There and Almost Back Again

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THERE AND ALMOST BACK AGAIN

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Holley Adcock’s teaching career spans over thirty years and four continents. Her early education took place in Ohio, and she received her B.Ed. from the University of Hawaii. She then spent twenty-three years teaching at the American School in London, interrupted by a one-year teaching exchange at Kamehameha School in Honolulu. In 1993, she moved to Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa, to teach at the International Community School. In 1998, she arrived in Bogotá, Colombia, to take up a teaching position at Colegio Nueva Granada. In 2000, Holley returned to the U.S. and began teaching at the Bank Street School for Children. She lives with her husband and younger daughter in Suffern, New York.
When asked to assess my thirty years overseas, I was faced with a rather daunting task. Where to start to unravel the tangled skein of memories so rich and deeply embedded that a whiff of an odor or a faint sound will bring single images so sharply into focus that I am for a moment on that London street, in that West African market, or puffing my way up that Bogotano mountain. Then the ache and longing for that other life creeps in to replace the reality of the now.

The reality of the now has changed a great deal since I first attempted to organize my experiences last summer. Most people tend to look at the time prior to September 11th as an age of innocence, and I guess it was for America. The rest of the world has been living much closer to the threat of daily violence. The security measures adopted here after September 11th have long been in effect in many places. My husband, Doug, and I experienced the dangers of terrorism and hatred in each of the countries where we lived. We were much too close for comfort to an IRA bomb in London, caught up in an Ivoirian against Ghanaian riot in West Africa, and lived with the daily threat of kidnapping by guerrillas in Bogotá.

What we believe and what we do is inextricably linked with both individual and national identity. Examining our beliefs and actions helps us define ourselves. In what follows, I attempt to investigate the changes I experienced during the years of living and working abroad. There is a well-researched and documented phenomenon known as the “Third Culture Kid” (TCK) or “Global Nomad.”* These are children who have spent at least part of their childhood or adolescence in a country other than their own. While the experiences of these children vary greatly, they nonetheless develop certain common patterns. Ruth Useem (1993) describes the reentry process of those who have lived abroad in the following way:

The answer to the question of how long it takes them [TCKs] to adjust to American life is: they never adjust. They adapt, they find niches, they take risks, they fail and pick themselves up again. They succeed in jobs they have created

*This phenomenon was first noted by Ruth Hill Useem. In 1993, Useem, along with her husband, John Useem, Dr. Ann Baker-Cottrell, and Dr. Kathleen A. Finn Jordan, wrote a series of five articles about Third Culture Kids for Newslinks, the newspaper of International Schools Services.
to fit their particular talents, they locate friends with whom they can share some of their interests, but they resist being encapsulated. Their camouflaged exteriors and understated ways of presenting themselves hide the rich inner lives, remarkable talents, and often strongly held contradictory opinions on the world at large and the world at hand.

Although most of Useem’s research has been directed towards the effects of overseas living on children, I think much of the TCK research can be applied equally well to adults.

To know how my sense of self has changed in thirty years abroad, I need to look back at who I was when I boarded the ship *Nieuw Amsterdam* in August 1970 to sail from New York to Southampton. All of twenty-two years old, married for three years, I was clutching my newly acquired B.Ed. degree from the University of Hawaii. Needless to say, we were young and naive. Professionally, I knew only what I had experienced as a child in the Toledo, Ohio, school system and seen in the public schools of Honolulu. Doug was coming straight out of the very traditional Punahou School, which early missionaries had established to prepare their sons for Yale. It was the end of the sixties and it was impossible not to be ready for change and hopeful that change could happen. Doug and I were quite willing to cast aside the more limiting aspects of our Midwestern upbringing and open ourselves to new adventures in Europe. We have never really shed some of the more ingrained mores of our backgrounds, like the Puritan work ethic or the friendly outgoing manner of most Midwesterners. However, we were sure there were other ways to do things than the way they were done in Ohio, New England, or even in Hawaii.

Hawaii helped to open our eyes to cultural diversity and set us on the road to being Global Nomads. It is an incredible blend of Polynesian, Asian, and European culture. There are even language issues in Hawaii. The Hawaiian language is still used in some formal settings, and a blend of Hawaiian, Portuguese, Chinese, and English forms the pidgin that is spoken on the street to delineate the kama’ainas (old timers) from the tourists. Yet, in many ways, Hawaii is similar to the U.S. mainland. In 1970, we were ready to stretch our wings, both personally and professionally.

Professionally, it could not have been a more opportune time to arrive at the American School in London (ASL). September 1970 saw the opening of a
new school building, which combined the K-12 school in one building. This, plus the playgrounds and headmaster’s home, took up an entire block in the posh St. John’s Wood area of London. The school was designed by Southern California architects with few windows, and was not very well suited to the cold, overcast, dreary British climate.

