't know how to start."

She suggests that Matthew Shepard, the gay college student murdered in Laramie, Wyo., last month, was a TCK, and this may have contributed to the crime against him.
Although he grew up in Casper, Wyo., Mr. Shepard spent much of his high school years in Switzerland and Saudi Arabia, where his father worked. He returned to Laramie to attend the University of Wyoming, planning eventually to join the diplomatic corps.

"I didn't know Matthew," says Ms. Bell, "but I would say he was a young man starting from block one. ... Most TCKs have been in small communities where they have been accepted. That he was gay meant that people [overseas] may have said, he's gay. So what?" Ball participated in a TCK seminar shortly after leaving Kenya that helped him understand the challenges he faced. The seminar was given by Matthew Neigh of Barnabas International in Colorado Springs, Colo. "He pointed out so much of what was going to happen to me," says Ball. "It was helpful to know that it was normal for TCKs."

Mr. Neigh, who grew up in Vienna with missionary parents and now gives seminars all over the world, says TCKs first need to know they have choices.

"That's the bottom line," he says. "They are not victims of being raised in another country. Often they think they are a victim of having been dragged all over the world."

'I look like an American, but inside I don't feel completely American.'
- Matthew Neigh, Barnabas International

The seminars are informational, not therapy sessions or confessionals. Participants share experiences and realize they may not be normal Americans, but they can be normal TCKs.

"In the seminar I suddenly realized I was not alone," says Margie Ulsh, who spent her formative years in Indonesia. "The seminar was not a life changer," she says, "but helped me change my attitude and perspective about myself."

Along with seminars, there is a growing list of organizations designed to help TCKs cope in their passport country and abroad. Three of them are TCK World, a Web site (www.expat-repat.org/home.html) offering articles, interviews and news about TCKs, The Nomad Brat Journal (www.nomad-tbj.com) covering issues for military and other TCKs, and the Foreign Service Youth Foundation of the US State Department in Washington, DC. Greater access to the Internet, CNN, ubiquitous American movies and TV shows, as well as more institutional awareness of the challenges facing TCKs may be easing the transition for many youths.

"I don't know that it is as difficult as it used to be to repatriate back to one's passport culture," says Neigh, but adds that all TCK returns are different.

In Neigh's experience in the late 70s, society wasn't quick to welcome him back to the US. "TCKs can come back to their passport cultures," he says, "and not be accepted because they are not like the mainstream, and the people that offer to be friends at first are often not the most upstanding citizens because they are not mainstream."

Neigh says, "Being a TCK doesn't go away with time. For my parents, being a missionary abroad was their job. But being a TCK is who I am. I look like an American, but I don't feel completely American."

For Mrs. Ulsh, now living in Lawrenceville, Ga., home is not a geographic location. "I live in two worlds," she says.

"I live comfortably here because I made it a point to learn about American history as well as talking with my neighbors. But as soon as I am around other TCKs, I feel like I am back home."

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