

Am I Still Me? Changing the Core Self to Fit a New Cultural Context

Lois A. Dodds, Ph.D.
Lawrence E. Dodds, M.D., MPH.

American Association of Christian Counselors World Congress

November 6 - 8, 1997
Dallas Texas

Heartstream Resources, Inc.

101 Herman Lee Circle
Liverpool, PA 17045

Phone: 717-444-2374; Fax 717-444-2574

E-mail: heartstream@compuserve.com

Copyright, 1997. May be copied in entirety for non-profit educational use.

Presenters:

Lois and Lawrence Dodds served for 23 years with Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, including thirteen years in the Amazon jungle of Peru. During these years Lois served in various support roles, including human resources/personnel, as the school and community counselor, as a high school teacher, and as a writer in anthropology and linguistics. Larry served as physician for the members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators and other missions, as well as caring for the indigenous peoples of Peru and overseeing health training programs.

Lois, a graduate of Westmont College, earned an M.A. in education, with an emphasis in human development, from Azusa Pacific University, an M.A. in confluent education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Ph.D. in psychology and education at UCSB. She is the author of ten books and about 100 articles. She served in W.B.T.'s candidate selection and training program, Quest, for several years, and in this program counseled and taught nearly a thousand candidates.

Larry earned his degree in medicine at the University of Southern California, after graduating from Wheaton College. After internship and service in the U.S. military he took a family practice residency in Ventura, California. He is board certified in Preventive Medicine and has much experience in tropical medicine as well. Before working with Heartstream Resources he served as director of the Public Health Department of Ventura County in California.

Both Lois and Larry teach in the summers with Azusa Pacific University's overseas extension Masters Program, Operation Impact. They teach a variety of courses and subjects related to leadership, including human development, whole person studies, spiritual formation, ethics, creative leadership, and counseling. They have taught cross-cultural workers from dozens of organizations in more than twenty countries.

The Dodds have three children and seven grandchildren. Their daughter and her husband are missionaries in Peru.

Heartstream Resources is a non-profit organization serving the needs of cross-cultural workers around the world. The four purposes are to provide programs of restoration and renewal for cross-cultural workers wounded or depleted in service, to provide education/prevention programs, to assist mission agency leaders through education and consultation, and to research matters related to cross-cultural ministry.

Heartstream Resources was incorporated in 1992. Planning is underway for the development of a residential center in central rural Pennsylvania.

Abstract

Going across cultures requires a person to change his or her core self in significant, even profound, ways. Adjusting to and internalizing the values and practices of a new culture requires that one relinquish aspects of the self shaped in the home culture. These changes may be welcomed, even fostered, or they may come at a high cost. Struggles in identity and loss of self-esteem are results of the loss of familiar reference groups and relationships. Cues and feedback about one's self shift radically in the new context. One may have to develop other traits and qualities, practice one's profession differently, fit into the social structure at a different level, and give up cherished roles or aspects of the self. This paper explores the reasons for change, the process of change, and suggests strategies for shoring up the shifting self. It concentrates on the needs of people in cross-cultural ministry.

Am I Still Me?

A young missionary a year and a half into his field term recently said to us, "I feel like every part of me has been disassembled and is lying about. I've been taken all apart. Nothing works. I can't put myself back together, and I don't know who can." We hear painful pleas like this frequently, especially from people serving their first years in foreign cultures.

The challenge to develop a new identity is faced by people the world over who are forced to or chose to go across cultures. It is one of the painful aspects of becoming a refugee, for instance, or of immigrating for more hopeful reasons. Whether we are forced into a new culture or voluntarily make the choice, we usually face multiple changes resulting from the move into the other culture. There is often a change in social standing and economic level, as well as the grief of leaving behind all that is dear and familiar. Talking with immigrants and refugees around the world, we see a similar pattern of loss of identity and the need to form a new one based on the new context. Those who leave the homeland with a high status, and are well educated, highly trained, or are pillars of their community particularly feel the impact of their come-down. While they were once looked up to, they may now be disdained as aliens with little to offer, or worse, who are using resources rightfully belonging to others.