The late sixties and early seventies were a period of innovation in education. Most of us who lived through it remember some sweeping changes in the air. Because ASL was built at this time, it was designed to accommodate a free-flowing approach to education. Remember, this was the era when Summerhill was considered the height of liberal educational practice. Although ASL never resembled Summerhill in either philosophy or methodology, there was an effort to try to push the boundaries of traditional education during our first years there.

In the beginning, the school had an open-plan building. The areas were called pods, and these pods contained a whole age group of about 100 students. The pod was roughly divided into five classroom spaces with no walls in between. These spaces were called bays. There was a minimum of furniture and both teachers and students sat on the carpeted floor for much of the day.

During my first year as a sixth-grade teacher, we attempted to teach through learning centers. These were elaborate learning packages prepared by the teachers and placed at strategic points around the classroom. The students were to move through the learning tasks, seeking teacher help when needed. At least that was the theory. Students received weekly assignment sheets in each of the four major subjects. They left the pod for foreign language and other “special subjects.” The students were to plan their own time and move from one subject to another as they wished. What actually happened was a little different. Some students were required to spend part of a day in, for example, the math bay of the pod, because they were behind in this work. A fair amount of direct teaching took place, especially at the beginning of the week. Otherwise, the students had no clue how to start on the weekly work. When teachers got fed up with the behavior of a student or group of students, they would throw them out of that bay. I remember a girl named Jane who regularly got herself thrown out of all four subject-area bays by lunch, and would start the rounds again in the afternoon. One day, as I recall, she managed
to get thrown out of each class three times. Since the teachers were fairly tolerant, this was quite a feat. She certainly was a student who would have pushed the boundaries in any school.

By winter break, many teachers were crying for walls. However, there were worthwhile aspects of this open system of education that some of us fought to preserve. I realize that they still affect the way I teach today.

First, it was clear from observing students, long before “learning styles” were even a twinkle in anyone’s eye, that some students learned best in one way and some in another. I started offering choices of assignments and assessments back then and have continued to do so. Without the freedom to observe students in an unstructured environment for long periods of time, I do not think I would have come to that conclusion so quickly.

Second, the wall-free curriculum also required a great deal of flexibility on the part of both teachers and students. You had to be quick and think on your feet when one plan did not work because your students did not have the background you thought, or because the neighboring class was showing a film. Our students came from all over the United States, Canada, and many other countries, as well. In the early years, we had a large number of families from Oklahoma and Texas who were involved in developing the oil fields in the North Sea. After the oil fields were up and running, bankers and other businessmen from the U.S. replaced the oil men and women. There were always diplomats’ and business executives’ children from all over the world. There was even a smattering of Brits who, for a variety of reasons, preferred ASL to local options. Although the students were all reasonably bright and economically upwardly mobile, their educational backgrounds were diverse. Flexibility and multilevel planning, teaching, and assessing were needed. The staff was seventy percent American and thirty percent British. My British colleagues had a great deal to offer in terms of flexible teaching styles and methods. British primary schools at that time had the reputation for being more innovative than U.S. elementary schools. The British educators were also used to dealing with a multiethnic immigrant student body.

Third, the lack of walls and limited structure made me a team player. Although I tended to avoid conflict as a young adult, I soon learned to stand up for
aspects of the curriculum and schedule that I felt were important without stomping on the ideas of others. I learned to compromise to achieve the greatest student learning. I learned that sharing problems about curriculum or students really did help me reach a better solution. Although I have worked on teams for most of my career, it was that first team that taught me that the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts.

My early days at ASL were before any of the Third Culture Kid research was widely known. We just viewed the students as foreign nationals living abroad. Some of them loved the experience and some hated it. At times, students would act out at school to “get even” with their parents for making them leave their home environment. Usually this phase did not last long, and oddly enough it was often those same students who cried the hardest when it was time to go “home.” Students do not really recognize the TCK identity until they return “home” and realize that neither they nor their home are the same as when they left. Certainly adjusting to a new culture, even a once-familiar one, poses considerable challenges, whether you are a child or an adult.

