

Boxed In

By: Robin Pascoe

“Moving boxes are a metaphor for expatriate life,” wrote the adaptation consultant on a chalkboard at the front of a makeshift briefing room. He had been flown into a major international city on a special assignment by his multinational corporation to brief spouses of newly-arrived employees on adaptation skills to overseas life. “Anyone care to comment?” he asked the group sitting before him.

“Yes, I have one,” announced one of the six women sitting in the hot, stuffy room. “Ever tried unpacking a moving box in this heat?”

“Actually no.” He was not about to say his wife always took care of that chore. The room was not only hot, but hostile.

“What’s a metaphor?” asked another participant with a thick list of papers in her hand. “I don’t remember seeing any metaphors on this list. Mattresses, yes. Mustard, yes. No metaphors.”

“The man is trying to be symbolic,” explained another wife. “At least I hope he is.”

“Oh....metaphor,” said the woman with the list. “I have been so wrapped up in these papers they gave us I have lost my ability to think straight. Symbolic you say. How about being practical instead?”

A chorus of agreement rang out through the room.

The adaptation consultant’s technique of diverting spouses’ attention away from the tedious, monotonous, stressful chore of moving a family abroad by any means possible clearly was going nowhere. The room was getting hotter by the moment. He mopped his sweaty face.

“Ladies, I know you want to be practical. But sometimes if you look at moving boxes as something other than objects, the re-location exercise becomes a lot easier.”

“I don’t even have my boxes yet, metaphorically speaking of course,” giggled another participant. “The moving company says they are sitting on a dock somewhere. When can I expect them?”

“I’m afraid I’m not here to discuss that kind of information.”

“Then what exactly are you here for???”

“To help you get over the shock of moving here. Now if I could just get back to my theory about moving boxes.”

“Save your metaphors,” said another woman. “All of us in this room have watched our lives go in and out of moving boxes too many times to count. We thought we were here to get some practical advice on this city. Not some drivel about life being a moving box. We know that already. We want to know how to get around this city, where to buy our groceries, where to find good schools.....”

“As I said before, that’s not my speciality,” he said, looking at his watch and wondering how soon he could make good his escape. Clearly, the corporation had sent him on a misguided mission.

Suddenly, the door of the conference room popped open and a woman poked her head in for a moment. She looked at the writing on the chalkboard. "I have the wrong room. I already know about moving boxes. I moved here last year."

"Wait!!!" said the women gathered for the briefing. "Don't go!"

"Excuse me?"

One of the women spoke on behalf of the group. "We have just arrived here and this idiot wants to tell us that we should look at our moving boxes as a metaphor of our lives. Can you believe it?"

"Yes," said the stranger. "This same, uh, person spoke to a group of us last year when we arrived." She nodded at the consultant.

"Did you learn anything?"

"No, but we had hoped the corporation had. We told them not to send this guy out here again. Obviously, they chose to ignore our advice."

The women were fanning themselves with their lists and looking so lost and culture shocked that the stranger couldn't just leave them. "What would you like to know?" she finally asked.

"Now just a minute," the consultant interrupted. "I don't think...."

"Right," said the women. "Don't think. Let this woman speak to us instead."

"OK. What would you all like to know first?"

The women thought for a minute. Finally, they asked in one voice: "Why IS a moving box a metaphor for expatriate life?"

When the laughter subsided, the answer seemed to satisfy everyone: "Because at the beginning, all those boxes represent the drastic change you have just made. They represent unsettledness, which is what you are all feeling I'm sure. Unpacking them, or waiting for them to arrive in the first place, make you feel trapped. Am I right so far?"

The heads all nodded in agreement.

"But when they are finally unpacked, you get on with your new life. It's as simple as that. Any other questions?"

"I have only one," said a participant. "Could you stay and finish the briefing?"

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