We have found that this matter of the shifting core self is seldom addressed in mission training or other cross-cultural preparation. Yet, this adjustment accounts for a great deal of the stress involved. It can require enormous amounts of energy to effectively re-form one's identity and to regain appropriate self-esteem. We believe it would be helpful to address the issue of the changing self during mission and other cross-cultural training programs. Such teaching would give a framework for assessing one's own and others' process of change. It would be a pro-active way to prepare people for the stress involved. Most training focuses on more superficial, external changes we will face and does not anticipate or deal with the deeper changes that will be required.

Why A New Self?

1. **Chosen, but no longer suitable:** Each of us is shaped by our home culture, which is the larger context in which our family teaches us how and who to be. We become “fit” for the world in which we are socialized. But in order to become effective in a new reality we have to change who we are. Who we have been is usually no longer sufficient in the new culture's expectations and demands. We have to be re-socialized.

This is paradoxical, because we are “chosen” by our churches (and by God, we believe) and selected by a mission because of who we are and who we have already become. We may be accepted to some extent by the potential for growth and change that trainers see in us, but that is usually not brought up to consciousness in the excitement and glory of becoming mission candidates. We don't think about being chosen because others may see in us the potential to become a different person.

2. **Loss of familiar and preferred roles:** An important aspect of the formation of our identity is the roles we have learned to fill within our own society. Adjusting to life abroad means we must give up many of these roles and adjust others to the new context. We must relinquish aspects of self related to these roles, perhaps some of which we treasure. This causes disequilibrium. We lose our balance as we let go of aspects of the self and take on some new aspects which seem foreign, perhaps even seem unacceptable at first. Yet these new things are expected of us – even to the extent of having to emulate behaviors which we do not value. We may have to practice the roles we have in new ways, such as when Americans used to touching their spouses in public have to keep their hands off so as not to offend people of the other culture who are watching.

3. **Loss of affirmation:** In our home cultures we have learned to gain affirmation in certain ways. This is what keeps us emotionally filled up. We learn the gestures and feedback which say we are valued, appreciated, loved, approved of, accepted. For most of us, this is an unconscious process. We learn to recognize it, with a rude awakening, when it becomes evident in the new culture that we are experiencing a dearth of affirmation. We are forced to see ourselves in a new light when we receive different feedback. Our emotional resources run dry without approval or encouragement. We often receive criticism and even disdain because we don't measure up to what is expected in the new.

4. **Loss of reference groups:** Back home, we learn who we are on a daily basis through the various reference groups who are sources of affirmation for us. Through them we develop a sense of our own value, our place, the boundaries of what

is acceptable and expected. Going into another culture usually means we leave all of these groups behind, **all at once!** Those who go single rarely have even one other person to accompany them into the new. Couples or families have each other. Ideally they are able to provide some ongoing affirmation for each other as they remain one familiar group.

5. Disillusionment about the self: People going into ministry are usually idealistic, especially missionaries. We want to go out and change the world, to love the world on Christ's behalf. We intend to make a difference through the sacrifices we make. The pain of discovery that we are not as "good" or as "loving" or as "committed" as we believe ourselves to be is very real. It doesn't take long before we discover that we don't measure up to our idealistic self. I remember finding it hard to love people who spit on my walls and let their children wet on my couch. I found I had to have **divine love** to love those for whom I had no natural affinity.