On a personal level, my first year in London was a great challenge. Everyone had said, “Oh, it is easy to go to England. They speak the same language.” Wrong! Even without certain dialectical differences — which made my Midwestern, nasaltuned ears wonder if the Cockney publican really was speaking the same language — the vocabulary and phrasing were greatly different. After being looked at askance the first time I asked at the greengrocer’s, “Do ya hav any tomaytoes?” I learned to say, “Have you any tomahtoes?” with the proper light inflection. Every aspect of life brought new vocabulary. First, you had to figure out which shop to go to for which item. This was before the days of supermarkets in the U.K. You went to the greengrocer’s for vegetables, the butcher’s for meat, the bakery for bread, the grocer’s for nonperishables, and the ironmonger’s for tools or nails. Shopping was done on a daily basis, since British refrigerators were mostly of the minute, under-the-counter variety. On the bright side, milk (butter, cheese, and orange juice, too, if you wanted) was delivered to your doorstep. In the area where we first lived, this was accomplished by a horse-drawn cart, and even when we left England in 1993, milk still came in bottles and was not homogenized, so the cream would
settle to the top.

Each task that Doug and I attempted that first year brought new terms and vocabulary, often accompanied by frustration. Figuring out how to set up utilities accounts for our new flat (apartment) was a process requiring us to visit several offices, pay huge deposits, and sign documents in which we promised a pound of flesh to the company if we missed our payments. Imagine our surprise when we learned that our new car came with a boot and a bonnet. When the plumber came to fix a leak, we were asked for our spanner and looked at each other blankly. Even school was not free of language stress. My mouth fell open the first time a British colleague asked me for a rubber.

Having Doug to share all this helped a great deal. We survived and gradually settled into a comfortable way of life. In the early years, we worked hard teaching and directing student plays during term time, and then scampered off to the Continent to play hard during the holidays. In 1975 our first daughter, Gwendolyn, was born. Just as happens to families in all cultures, the new baby made us decide to buy a house. We settled into our community. Although we were often referred to as “those Yanks on Gratton Terrace,” we actually got to know our neighbors quite well. We gardened, gossiped over the back fence, and threw an annual Christmas Eve party to which neighbors and school friends alike flocked. Gwen played with the neighborhood children and later babysat for them. Although Doug and I were never fully British, we were no longer completely American, either. We used to refer to ourselves jokingly as citizens of the mid-Atlantic.

Ambiguity about nationality was less the case for our daughter Gwen. She went to private British schools from age three to age thirteen. She did everything possible to deny her American background. When in primary school, she would not allow us to speak to her within two blocks of the school gate, lest our American accents give her away. Although her friends knew she was American, she herself rarely referred to it. In her early years, Gwen was really British. Oh, she had American parents and visited the States once a year, but her English nanny and her school equipped her with all the correct cultural baggage to blend in perfectly with her classmates. This was brought home to us when Gwen was about six and we were dining out. My husband wondered why waiters often asked him if he was finished
before clearing his plate, even when it was entirely empty. Gwen promptly told him that it was because he did not place his knife and fork together at the correct angle to the plate to let the waiter know he was finished eating. So, throughout childhood, Gwen was more a British child than a Third Culture Kid.

The complexity of her cultural identity increased when at age thirteen Gwen asked to attend the American School in London. High on her list of reasons was that it was coeducational. She was tired of being in a single-sex school. She was also frightened by the daunting exam system in British schools. At that time, Britain was changing from O levels to GCSE exams. At age sixteen, she would have taken at least eight GCSEs. Then she would have faced two years of study for her A levels, specializing in only three subjects. Gwen was a somewhat rebellious teen and probably would have been so in any school system. She never felt entirely a part of the American School and questioned the validity of any formal education for a while. She maintained a base of British friends and tended to opt for non-American friends within ASL.

By the time Gwen graduated from ASL, she had had her fill of American education and wanted to go to a British university. The University of Sussex accepted her on the strength of her APs. After a break year spent working at various odd jobs in London, she went unenthusiastically to “read” sociology at the University of Sussex. Three years later, she gained a B.A., and is now a paramedic in Detroit completing prerequisites for a nursing degree. Because she took only sociology courses at university, as is the system in Britain, she had none of the survey courses that most American colleges require.

Gwen’s education was a combination of British and American. From her British primary school, she gained a strong ability to write. It was standard for her to turn out a thorough and proofread essay in thirty minutes. It had to be legibly handwritten, since there were no classroom computers in those days. From her courses at the American School, she learned to question what she read and to keenly watch world events with an analytical eye. She is entirely bidialectical. The nationality of her telephone callers is always immediately apparent by the dialect she unconsciously adopts. Her heart and soul are British, but she is physically present in the U.S. Although she would certainly meet the criteria of a Third Culture
Kid, her dominant national identity is British, and she has had to deal only with two cultures that claim to share a language.

