



Taken from *After the Trip* by Cory Trenda.
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WHAT NOW?



It's the end of your crosscultural experience. You've picked up many memories and memorabilia, and along the way you've left pieces of yourself behind. You've given and received gifts and purchased more for family and friends.

On that last night before returning home, if you're like me, you aren't even sure anymore what's in your bag or suitcase, and you're fairly certain you can't take all of it with you. So you pull everything out and spread it on your bed or on the ground, and you try to sort it all out—what to take home, what to leave behind, what reminds you of important encounters, and what it all means. Maybe you brought a few “necessities” from home that you didn't need after all. Maybe a few things don't fit *you* very well anymore. And you are determined to make room for some new items that you want to have a part in your ongoing life.

In the same way, your heart and your mind will go through a similar sorting process as you wrap up your encounter, return home, unpack your bags, and resume your regular life. You will try to sort it all out, except that you know this is not a task you can complete in an hour or two. Or a day. Or a week.

In fact, if you truly want your experience to be life changing, you'll be sorting it and working it out for the rest of your life. After all, that's what *life* change means.

THE PATH TO LASTING CHANGE

Crosscultural encounters leave us with vivid memories, writing seemingly unforgettable stories on our brain with permanent ink.

But as time progresses, memories and good intentions fade when they aren't an active part of our life. Perhaps you're reading this only weeks after your trip, and you've already felt such a fading. So how do we move the memories from our head to our heart, and finally to our feet and hands? And what does it mean for a one-time crosscultural experience to be truly life changing?

In recent years there has been much consternation among mission and educational leaders concerning the actual value of mission and volunteer trips. You may be surprised—and disturbed—to learn that studies have almost universally found *no measurable long-term effect* of these encounters on the lives of trip participants!

Still, I'm confident that these experiences have the potential for great good for those who go. Of course, the key word here is *potential*, and much of that potential has to do with whether or not this once-upon-a-time experience actually becomes integrated into the participant's ongoing life.

People often fall into one of two traps after their crosscultural experiences. Some put a thick firewall between their home culture and the one they visited, and they do their best to not allow their trip experiences to seep into their cozy worldview. Conversely, others condemn everything about their home culture. Once they come back they make everyone around them miserable with judgmental statements about what others need to do differently because the traveler has now become the enlightened one.

But there is a third way. It's neither fast nor drastic. But it's the key to an experience that truly earns the label *life changing*. This third way is integration. Integrating, or interweaving, a one-time experience into your ongoing life means being thoughtful, a lifelong learner, someone who continues to seek ways to engage across cultures. Integration respectfully holds in tension differing worldviews or cultural realities and attempts to incorporate the best aspects from both, while also holding both up to the light of the gospel.

Integration is not theological syncretism. But as you no doubt have experienced, every culture is a mixed bag of strengths and weaknesses—including your own. *There is no human-made culture that is a perfect reflection of the coming kingdom of God* culture that Jesus spent his entire ministry describing. People from every culture that I have encountered have given me new glimpses of that soon and coming kingdom through their values, paradigms, and choices. These are the treasures I want to glean, the pieces of a culture that I wish to add into my own worldview, so that my ongoing life choices, attitudes, and actions might be closer to those of Jesus.

It takes time and honest effort to synthesize our experiences into actionable lessons that can, over time, actually change one's life trajectory. That's what this book is designed to help you do. I believe that this is exactly what God expects from us: to learn and integrate the best lessons from every human culture that God exposes us to, in order to live more like Jesus and reflect more of God's kingdom on earth.

I love people. I love seeing how they interact, what makes them happy, what they worry about and don't worry about, how they love

and care for one another. And in this school of human nature, everyone can be my teacher—if I'll open myself to being taught.

It's an exciting journey, this journey of integration, where one-time encounters can alter us and become truly life changing. The Peace Corps handbook for returning volunteers states that their most successful returned volunteers “did not put their Peace Corps experience behind them. Instead, they took it with them and threaded it through their lives.”

This “threading,” or integration, takes time, patience, a posture of learning, ongoing engagement, and—*gulp!*—an openness to actually embracing change. Only a commitment to a larger, more God-honoring life can give us the courage and power to overcome our inertia and our fear of the unknown. But the good news is that, armed with this commitment and the principles on the following pages, you already possess your most important tools!

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

The upsurge of crosscultural mission-related travel—estimated at two million Americans each year—is quite a recent phenomenon. Hundreds of books, articles, and Bible studies exist to prepare travelers before and during their trips. But beyond a few tips for returning home tucked into the last chapter of a book you've now misplaced along the journey, very few resources exist for helping earnest travelers transform their one-time experiences into lifelong learning and change *after the trip*.

Many people want their trip to be life changing, and yet the trip in itself can't possibly be so! It's only as your post-trip life unfolds

that this transformation can begin to come to pass. Therefore, your ongoing decisions *after you return home*—to either process or ignore, zone out or lean in—are crucial to whether your wish and hope and prayer for a life-changing experience comes true.

This book humbly attempts to aid you in that critical process of integration. Together we can also begin to change the currently condemning statistics about the *non*-impact of these trips on the ongoing lives of participants. I hope to share useful tips and proven principles as well as provide glimpses into my own attempts at interweaving my crosscultural encounters into my ongoing life.

Quotes from past trip participants and leaders are featured throughout. As part of the preparation for writing this book, I distributed two surveys: one for past trip participants and another for trip leaders. The respondents, representing numerous churches, denominations, and mission agencies from over a dozen US states, express feelings you've probably had and raise some important issues we'll be addressing in these pages. At the end of the book are "Questions for Reflection and Discussion" designed for group and personal reflection, plus an appendix featuring Tim Dearborn's Eight Great Questions to further help you process your reentry.

It's amazing to realize that we can actually glean a lifetime of learning from our one-time crosscultural experiences, and our attentiveness to those lessons is key to a trip truly becoming *life changing*. May this book be a useful tool as you continue your own journey of discovery and integration.

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