This pain of change and the loss of who we thought ourselves to have been is like a pruning process. The fruit and foliage of our lives are cut off when we are transplanted into the new place, leaving a barren mass of branches while we transition to the new. This is essential, of course, to put down our roots in the new soil. But it is not easy; it is quite painful and even ugly at times. It reminds me of placing orders from mail order flower companies. I see gorgeous blooms on glossy pages, and order those colorful plants to brighten up my garden. What faith it takes to plant the dead brown mass of something which arrives in brown bags from the floral company! I want the blooms, and hate the slow process of coaxing life out of the bare roots. I know it is essential to plant just a bulb, or a stock, or a bare root, but it's certainly not beautiful to start with.

Of course, once we begin to change to fit the new context, we will no longer fit our home culture as well. We can't go back to who we once were; we will no longer be perceived and perhaps not even loved the same again. That means certain losses, which engender sadness and require grieving.

6. Back to babyhood: Another quality of most missionaries is the ability to articulate one's vision, one's values, one's hopes and dreams, as well as all the matters of everyday life. Yet, going into a new culture means letting go of one's competence to manage even the most elementary aspects of daily life. One reverts to babyhood. This is depressing. Seeing toddlers who surpass you in language skills and cultural knowledge is humbling, at best. The more highly trained one is, the bigger the step back to infancy.

A Closer Look at Identity

Inherent in going across cultures is the need to adapt the self, since we can not adapt the culture to fit ourselves. Both deep and superficial aspects of the self must change in order to become effective in the new context. Changing most everything in one's life simultaneously demands an overwhelming amount of adaptation, and adapting successfully means forging a new identity. This process is an exhausting one,

requiring enormous energy. Few of us are prepared for the drain.

One's whole life pattern needs re-working because of simultaneously changing multiple life elements. Overnight the person entering cross-cultural ministry changes his or her cultural context, the actual job or role, the place and standing in society. He or she leaves behind all of family, friends, acquaintances. These are profound losses. Even the seemingly superficial things such as climate, clothing, foods, are real and costly in terms of energy. They too press the self to change.

Loss of one's reference groups becomes a central factor in the change in identity. Those familiar people who provide both subtle and overt feedback about who we are and how we are perceived suddenly disappear. The people who become new sources of feedback, especially those not from our own culture and language, may give us very different messages about the self. In the early stages of our adaptation, they will likely let us know that we are inadequate in new cultural setting, our new role, etc. On our first day of linguistic training, Dr. Cal Rensch of SIL told us, "Starting today you will never really belong to the people you are going to work with or belong fully to the people you are leaving. You will be people between."

For example, when we were in the process of becoming missionaries, people in our home context idealized us; they saw us as models of commitment and inspiration. They told us this in many ways, and even though we didn't take it much to heart, it was a shock once we lost that affirmation and instead received feedback from some Peruvians maligning us as "imperialists, paternalists, full of self interest" and other derogatory terms. No one thanked us for coming or thought it admirable that we had uprooted our whole lives in order to help them change! They perceived such a move as stupid, or at best suspicious. We suffered some loss of self esteem with every loss of skill in language and relating, with every misunderstanding about our motives and character.

Without anyone around who actually knew us over time, we had to start fresh in being known to a degree that we could again receive positive feedback about ourselves. That took time because we started out with no shared history. In the meantime, we starved for the kind of affirmation which keeps one emotionally nurtured.

Over time, if one is successfully adapting to the new, one achieves an altered sense of self, a new identity, incorporating some of the old and some of new. This is not easy or quick, as it means letting go of parts of the former self. This is in fact a painful process as we seek to determine which aspects of the self are negotiable and which aspects we cannot change if we are to keep our sense of integrity. I had the goal of becoming "really Peruvian" when we first went to Peru. Soon, however, I discovered

that this meant accepting certain attitudes and habits which were in conflict with who I perceived myself to be – notably attitudes towards others and issues such as honesty. To fit the new I would have to change to a degree that I would no longer fit myself or my own Christian sub-culture. To stay the same meant I would be miserable as well as ineffective in the new. I had to find a middle ground of change so that I would in fact never again fit my own culture, and would never be fully a member of the other culture – I had to forge a new self, to become a “marginal person” in the anthropological sense of being a person between, living successfully on the boundary. In a sense, I had to become a bridge between two worlds, connecting what could never be fused. I had to give up my goal of total assimilation and acculturation and settle for a functional level of adaptation.

