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Mobility in metaphor: colourful descriptions of Third Culture Kids

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If a picture is worth a thousand words, then what is the worth of a metaphor? In the course of the tomes of readings for research on Third Culture Kids (TCKs), or Global Nomads (GNs), a previously unnoticed pattern was observed. I noticed that the profile and characteristics of TCKs were being described using a wide variety of metaphors. As I pondered the question, the late Neil Postman offered an explanation:

'Poets use metaphors to help us see and feel... A metaphor is not an ornament. It is an organ of perception. Through metaphors, we see the world as one thing or another ... it has always astonished me that those who write about the subject of education do not pay sufficient attention to the role of metaphor in giving form to the subject. In failing to do so, they deprive those studying the subject of the opportunity to confront its basic assumptions.' (Postman, 1996, p.174)

Yes, metaphors help sensitise and clarify for the uninitiated new and unfamiliar concepts. With regard to the relatively new understanding about the experiences and characteristics of TCKs/GNs, metaphors also help the subject express feelings and situations with few words but much symbolism and descriptive representation.

For example, TCKs have been described as 'cultural chameleons' (McCaig, 1996; Smith, 1996) due to their intercultural, linguistic, observation and adaptation skills.

'These intercultural linguistic skills are the markings of the cultural chameleon, the young participant observer who takes note of verbal and non-verbal cues and readjusts accordingly, taking on enough of the coloration of the social surroundings to gain acceptance while maintaining some vestige of identity as a different animal, an "other."' (McCaig, 1996, p. 100).

Fail (2001) described them 'rather like an iceberg – what is hidden is much larger than what is seen on the surface. The international features of the lives of those who responded reveal how multilingual, well travelled and cross-culturally experienced they are but do not necessarily expose what is going on under the surface.' (p. 218)

The ancient legend of the 'Phoenix' which burns up in flight, crashes to the ground but rises once again has been conjured up to describe GNs, as well. (Schaetti, 1996). This metaphor is used to describe the GN's process of

establishing their identity through the search for their own truth. The search leads to a decision about whether the GN will live in 'encapsulated' or 'constructive' marginality. If it is the latter, they may rise up in their positive self-awareness, instead of being trapped by their sense of being different.

The proverbial 'rolling stone' (Bell, 1996; Bell, 1997) describes the odysseys and resulting characteristics of TCKs. The rolling stone represents the constant motion and mobility of their lifestyle, yet, the final verdict, according to the author, is that the majority adjust well to their lot. Similarly, descriptions of the 'swinging door' (Merrill-Foster, 1996), 'nomads' (Balakrishnan, 1999) and 'Boomerang kids,' (McCaig, 1994) are additional snapshot descriptions of the mobility that is common to their lives.

To assuage the guilt and confusion of parents who raise their children overseas and then discover, to their bewilderment, that the resultant creature does not necessarily identify with their parents' culture, Bell (1999) writes about the beautiful 'pearls' that grow inside 'oysters.' She opines that the skills of cultural tolerance and understanding that TCKs develop should be cause for pride instead of guilt. This valuable gem, the pearl, is to be found growing among the foreign matter inside the oyster's shell.

A 'rubber-band nationality' (Smith, 1996) is created among those who live overseas for a considerable length of time and is promoted through the process of adaptation to foreign cultures (p. 196). This metaphor exemplifies the expanding and contracting of their national consciousness. 'It is an elastic concept of nationality for those who have incorporated foreign elements into their lives' (p. 200).

'Overseas Americans sometimes experience some conflict related to their sense of nationality. Because they are outside the nation's borders their ties to the group, that is, to the Americans in America, are loosened. The result is a kind of rubber-band nationality. Overseas American national consciousness, or sense of self as an American expands and contracts as he/she moves among different cultural settings' (p. 193).

The fact that TCKs are able to see and understand the relationships and connections between cultures has resulted in their being declared cultural 'bridges.' (McCaig, 1996; Willis *et al*, 1994; Killham, 1990). As such, they can serve the globalised world in the quest for inter-cultural understanding. The TCKs have the ability to connect different cultures, like a bridge, due to the sensitivity, awareness and perspective that their lifetime experiences have afforded them. One TCK used the 'camera' to describe his international experiences. "I gained a wider angle, I didn't have another film, I didn't have another camera, I had another lens. I could see wider, deeper, more contrast" (Fail, 2001, p. 28).

