

# Your Changed Life

Drs Larry and Lois Dodds



When you move to another culture, no matter where you come from or where you go, you're really experiencing a process that is universal. We could call it a transition. We could call it going cross cultural. But for us in ministry, as well as for refugees and other people, we really are being displaced because what's been home is no longer home. Things are no longer familiar. That has very profound implications for us. I was certainly never trained or taught about those things before we moved off the Amazon jungle.

What I discovered in my early years of adjustment is that I felt very alone and I didn't have a place yet. I had to figure out what my place was. Now back then, I used to write a lot of poetry because that was my way of journal writing, of getting my thoughts out of myself. When we started 'Heart Stream' eight years ago, we made a major move and so we were homeless for six months because we were in transition. Meanwhile five out of the six months we had travelled, most of that time had been in a number of countries and temporary settings. I found that I needed again just to verbalize what I was feeling. I'd like to share a poem with you that I wrote at that time. It's called 'Displaced Again.'

*I want to go home, but home isn't there anymore.*

*I want to go home where people know me, Understand me, speak my language, Where I don't have to explain myself, Where everything is not an effort And life glides by on automatic pilot While I think about important things, I want to go home, but home isn't there.*

*Someone else's art adorns the walls Their music fills the halls Their children tumble in the grass I'm thousands of miles from home I have to create a new home once more Start new in a raw house Boxes, barrels, strangers, names I can't pronounce, Words with different meaning.*

*Someday this place will be home Our pictures, our music, our children, but not now, not yet.*

*I want to go home.*

This little poem was published in a magazine I'd like to tell you about called "Women of the Harvest". A wonderful magazine about five years old now, published specifically for women who work somewhere other than their homeland. I really recommend it to you. But what this poem illustrates for me personally is, that there are many costs for us in going across cultures. Hidden costs, things we don't expect. We expect to learn another language. We expect to cook different food. Our training says you have to relate to this different culture, but the most profound changes, most of us are not warned about—the sense of being displaced, of having lost everything familiar that gives you a sense of who you are.

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By now, I've talked with literally thousands of people for thousands of hours. Some of them make statements to me like: "I don't have a clue who I am anymore." One young man said, "I feel like somebody disassembled me (He's an engineer.). Someone disassembled me and the parts of me are laying all around and I don't have a clue who's going to put me back together." This was said almost in tears after having been abroad for a year and a half. One woman said to us, "I feel like my life, which was like a beautiful vase, has just been shattered and only a miracle of God can put me back together. I don't know who I am anymore."

My own sense, in those early days in the jungle, was that I had constructed my life very neatly. After coming out of a very disturbed home, I had established a nice life. And then we moved on to the jungle and it's like someone took my 'puzzle', and just threw it in the air, and like a jigsaw puzzle came down all over the room. And then I had put it back together to make life work again.

What we don't expect is that we, ourselves, have to change enormously—the deep parts of ourselves. I wanted to be really Peruvian. That was my goal, but it only took me about two years into the experience to realize I can never be really Peruvian without giving up parts of myself that are too valuable to me. For example: We lived in the home of a wealthy widow and I was shocked because every cupboard in her house had a lock. The telephone had a lock. The refrigerator had a lock. Everything had locks because in that culture people don't trust. The assumption is, if I leave anything available to you, you will steal it and it's my fault. So this was a total reorientation to me and I realized if I left a watch out and someone took it, they were going to consider that it was my fault. It wasn't their lack of responsibility, it was my fault.

Well, there were issues like this that dealt, for me, in basic integrity, and I thought that I couldn't give up parts of myself to be really Peruvian. So I had to change my goal to learning the culture and to operate in it, to be what I would call: acculturated. I knew it well, but I wasn't ever going to become really Peruvian. I would never be assimilated. I would never lose my identity by melting into the culture.

Most of us are not at all prepared for the impact that our persons go through when we have to make that adaptation to the other culture. We lose a lot of self-esteem in the process. So what do we do about this? I know that for me, it was crucial to reaffirm who I am in Christ, that I belong to Him, that He is my source. That home, real home is not the Peruvian jungle, or Mexico, or Chile, or France. Real home is in Christ. My real identity is in Him. That's our idea of it. Let's face it, it takes a long time for most of us to get there. But in the meantime, we will sometimes suffer real loss of identity and probably a big loss of self-esteem. If you're a professional person and you have reached a very successful level in your own culture, it can feel very humiliating to go into another culture.

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You can't even speak like the three-year olds. That is very hard on your self-esteem, hard on your sense of competence. Maybe you can't even practice your profession the way you've been used to doing it. Those things are all, in a sense, an assault to your identity, to your self-esteem. So what I recommend to you is that you have an on-going program of looking at who you are in Christ and you learn to live out that identity. And as you learn how to do that more, you can let go of some of your own culture points of reference.

You see we all know who we are because people tell us who we are. Anybody ever tell who you are? We get a lot of uncomplimentary things said about us, but we have to learn the truth. You may be grappling, especially in your early years of adjustment, with figuring out who you are and feeling like you have value in the long run and even in the short run. I want to recommend that the more quickly you internalize that your real value is in God and in Jesus. That you belong to Him, He's going to help you keep your sense of value. Because, let's face it, your host culture might not even really like you. They may tell you really bad things about yourself and you have to choose whether to believe those things or the truth that God sets the value. The important thing, whether your family is two or ten or a team of three or twenty, that your relationships make the difference between whether you survive emotionally—whether you thrive, and in fact, even how long you live.

A wonderful book came out two years ago by Dean Ornish called: 'Love and Survival.' It's a book full of research that shows how being loved has tremendous impact on your health. So in your setting, especially if you are isolated, you have to think seriously about who is nurturing you, who is loving you. Keep those relationships healthy. When you have trouble, let's suppose you are under so much stress that one spouse is just exploding all the time in anger and the other one is withdrawing.

And nobody's nurturing anybody and nobody's affirming anybody, it's time to say, "Time out." It's important enough to take time out to get your primary relationships healthy again because without that, you won't be able to make it over the long haul.