At home in the U.S., I had created an orderly and satisfying life, as a wife, a mother, a creative person serving the church, a nurturer of the extended family. With our move to the Amazon, it seemed like my carefully constructed life was suddenly thrown in the air, coming down like a jig-saw puzzle unable to hang together. Re-building and re-ordering life in the new culture meant I had to re-form myself as well.

Patterns of Changing Self-esteem

Most all the changes resulting from cross-cultural work, of context, of language and so on, are assaults to self-esteem in some way. The culture cues about our adequacy (or likely inadequacy) will often be radically different, perhaps even unrecognizable. It becomes hard to answer “How am I doing?” because the means of feedback, as well as the actual messages differ. It is difficult to measure our appropriateness or progress in the new. Expectations for us likely vary in significant ways, most often unknown to us. We have to ferret out what is expected and what will gain approval.

An extreme example of this loss of moorings is a single missionary who went to South America, met a national on the bus, and within two weeks of landing in the country was wooed into landing in bed with him.

Even when one goes away to do the same job, such as pastoring or teaching, it is not likely practiced in the same way, with the same values and attitudes, the same resources. One may have to let go of exercising important gifts or areas of training which contribute to a sense of competency. Loss of resources and compromise of our internal standards of practice can undermine self-esteem, leading to doubt about our own integrity and adequacy. Our usual tools, standards and criteria for performance may be absent. The new peer group may conceptualize the profession or job in a radically different way. The new culture may place our profession or role in a different place in the social hierarchy. All these require adaptation and sorting out: what is most essential, what can we give up or compromise, what must we cling to in order to remain ourselves? It becomes hard to see one's self as coping and adaptable given the multiplicity and rapid rate of change.

As mentioned, language acquisition is particularly hard on self-concept and self-esteem. As educated people prepared for ministry in our own culture, we usually are articulate and skilled in communication. When the educated and articulate person enters the new context, where even toddlers surpass him or her in speech for the first couple of years, it is not only humbling but also destructive of self esteem. Most professionals are reluctant to make mistakes. Depending on temperament this may be a severe problem in adjustment, since language acquisition consists of multiple mistakes and constant correction. In our experience of 25 years in missions, the most educated and articulate suffer the most loss of self through the process of language development. Once gained, of course, mastery can once again enhance self esteem.

Another critical area relating to self esteem is success. It is hard to see and

measure achievements in ministry where long-term and often intangible goals guide us. It is hard to maintain vision without visible gains. Uncertain or imperceptible progress creates self doubts. How do we measure our effectiveness and whether our sacrifices are worth it? The perpetual unfinished work leads to lack of self-confidence and sense of achievement.

Most missionaries do eventually reach a state of equilibrium, with enough sense of success to keep them in ministry. However, faced with the prospect of return to the homeland, the self is once again assaulted. Long-term cross-cultural workers may have lost their sense of ability to cope when returning to homeland or “regular” life and work. This can create a feeling of panic or despair. Having changed to fit the new, they no longer see themselves as able to readjust to the old.

A typical pattern in the fluctuations of self esteem seems to be a sharp decrease in self esteem in the first years during the period of culture shock, a gain or increase with adaptation to the new culture and field situation, and another drop with the stress of furlough or re-entry. Return to the field setting may bring another boost in self esteem as one experiences success, or lead to chronic culture fatigue because adaptation remains a constant struggle. There seems to be a cyclical pattern provoked by the constant change which cross-cultural ministry requires. Especially in the early years of ministry there is seldom a phase long enough to reach equilibrium, to relax and get back to normal.

