

Third Culture Kid: Reflections by Jeanne M. Dicke – December 24, 2020

My parents told this story from our first trip home to the USA for furlough in November 1959. My older brother Mark was 4 1/2 years old. I was 3 years old; Marty was 1 1/2 and Kay was 6 months old.

We stayed overnight in a hotel in downtown Sydney so we could catch our flight to the US the next day. For us children this was our first trip outside of Papua New Guinea and our first stay in a hotel. My parents said that Mark and I were so fascinated by the electric lights and indoor plumbing that we ran around the hotel room turning lights on and off and playing with the bathroom faucets. We had never experienced anything like that before! Our nights had been lit by Coleman lamps, kerosene lanterns, candles, and flashlights. Our water came in buckets and was heated on a wood stove. We took baths in a galvanized tub in front of the wood stove. What kind of world had we stepped into in Sydney?

I was too little to remember this incident myself, but I can picture it happening just as my parents described it. It's a humorous illustration of a couple of missionary kids being "out of step" with the world around them. It was a temporary situation of course and we quickly adapted to modern conveniences.

A few years ago, I discovered that I have a 'label'! I am a "TCK" or third culture kid. I did not know that people have been studying the impact that growing up in another culture has on children – not just missionary kids but children of diplomats and others as well. I wasn't sure at first if the label 'fit me' but now I see that it does, at least in some respects.

My Story: I was born in Madang at Jaguam Lutheran Hospital. There was no doctor at Mambisanda at the time, so my Mom went to Madang for my birth. I lived in Papua New Guinea the first 18 years of my life. Papua New Guinea was my home.

We moved three times on the mission field but only a few miles down the valley. My parents started at Ireyla (1954) and then moved to Kumbasakama (1956), and then to Mukatamanda (1966-1974). Because of my Dad's work as business manager and then in economic development we always lived somewhere along the main road and near an airstrip. This meant that we were able to go to grade school at Highland Lutheran School from Monday through Friday and come home on weekends. (Not all my friends were able to do that.) Many years later I asked my Dad why we had to board at HLS when it was only a few miles down the road from Kumbas and Muka. He explained that at that time the roads were bad and dangerous to drive on, so the less time you spent driving on them the better. Also, he said the mission did not have enough jeeps to transport kids back and forth to school every day. By staying at the school during the week, the jeeps would only be needed for school transportation on Monday morning and Friday afternoon. That makes a lot of sense now that I think about it.

Papua New Guinea is a beautiful country and a fun place to grow up. I felt safe there. I grew up learning to appreciate different cultures and viewpoints. I got to see a young country move from the stone age to the space age; and then to move towards independence. I got to see God at work in the lives of the Enga people as they heard the Good News that Jesus loved them. I got to see my parents and other missionaries live out their faith in service to their neighbors – Mom’s backdoor nursing and Dad counselling his employee’s.

In my younger years we played with our Enga friends but once we started school at HLS and then left for Luther College, we didn’t have as much contact with them. They were also busy growing up, going to their school, or helping their parents so we had less opportunities to see each other.

Some of my fun memories from HLS are the annual Christmas programs; Hagen Sports Day; Mrs. Green’s famous “Friday Soup” and the morning porridge. We dried wet shoes overnight by the wood stove in the kitchen and raced to be the first ones to the kitchen in the morning so that we could stir the porridge. In the dorm we had a competition each term to see who could keep their room the cleanest. I vaguely remember a solar eclipse happening one of my first days of school in 1962. There were times when we were late for school on Monday morning because there was a landslide. And there were times Monday mornings when the Kumbas jeep would race the other jeeps around the oval to see which one would get to the dorm first.

As teenagers, we went on hikes; had coffee bean fights (got in trouble for that one); rode our bicycle and played basketball. We had our chores to do around the house. Mom taught me how to start a fire in the wood stove and how to bake bread and sew. Laundry day was a big day. Everyone was on call to bring the clothes in from the clothesline when it started to rain. My first paying job was as a cashier for the WASO Self-Service store when I was 17. I also taught Sunday School at Kumbas for a few months before we returned to the USA. I remember rehearsing the Bible stories in Tok Pisin so that I could teach my class. I found out that it was a lot harder to teach a Bible story in another language than to communicate casually with people day to day.

We returned to the US three times for furlough. The first time I don’t remember much because I was 3 years old. However, I remember that we all got the measles and I remember building our first snowman. The second furlough I was 9 and in 4th grade. I had my first experience going to a public school in Madison, WI. There was a boy in my class who would walk home at the same time I did each day, but on the other side of the street. He would tease me and call out across the street that I was a “New Guinea cannibal”. When I told my parents this, they said I should do what my Dad and his sisters did when they came back from the mission field in Brazil in the 1920’s and their cousins were calling them “Brazilian monkeys”. They said I should call him “an American skunk” since skunks are only found in North America. So, I did and that was the end of the teasing. For the third furlough I was 13 and we traveled back to the US through Europe. That trip was a terrific family experience that I will always remember. This time my brother Mark and I could only stay in the US for about 6 weeks because we had to return to high school in Australia.

