

THE CULTURAL BRIDGE

*As I travel the world, I have come to feel not quite at home anywhere,
yet I have also come to feel quite at home everywhere.*

~~~Pearl Buck

When I cross a cultural bridge to go on a vacation in some exotic dreamland, I am there to *take*. Any local culture is looked on as “quaint” or “unusual” or “that’s different”. Through my dazed jet-lagged mind, thoughts of those local cultural distinctives generally focus on “how did they come up with *that* idea?” Or, “I’m glad that when I get back home, I will be able to do it the *right* way!”

Of course, I bring my brand new iPhone with the extension always attached for a hundred selfies. People back home need to know that *I* was really there. And then, I will also have my finest Canon EOS 5D Mark IV camera with its variety of telephoto lenses in my shoulder bag and the tripod for the scenic pictures. I have enough home currency to buy anything I want—after I have bartered the merchant down to the ridiculously lowest price. And, of course, he had to make change from my large bill. Do I care that he will go home to his family, having to say, “I didn’t make enough sales today to purchase any meat. We will enjoy the vegetables your mother has grown in the garden.”<sup>1</sup>

However, when I cross the cultural bridge to engage in ministry, I must take a much closer look at a number of things. I need to closely examine what I will take with me and what I will leave at home. And, I need to take an equally close look at what I will bring back across that bridge to my home culture. For, *most* who minister cross-culturally do return to their home culture. Knowing how to cross the cultural bridge in *both* directions is critical.

As I am preparing to go, I must take a close look at all of my cultural baggage. It can be placed in one of three suitcases. As I am challenged by the privilege of ministry, I must admit that some of my cultural baggage is not Godly—is not Christian. For example, most of my home culture humor makes another person or people group look bad or inferior. I need to place such non-Godly baggage in Suitcase A. And destroy it!

Suitcase B contains the cultural ways that are good and appropriate in my home culture, but very possibly would not do well in my ministry culture. Contained in that suitcase would be the majority of our Christian practices and many of our theological positions. For example, the *need* to serve communion the first Sunday morning of each month. Or, to *take* an offering every service. Or, water baptism can be done by anyone, anywhere, any time. Or, women cannot teach men from the Bible, but it is okay for them to teach men from a book. Or, believe in a pre-tribulation rapture. Or, study the Bible verse-by-verse. Or, it is a

sin to drink alcohol. Or... And the list extends to the finest details of Christian practice. After I destroy my Suitcase A, the rest of my lifestyle practices may be okay in my home culture, but may not necessarily be accepted or necessary in my ministry culture. I must leave Suitcase B at home.

However, as I am sorting through my cultural baggage, I must realize that there are some things that I cannot leave at home. (And knowing this, I will “stumble” over them less often!) My nationality, my passport, my language, my large wads of money, my frame of reference—that built-in filter that forces me to look at every new experience through the grid of all of my past experiences. This *filter*, formed at a very early age, has to be open for major adjustments!

For example, if I grew up in a very “closed home”, i.e., nobody visited us in our home unless they had had a previous invitation for a specific day and time, it is likely that I will operate my ministry home in the same manner. However, if I grew up in an “open home” where anybody could stop by at any time, any day, I would very likely manage my home like that. And many other such lifestyle practices. I will be taking Suitcase C with me.

I am ready to go! I cross over that bridge, carrying only Suitcase C. (I did tuck in a few perceptions of their cultural baggage that I had studied ahead of time.) I discover that they also have three suitcases. I realize that some of the local Christians carry with them things that should have been placed in their Suitcase A. I definitely do not want to carry that bag around with me as I minister the Love of Christ.

They also have a Suitcase B—things that help to identify them in their culture that are not practiced in my home culture. As I grow in my love for these people and their culture, I begin to “use” many of their Suitcase B items, from foods to mannerisms to clothing styles to language to relationships to social distances to...everything! Very slowly and gradually I find myself becoming like them. Because I left *my* Suitcase B at home, I am enjoying not only allowing them to “clothe” the Gospel and Teachings of Christ in their cultural garb, but so many other aspects of their lifestyle. And I have come to appreciate them for my own use.

It has been a good experience. But it is now time to go home. When I came, bringing Suitcase C, I expected that that is what I would bring back with me. I get out my Suitcase C, ready to fill it for my return home. However, I discover that I don't have much to put into that suitcase. Yes, my nationality has not changed. In it goes. I drop my passport in. But, I begin to realize that there is not much else to put into that bag! Even my language does not fit into Suitcase C. It has been altered by learning the language of my ministry culture. Not as well as the

nationals, but neither is it what I brought when I crossed that bridge. My attitudes toward people have changed. I learned that older people are still respected. I don't believe my old attitude of "just put them away in an old folks home" anymore. I will have to take that out of Suitcase B when I get home and I throw it away. And so many other lifestyle beliefs will have to be thrown out! My new work ethic wants to replace the one I brought over. Now, people are more important than production! Yes, the work has to get done, but through everything I do, I want the love of Christ to show. I realize that most of the "universal religious beliefs" I brought with me, I do not want to put back into the bag I take home. I begin to realize that I am not the same person who crossed that bridge into my ministry culture. I no longer have a Suitcase C to take back home! I have mixed most of the things in my Suitcase C with much from their Suitcase B. I now have a new cultural lifestyle. As I prepare to return home, I purchase a new suitcase, Suitcase D. There has been a unique forging of two cultures into a new me. I will cross back into my home culture a distinctly different person. Knowing this is going to help me adjust my new persona into a new culture. For, I realize that the people back home have also changed. Culture is not static; it is always changing. But they have probably changed in a direction somewhat different than my changes.

Therefore, I must act cautiously and slowly as I attempt to merge my new person into my new home culture.

~~~*Neal Pirolo*

¹ It distressed me to write that in the first person! Yet, unfortunately, that is often the attitude of too many tourists.

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