Another important factor relating to self esteem is that many Christians, especially those from fundamentalist backgrounds, seem to be predisposed to feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness even before entering cross-cultural ministries. Some individuals may have temperamental, genetic, or familial predisposition towards depression or self doubt. These create additional vulnerability, as all the challenges to self compound through events in the new culture. These factors should be carefully evaluated in candidacy selection.

The nature of ministry, especially cross-cultural, provides continual opportunity for self doubt, as expectations for living “the examined life” and “making the most of every opportunity” present continual choices. One young missionary put it this way, “**Every** moment has to be given to a **necessary** responsibility — things which do in fact have very real consequences if you do or do not do them.”

The role of the Holy Spirit in shaping identity

What God entrusts to us is that we make Him visible to the world. We see this theme especially in Colossians, and in the teachings of Jesus. Loving the world on His behalf is no easy matter. It seems that what God gives us, as His cross-cultural agents, is the opportunity for accelerated learning. Our spiritual, emotional, and social growth has to be speeded up to fit us for the new demands and opportunities. He gives us more frequent and more serious testings to move us into fuller usefulness. He asks us to learn that our identity is in Him, for in Him we live and move and have our being. This is a radical shift, because as we grow up, we are unaware that we live and move and have our being in our home culture. We must grow in faith more quickly than the

average Christian back home.

The accelerated, chronic high stress of adjustment reveals the “cracks” in the foundation of the self. Pressure causes even fine fractures to become larger, perhaps even to develop into chasms. All of the stresses and our responses to them point us to our need for transformation. It is more difficult to live out our ideal selves in the crucible. We quickly see our needs for God's power. He reveals to us that our human love and idealism is inadequate to the task to which He has called us – of loving others as He loves them, on His behalf. We discover that our human love is insufficient, that we must have His love to fulfill His purposes.

This, of course, is not a complimentary process. Sadly we usually attempt to cope with all the stresses by using our past experiences, in our past culture. But under high stress we usually regress or revert to the old ways we developed in anxious situations. We may withdraw or fight. When our identity gets shaken because new stresses touch or tap into old experiences and hurts, we revert to believing lies about ourselves which we learned from distortions of childhood.

We may feel, as did the Psalmist that “no one cares for me.” We may cry and be in desperate need (Psalm 142). We may feel our hearts destroyed and our spirits faint (Ps 143:3, 4). Yet, we can find hope that one day, the “righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me “(Psalm 142:7b).

Many of those who come to our programs for restoration of cross-cultural workers have been torpedoed in their ministries because of the confluence of field stresses and old beliefs about the self which cause pain. We find that people have heart messages, deeply hidden, which are contrary to God's truth. The Scriptures refer often to the process by which we feed on lies. Isaiah 44:18 speaks of those who worshiped idols as “feeding on ashes.” Ashes are caustic, destructive. So too the lies many of us internalized in childhood which we have never replaced with God's truth about who we are. Psalm 143 speaks of the enemy plunging us into darkness, so that our spirits grow faint and our hearts dismayed. When we are under pressure, the “father of lies” brings back to us all the harmful things we were taught about ourselves.

God offers us freedom from these lies. He allows us to exchange the gloom for gladness, to substitute His magnificent truths for our destructive lies (Isaiah 61:3). He allows us to be transformed by renewing our minds through His word (Romans 12:1). He assures us there is no condemnation to us when we are in Him (Romans 8:1).

One key we can use to unlock our true identity lies in the Gospel story of Jesus telling the disciples “to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God to the

things that are God's." He led them into this by asking, "Whose image is on the coin, whose inscription does it bear?" We can ask the same questions of ourselves. Are we not His image bearers, inscribed in our hearts with His marks of love?

Strategies for Growth

The counselor to the cross-cultural worker, both peer and professional, can assist the person in significant ways during the period of identity transition and loss of self-esteem.

1. Teach about the process of changing identity and fluctuating self-esteem so that the person can discover he or she is not "going crazy" or is alone in the struggle.

