

# **Am I Still Me?**

## **Changing the Core Self to Fit in a New Cultural Context**

*Adapted and abridged from resource written by Lawrence and Lois Dodds, Heartstream Resources*

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 choose 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, as intruders who are using resources rightfully belonging to others. We saw this personally in our friendship with an Afghan family who fled to the U.S. during the communist years. The husband, a gifted surgeon, later committed suicide. It seems he could not overcome the loss of identity and status, unable to practice his profession in the new land.

This adjustment accounts for a great deal of the stress involved in going across cultures. It can require enormous amounts of energy to effectively re-form one's identity and to regain appropriate self-esteem.

### **A Theoretical Perspective**

Becoming one's self is a life-long process. Our original formation of the self is considered to be a complex process, beginning at birth. Although various theorists of personality (the self, the ego, personhood) place differing emphasis on the degree of genetic influence, all agree that we are born with certain qualities, traits and pre-dispositions. What we inherit is then strongly influenced by many factors, primarily the historical and cultural contexts and our families of origin. Who we become (the self) emerges most strongly from whom we belong to—who loves us or not, who makes a place for us, emotionally, socially, and physically.

It is proposed that identity confusion arises in part due to an inability to make choices. We see this as also very relevant in cross-cultural life because the individual must constantly choose between values and behavior, language and other means of expression of the home culture and the host culture. At times one experiences overload (such as during culture shock) from the choice-making; and a sense of paralysis may set in, leading to confusion or crisis.

## 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. How we make the shift to becoming “different” seems to be in part a reflection of the degree of identity achievement before the challenge of cross-culture is attempted. We see that a person without a solid sense of self, struggles more to make the change, and also suffers more significantly in re-entry to the home culture.

**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 other roles to the new context. We must relinquish aspects of self that are 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. This is true again when we re-enter the home culture, often having changed in ways not appreciated or affirmed by the significant persons of our lives who remained in the home culture.

**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. In most cases, it takes years to become a solid member of a new reference group. Meanwhile, we may feel we don't fit and have no place. The sense of isolation and aloneness contributes to some loss of self.

**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 what happens when I order flower bushes or bulbs by mail. I order the gorgeous blooms on glossy pages to brighten my garden. What arrives are lifeless-looking brown masses. It takes faith to plant the "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. After returning to California from the Amazon, we used to joke with our friends, "Remember, we seem weird here and now because you prayed for us to adapt to life in Peru! God answered your prayers!"

**6. Back to babyhood:** Another quality of most people who go cross-cultural 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 can be depressing. Seeing toddlers or house pets 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.

**7. "Sickness" in host cultures:** Going across cultures means entering a system which may be "sick," probably in ways different from our own society's sickness. It is proposed that no culture or society is entirely healthy. We may be called into one which is actually psychosocially sick. This compounds the adjustment process because we have to sort out what to adopt (the healthy aspects) and what to reject (unhealthy aspects), while yet

understanding and working within the system—we have to accommodate without assimilating the whole.

My personal experience living in the Amazon for many years brought me into contact with some very sick societies. From a Christian perspective, we would have to say they included evil and even “demonic” aspects threatening even to physical life. For example, one culture has taboos against eating certain foods during pregnancy and lactation: no meats, no fruits, no vegetables, nothing except manioc root. This results in very low birth weight babies, and severe nutritional depletion of mothers after two or three pregnancies. Another culture teaches their boys, beginning at age five, to prepare and use hallucinogenic drugs while roaming the forest alone searching for a spirit to help them become good killers.

In our work, we find that cross-cultural workers experience considerable stress from being immersed in cultures whose practices or values seem sick when viewed from a Biblical perspective. (Think of Lot, “vexed in spirit” by the practices of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.) Forging a new identity in such cultures is particularly complex and exhausting.

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 (Lois) 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. For Larry, a physician with elite training in space and aviation medicine who had served as flight surgeon for President Lyndon Johnson, practicing medicine in a simple jungle clinic, without glass for windows or modern equipment, led to a shift in his professional identity.

### **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 by nature “we live and move and have our being” in our home culture. Our unconscious acceptance of our cultural environment with its values has to shift radically to intentional living out of Christ’s values. 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 divine love to fulfill His divine purposes.