Recently a new term, 'boundary layer people' has been introduced to the cross-cultural arena (Hansen, 2003). This term comes from modern physics and refers to the molecular activity that takes place when the surfaces of two different materials rub against one another ... the two types of matter adapt to and accommodate one another. The boundary layer molecules are a mixture (p. 3). This metaphor has been used to describe immigrants to the US, as 'a generation who make the adaptations from a foreign culture to the ever-evolving America culture while embodying elements of both.' Isn't this reminiscent of what happens to TCKs as their 'molecular activity' comes into contact with the numerous cultures against which they have 'rubbed'?

Railways (Stempel, 1996) is a poem written by a TCK in order to describe the personal TCK experience. The poem makes use of additional related metaphors paralleling feelings to the station, the train, the tracks and to the journey. The image of a 'ghost train chugging through my blood' described the feelings of another TCK, even after 20 years back in the US:

'it goes unnoticed for long spells, imperceptibly pushing along my pulse, only to clatter randomly through my dreams ... underneath the rush and rattle of life, the little engine keeps nudging me like the phantom itch of an amputated limb.' (Seaman, 1996, p.51).

The need to establish a 'nest' (Pollock & van Reken, 2001) refers to the genetically programmed act that all living species have in common. The metaphor conjures up the familiar concept of a bird meticulously building its home up in a tree. TCKs have great difficulty in establishing a permanent definition of a physical home. Many have difficulty in deciding where to 'build their nest,' especially after multiple moves during their developmental years.

The difficult experience of returning to the original passport country typically takes place between High School graduation and university enrolment. However, it can also occur at an earlier age due to the cessation of the parents' overseas contract by the sponsoring group, or by a family decision. Whenever this return takes place, the literature has described it as a difficult, and often traumatic, experience. The metaphor most commonly used to describe this event is 're-entry,' as a rocket or shuttle enters the fire, heat and stress of the earth's atmosphere.

For some TCKs it is, indeed, a return to a place once vaguely familiar; for others 're-entry' is a misnomer, as they have never been there in the first place, except vicariously through the myths of their parents. Just as it takes skill and training to maneuver the space vehicle safely, thus sponsoring groups, schools, universities and parents are encouraged to prepare TCKs and their families for this challenging transition time. (Gratto, 1994; Jordan, 1981; McCaig, 1992; Pollock & van Reken, 2001; Smith, 1996; Salomek, 1989; Schaetti, 1996; Sotherden, 1992).

The famous fable by Hans Christian Anderson, *The Ugly Duckling*, has been recalled (Pollock, 1994) to describe the feelings of the GN who does not think or act like a duck, but looks like a duck and is expected to behave like one. How liberating and empowering for the duck when it learns that it is really a beautiful swan.

A 'crazy quilt childhood' (Kittredge, 1988) uses this mixed-pattern textile as metaphor. Similarly, the use of the *mola*, a unique Panamanian embroidery, describes in detail the result of a colorful lifetime of experiences:

'Pieces of bright-colored fabric ... are layered upon one another and attached temporarily at each corner ... As she continues to cut, fold, and stitch, a multihued pattern slowly emerges, finally coming together in a richly vibrant image of a fish or a lobster, for instance. The end result is a piece that has a solid hue on one side and emerges brilliantly into full color on the other. Each has the stamp of the creator's individuality but is borne of a distinct cultural heritage. So it is with our lives as global nomads, as TCKs. During childhood and beyond, all our experiences of mind, heart, body, and spirit – cultural, emotional, physical, geographical – all of the moves, the relationships, the places, the losses, the discoveries, the wonder of the world – are layered one upon another through time. Ultimately, to revel in the beauty of our personal mola-like tapestry means cutting, sometimes deeply, through these layers to reveal the richness and color beneath. This can be painful. It is the legacy of transition and change, and it is also the precursor to growth.' (Pollock & van Reken, 2001, xvii).

Perhaps the reason for this metaphoric proliferation is because metaphors are the most effective way in which to paint the picture of a new phenomenon. It offers the reader a colourful understanding of some of the characteristics and experiences of being a TCK, a relatively new cultural sub-group, which has grown in parallel with the globalised world in which we live. It is also a phenomenon which is not visible to the eye and thus a 'photo' would be useless. In descriptions about TCKs the writers use metaphor to describe the experience and the profile; in autobiographical writings, the TCKs use the metaphor to express and better understand their lives.

Postman (1996) claims that 'word weavers are the world makers.' Perhaps we should encourage more metaphoric weaving of words so that we can gain a better understanding of the third culture experience, which forms the patchwork-quilt-persona of our international school world.

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