

Many Happy Returns –the challenges of going home

So you are going home? You have rushed off Greenhills to pick up those last minute bargains you have been admiring for three years, but never got round to buying. The packers are coming, your dog has had his shots and you are booked into the Peninsular Hotel for your last couple of nights. Goodbye parties bring a lump to your throat and you realize that this is really it, you are homeward bound. So how do you feel...excited, relieved, apprehensive?

Marilyn Duncan-Webb

You are right to feel that little jolt of apprehension. Yes, home is home, but since you last lived there (as opposed to spending a week or even a month or two on leave) your country, your neighbourhood, your friends and your family will have changed. More important, since you left, however many months or years ago, you will have moved on, emotionally and socially, perhaps profoundly.

Life changing experiences

Whether or not you have enjoyed your overseas posting, you have had a life enriching experience. You have survived, even thrived in a different culture. You have adjusted to a contrasting way of life. You may have witnessed extremes of wealth and poverty; your perspective on life will almost certainly have altered. As an expatriate you may have enjoyed an elevated standard of living; you might for the first time have had household help, a driver and a gardener. If you have been employed as a manager, Philippine hierarchical values will have meant that you have been treated with far more reverence and respect than would be customary in a Western environment and you will have been somewhat autonomous, distant

from the everyday controls of a large corporate head office. When you return home, you'll be just one of the crowd. Several factors contribute to or detract from a successful re-entry. Returning is easier if you have done it before - and successfully readjusted; if you have had plenty of contact with home during your time away; if you have a job, a place to live, schools, transport and other fundamentals organized; if you are prepared for home to have changed and openly acknowledged this. You can also work at making your re-entry less stressful by following some suggestions gathered from others who have made the journey home for good:

Your work environment

Before leaving the Philippines, make sure you are up to date with what is going on at home office, what the new priorities and goals are, how the organization chart has changed, what are the hot topics. Question whether your corporate culture has shifted and remind yourself that while organizations profess themselves to be global, you will have been functioning in an Asian context for a number of years. Get up to date with your reading of corporate literature, reports, budgets,

strategic plans as they relate to your new responsibilities. Understand that the colleagues you left behind will have expanded their sphere of expertise, been promoted, taken over your old responsibilities and in their eyes you may have been off having a great time, living the glamorous life of luxury at the company's expense, while they've been grinding away back at head office. They will not understand the realities and frustrations of working far from home in a different culture.

Professional considerations

If you have not been the work permit holder during your time overseas, take stock of what you have learned. Did you pursue a qualification through distance learning, use volunteer opportunities to build on your previous experience or learn a new skill? Before departing, connect with others in your chosen profession, check whether you need to update your qualifications. If you have enjoyed focusing on raising your family, remind yourself that in many of our home countries it is usual for both spouses to go out to work. Consider how you can continue as a full-time parent without the social support of other stay-at-home parents, or resume your career without affordable child-minders.

Money

As an expatriate, you may have enjoyed a generous package, which has allowed you to use your base salary for travel, pleasure, saving, paying down a mortgage or putting a kid through college. When you return home, you will

be responsible for all repairs, maintenance and household bills, with no company cushion or allowances. During your absence, the cost of living may have risen. Certainly if you are from a Western country or from other parts of East Asia, for example Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan or South Korea, you will find prices way higher than they are here. Do your math before you leave, so at least you'll be prepared for mangoes costing \$5 each.

Education

Your child will most likely have been attending one of the international schools. When she returns to her school back home, depending on where home is, she will probably notice more relaxed or tougher discipline, competition in different areas, new ways of defining success. Make sure you get as much information as possible about your child's new school, ask them to mail a copy of their most recent yearbook or school magazine, plus names of a couple of students who might be interested in exchanging emails with your child. If he has been born here or in a previous posting, it may be that your youngster has never lived in his own country: "My passport says I'm Australian (or whatever), but I've never lived there," is a not uncommon lament of third-culture kids.

Children and adolescents

The younger the child, it seems, the easier it is to adjust, apart from obvious disruptions in their daily routine, or if your own concerns have an impact on your child. Make sure your child (and

you) takes time to say good bye. Help him to prepare for re-entry and don't set him up with unrealistic expectations, such as, "sure you'll be on the hockey team". Be aware that his friends will have made new friends.

Adolescents face their own unique challenges. They were "little kids" when they left and now they are returning as young men and women with their own opinions and a maturity shaped in an environment totally dissimilar from that of their friends back home. They will be somewhat odd in an environment where being "different" is the kiss of death.

Do everything you can to help your adolescent fit in. Get her online with friends. This may sound simple, for what adolescent doesn't have an email address? But you will find that the information your teenager is exchanging with friends back home hardly goes beyond the what I did at summer camp and who's friends with whom level. Try to encourage him to ask real questions, to gather online information that will help him understand what's going on at home. Most important to children of this age is the issue of appearance. Try to help them find out what their buddies are wearing: haircuts, shoes, length of skirts, cut of jeans, electronic gizmos, jewelry.

Be a tourist

If you have time, once you arrive, try to be a tourist in your own country. Give yourself some relaxed family time to re-adjust and to relearn your living skills. For example, when I returned to England last year for an extended visit after

many years away, I found the banking system had completely changed and I was as doopy about the procedures there as I was about local banking when I first came to the Philippines...and the tellers were far more impatient at my incompetence than they are here. Practise driving within your own country's laws without the pressure of negotiating the rush hour. Read the newspapers, watch local TV; absorb all you can about current affairs. Spend time with your family and friends looking ahead, not backwards. Acknowledge that you have learned a lot, amalgamate your new self and your old self and use your new skills tactfully and respectfully. Try to find a friend who is truly interested in your experiences (probably someone who has tackled similar adjustments) who will appreciate your enthusiasm for your time overseas. Talk about it, reflect upon it. Then move on.

Marilyn Duncan-Webb emigrated from England to Canada when her children were young. She has lived in Asia since 1997 with a "Western year" spent in New York in 2005. She hasn't "gone home" yet, but although settled in the Philippines for now, she yearns for the Rocky Mountains and the cold climate of Alberta, Canada...someday!