Our younger daughter, Elizabeth, more closely meets the criteria of a TCK. After attending an English preschool, she started prekindergarten at age four at ASL. With a determination to see more of the world than Europe and North America, we moved to the Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa at the end of Elizabeth’s first grade year. She experienced grades two through six at the International Community School in Abidjan. When asked where “home” is, she always responds, “Abidjan.”

Both Doug and I taught in this school, which was a tightly knit community of students, teachers, and parents from more than fifty different countries. The students were diverse in experiences, cultures, and values, yet they were united by tolerance and a desire to participate actively in the life of the school. Creating and sustaining this community was the clearly defined goal of faculty, administration, and parents. Although this ideal was not always reached, it was never ignored. International schools such as this often serve as a social center for the community as a whole. Afterschool and evening activities were numerous and well attended.

In Abidjan, we lived in an apartment complex with other teachers, and in many ways Elizabeth had a very secure world. Everyone knew her within our immediate community. Her French gradually improved, and she often was the one to do the bargaining at the marché. She could always get the better price, because she was the cute little girl who would keep at it until she got the price she wanted. We would even lend her out to friends on occasion. She assumed the role of best linguist in the family, and this gave her the confidence to use her language in a wider context.

After five years of what was an idyllic experience in many ways for all of us, we moved to Bogotá, Colombia. This move happened to coincide with Elizabeth’s serious entry into adolescence. We arrived in Bogotá speaking little or no Spanish. The school where we taught, Colegio Nueva Granada, was a bilingual Colombian school. The student body was ninety percent Colombian and ten percent other nationalities. Except for Spanish and Colombian social studies, classes were taught in English. Nonetheless, Spanish was the language of the students in all nonclassroom
settings. Fortunately, Elizabeth was a quick language learner. However, even being able to speak fluent Spanish by her second year in Colombia could not make her a Colombian. Her friends were mainly “gringos,” and she often felt only a peripheral part of the school community.

Doug and I settled in more easily. This was partially because Doug was a principal and therefore a boss, or “jefe.” Everyone went out of the way to make us feel comfortable. Elizabeth’s dad’s being a principal only added to her discomfort and difficulty in adjusting to the new environment, however. Although Elizabeth ended up having some regrets about leaving Colombia after two years, she was a big part of our decision to go. She could never fully be part of the school community. Even her course requirements as a non-Colombian were different. Elizabeth’s sojourn in Colombia gave her fluency in her third language, for which she is now very thankful. However, her seventh- and eighth-grade years were otherwise a painful period of trying to adjust to a school culture where the students had entered as a group at age four and would graduate together from the school. They all spoke another language, went to the same country clubs, and often were children of parents who had attended the school. It was like trying to swim upstream in a river full of rapids.

Both Gwen and Elizabeth faced the difficult years of adolescence, when one is searching for an identity and trying on different roles, in the midst of cultural confusion. It certainly added many facets to the search for self that adolescents face. I’m not sure that either of them appreciated the added complications at the time, but neither of them would have wanted to sacrifice their international experience for a totally American experience. After all, growing up in one place is no guarantee of protection from the slings and arrows of puberty.

Although all of us would have preferred to stay overseas, a new grandson and an aging mother-in-law tipped the balance in favor of returning to the States. We came “home” with a rich bag of experiences and memories. We came with a family language that is a mélange of American and British English, French, Spanish, and a few Hawaiian words thrown in for good measure. Our family culture is equally mixed. Elizabeth came with a fluency in French and Spanish that her parents never quite achieved, and an international identity. She is a true Global
Nomad or Third Culture Kid. Gwen, who came to the U.S. three years before we did, came as a transplanted Brit.

Doug and I came home as “Rip Van Winkles,” waking up after thirty years abroad. We found the United States a very different place from the one we had left in 1970. Our frequent visits and short stays had not prepared us for just how different life would be. It was not immediately obvious that we were foreigners in need of help. The fact that we were Third Culture Adults who had spent almost all of our adult lives living outside our own culture was not something we carried in our looks or in our accents. We wore the “camouflaged exteriors” of the Third Culture Adult.

We foolishly thought it would be easy to do things like get a driver’s license and open accounts with utility companies. After all, we had done so on three continents. We were wrong again! Adjusting to life in the States has been the most difficult adjustment of all. After a year and a half, I feel that I am acculturated. However, my patient colleagues will tell you that I don’t quite have all the pieces of the American puzzle in place. The thirty years spent exploring other cultures have made me a stranger in my own country. I think my friends have just decided that it is easier to learn what I mean with my British phrases and vocabulary than to totally Americanize me. They sigh and direct me to the loo or hand me a torch when I ask for it. So perhaps the specialists are right — Third Culture Kids and Adults never really adjust. We just “adapt, find niches, take risks, fail, and pick ourselves up again.”