

What if I really struggled with Tanzania?

Your time in Tanzania may have been a greater challenge than you imagined. You might have started out excited and open to all the news sounds, smells, sights and experiences. But, somewhere during the three weeks everything started to get on your nerves. This is an equally valid response. Take time to reflect on your struggles. What were they? Why were these differences so hard to handle? How will you speak about your experience in Tanzania? Do you think you discovered something about yourself? Are you proud of the way you interacted with Tanzanians?

“KEEPSAKES”

things you'll treasure from your experience

For Further Learning

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Finlandia University SERVICE & LEARNING in TANZANIA

“COMING HOME”

Coming Home can be Disorienting...

An excerpt from a book by Alexandra Fuller - this section expresses her thoughts upon her return from a short visit to her parent's farm in Zambia where she grew up.

In late December I went home to my husband and to my children and to the post-Christmas chaos of a resort town, but instead of feeling glad to be back, I was dislocated and depressed. It should not be physically possible to get from the banks of the Pepani River [in Zambia] to Wyoming in less than two days, because mentally and emotionally it is impossible. The shock is too much, the contrast too raw. We should sail or swim or walk from Africa, letting bits of her drop out of us, and gradually, in this way, assimilate the excesses and liberties of the States in tiny, incremental sips, maybe touring up through South America and Mexico before trying to stomach the land of the Free and the Brave.

Because now the real, wonderful world around me – the place where we had decided to live with our children, because it had seemed like an acceptable compromise between my Zambia and my husband's America – felt suddenly pointless and trivial and almost insultingly frivolous. The shops were crappy with a Christmas hangover, too loud and brash. Everything was 50 percent off. There was nothing challenging about being here, at least not on the surface. The new year's party I attended was bloated with people complaining about the weight they had put on over Christmas. I feigned malaria and went home to bed for a week.

COMING HOME

After even a short period of exposure to another culture, especially in a country of the developing world, you may experience reverse culture shock. Students who have a study abroad experience often cannot help but re-examine their priorities, their values, and what they think of themselves and the U.S.A. You may begin to question images in the media, interpersonal behaviors, your church culture, or economic realities and consumer practices. The “return culture shock” may be more difficult than the culture shock felt when abroad.

Added to these internal conflicts you may experience a sort of disconnection to family and friends at home. You will discover that their lives carried on without you, or you sense a lack of interest in the stories of your experience. This may result in frustration and feelings of alienation. Of course, the difficulty of readjustment will vary for different individuals, but, in general, the better integrated you have become to the host culture, the harder it is to readjust to your home culture.

Feelings You May Experience (Reverse Culture Shock)

Stage 1 begins before you leave the host country. You begin thinking about re-entry and making your preparations for your return home. You also begin to realize that it’s time to say good-bye to your overseas friends and to the place in which you’ve come to feel at home. The hustle and bustle of good-byes, parties, and packing can intensify your feelings of sadness and frustration. You already miss the friends you’ve made, and you are reluctant to leave. Or, you may make your last few days fly by so fast that you don’t have time to reflect on your emotions and experiences.

Stage 2 usually begins shortly before departure, and it is characterized by feelings of excitement and anticipation – even euphoria – about returning home. This is very similar to the initial feelings of fascination and excitement you may have had when you first entered the country where you stayed. You may be very happy to see your family and friends again, and they are happy to see you. The length of this stage varies, and often ends with the realization that most people are not as interested in your experience abroad as you had hoped. They will politely listen to your

stories for a while, but you may find that soon they are ready to move on to the next topic of conversation.

Stage 3 of Reverse Culture Shock, usually parallels the Culture Shock you may have experienced when you first entered the country where you stayed. In fact, your transition into Stage 3 might occur sooner than it did when you first went overseas. You may experience feelings of frustration, anger, alienation, loneliness, disorientation, and helplessness and not understand exactly why. You might quickly become irritated or critical of others and of American culture. Depression, feeling like a stranger at home, and the longing to go back overseas are not uncommon reactions. You may also feel less independent than you were abroad.

Stage 4 is a gradual readjustment to life at home. Things will start to seem a little more normal again, and you will probably fall back into some old routines. However, things won’t be the same as how you left them. You have most likely developed new attitudes, beliefs, habits as well as personal and professional goals, and you will see things differently now. The important thing is to try to incorporate the positive aspects of your international experience with the positive aspects of your life at home.

MAKING YOUR EXPERIENCE COUNT AT HOME

Spiritual Growth: What impressions did the church in Tanzania leave with you? Did the encounter raise questions for you in terms of how you understand God and faith? Will your own journey of faith continue to be influenced by the faith of those from other cultural experiences?

Professional Growth: When you begin to consider your career and your desire to follow your calling, think of the professional and personal growth you’ve undergone from your international experience. Find a way to express these skills on your resume and in interviews with prospective employers.

Personal Growth: How has this experience influenced the way you will do personal relationships, especially with those who are different from yourself? Has the experience impacted your knowledge of world affairs? Will you stay in touch with those who became your friends in Tanzania? Did you discover anything about yourself through this experience?