My biggest/most challenging transitions were, going to Luther College, Melbourne for high school at age 12 (8th grade). And then returning to the US as a family at age 18.

At Luther College we immediately stood out because of our American accents. We got some good-natured teasing for our accents, but there were also some people who were not happy with the US and Australia's involvement in the Viet Nam war. I was an American but didn't really know my home country or what it meant to be an American. I didn't understand the issues. I remember a classmate saying to me: "All you Americans ever do is shoot your presidents and have racial riots!" I don't remember why he said that, but I remember wondering if what he said was true. Thank goodness I made some good friends at high school and have stayed in touch with one classmate now for over 40 years. I think if I were ever 'kicked out' of the US I would emigrate to Australia. I love the countryside and the animals. I love the food, even Vegemite. The final year of high school (Matriculation) was difficult for me academically. Somehow, I passed my exams. In the end it gave me a slight edge over other freshman when I started college here in the States.

We returned to the US as a family when I was 18 years old. (This time everyone thought I had an Australian accent.) The challenge was learning to live together as a family again, making friends and adjusting to long cold winters. I'm glad we were able to go through this transition together as a family. I think that made it easier.

Reflections from reading the book "Third Culture Kids"

Page 53: Hidden Immigrant – Look Alike/Think Different.

I can relate to being a "hidden immigrant" especially when we returned to the US. I looked like an American, but I didn't know the latest craze or movie or rock group or TV show, and I wore homemade clothes. I had a funny accent. I talked ALOT about a place called Papua New Guinea, that no one had ever heard of. I always had to explain where I came from.

Page 68: "Our basic position in the new community is one of statuslessness. We carry knowledge from past experiences... but none of that knowledge has use in this new place."

I was a freshman at Concordia St. Paul. They were planning a "Cultural Exchange Week" (now called Black History Month). My advisor suggested I join the planning committee. I thought that might be interesting since I had experience with other cultures as a missionary kid. I thought it would be an opportunity for me to tell people about Papua New Guinea. Much to my dismay no one was interested in learning about Papua New Guinea. The focus of this group was African American culture and history. I had knowledge and experience I wanted to "exchange about cultures", but that wasn't what people wanted to hear about, and I had a lot to learn about the African American experience in the US.

Page 104-105: "...what is labeled as arrogance in TCK's is simply an attempt to share their normal life experiences. People who don't understand their background may feel the TCKs are bragging or name-dropping when they speak of places, they have been or people they have met. Non-TCK friends don't realize TCK's have no other stories to tell."

As a freshman at Concordia St. Paul, I remember that many of my stories started with the phrase, “in New Guinea we...” People’s eyes would glaze over, and I knew they really weren’t interested in what I had to say. Also, when I would talk about other places I had seen in our travels, like Australia and Europe, some people thought I was “bragging”. I learned to be careful when, where and how I told certain stories.

But there were a few people who took an interest in my stories and they became my closest friends. Often, they had a personal connection with another missionary (like their former pastor became a missionary). I’m grateful that God provided those friends for me in college.

I’m still somewhat ‘careful’ how I tell a story from my childhood. Depending on the audience I find myself telling the story in a way that people will ‘get the point’ without me having to explain in detail where I grew up and why I grew up there.

Page163: “Of all the TCK’s we have met or worked with, very few would ever exchange the richness of their lives to avoid the inevitable challenges they have faced along the way.”

Page 195: “The challenges of their upbringing are insignificant compared with the sense of what is being accomplished.”

A few years ago, when my parents were still alive, I found myself looking at some of our pictures from Papua New Guinea. I saw pictures of people like Yonge, and Aen and Tipingi -- real people and family friends from Kumbas. I thought to myself “was it worth it? Was it worth it to be separated from my parents and sent to high school in Melbourne so that these people could learn that Jesus loves them and has a home for them in heaven?” For me, the answer is **YES! Absolutely yes!** We all sacrificed something for the sake of the Gospel. We didn’t have a choice in the matter as kids, and it was hard sometimes, but God was faithful, and He took care of us. And we are richer for the experience.

Page 252: “Instead of presuming it’s everyone else’s task to understand them, TCKs need to make an effort to understand the life experiences of their home peers.”

During my freshman year at Concordia College St. Paul a friend of mine, one of the people who would listen to my stories about Papua New Guinea and Australia, said to me:” What language do they speak in Australia?” And I, surprised by her “lack of knowledge” on this point, took a deep breath and calmly said: “English.” Later when I told my Dad about her question, he reminded me that if I had only ever lived in Minnesota like her, I might not have known what language they speak in Australia. He was right! (And I had to admit there was a lot I didn’t know about Minnesota and the USA.) My parents were my mentors in the transition back to life in the USA.