2. Affirm the uniqueness and inherent worth of the person, especially from a Biblical perspective of our identity being in Christ, being His workmanship, being His beloved children, being His chosen. Nurture the wounded person, because experiencing God's love and acceptance through the counselor becomes a key source of energy and motivation for regaining equilibrium.

3. Help the person identify key aspects of the self, to sort out what is negotiable for change and what must remain relatively stable in order to maintain integrity of the self. This involves traits, qualities, values, habits, ways of relating.

4. Affirm the adaptive ability the person already manifests, as evidenced by the levels of stress already endured and the amount of change already achieved.

5. Educate regarding the energy demanded for adaptation and affirm the reality and difficulty of maintaining a good sense of self given all the layers of change required by cross-cultural ministry.

6. Teach about God's view of growth and His purposes for "conforming" us to the image of Christ. Teach about the abiding presence and life of Christ within us which enables us to grow to become like Him. Also illustrate the role of Holy Spirit to enlighten us, show us our blind spots (hidden faults, secret sins, hurtful ways) and to empower us to make the changes.

7. Encourage the person to participate in a small group in which he or she can be vulnerable by sharing in others' failures, disappointment, needs, changes, struggles. This lends perspective difficult to achieve alone.

Helpful Biblical perspective: A study of Ephesians 1 and other passages which describe our place in God's family is a valuable resource for focusing on central and unchanging aspects of identity and re-experiencing positive feelings towards the self, based on God's love for us. (See Dodds next page.)

Recommended Reading

- Chester, Raymond M. 1983. Stress on missionary families living in "Other Culture" situations. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 2, 30-37. Reprinted in O'Donnell and O'Donnell, 1988, p. 164-185.
- Dodds, Lois A. 1980. *How do I look from up there?* The Biblical basis for self-esteem. Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press.
- _____ and Dodds, Lawrence E. 1997 Stressed from core to cosmos: needs and issues arising from cross-cultural ministry. AACC World Congress on Christian Counseling. Formerly presented at other AACC conferences.
- _____ and _____. 1994. Why missionaries go bananas. A developmental model of disease and levels of intervention. Mental Health and Missions Conference. Available from Heartstream Resources, 101 Herman Lee Circle, Liverpool, PA 17045. Heartstream@compuserve.com
- Donovan, Kath. *The pastoral care of missionaries: The responsibilities of church and mission*. Sept. 1992, Melbourne, New Zealand: Bible College of Victoria.
- Gardner, Laura Mae. 1987. Proactive care of missionary personnel. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 15. p. 308-314. Reprinted in O'Donnell and O'Donnell, 1988, p. 432-443.
- Jones, Michael E. Ed. 1993. *Caring for the missionary into the 21st century*. Available through Heartstream Resources in the U.S. or Interhealth in London.
- Larson, Mildred, and Dodds, Lois A. 1985. *Treasure in clay pots: an Amazon people on the wheel of change*. (Illustrates the stresses of cross-cultural life and their effects on a mission team.) Palm Desert, CA: Person to Person Books.
- Lovell, Debbie. 1998. In process: dissertation on self-esteem in missionaries. See Dissertation Abstracts, 1998.
- Mueller, D., Edwards, D. W., and Yarvia, R. M. 1977. Stressful life events and psychiatric symptomatology: Change or undesirability. *Journal of Health and Sociology*. 18, 307-316.
- O'Donnell, Kelly S. and Michele L., eds. 1988. *Helping missionaries grow: readings in mental health and missions*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.
- O'Donnell, Kelly S., ed. *Missionary Care*. 1992. Pasadena: William Carey Library.
- Schubert, Esther. 1993. *What missionaries need to know about burnout and depression*. New Castle, IN: Olive Branch Publ.
- Vinokur, A. & Selzer, M. L. 1975. Desirable versus undesirable life events: their relationship to stress and mental distress. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 33, 329-337.