

New
Horizons

Adjusting to
Life Back Home

by International
Students, Inc.

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FOREWORD

A much needed, succinct, relevant and useable work set against the backdrop of a 21st century global international student culture!

The process has involved much ardent prayer, research and relational dialogue with international students after they returned back to their own countries—many as “third culture” global citizens.

New Horizons: Adjusting to Life Back Home is the result of feedback from over 70 overseas trip reports between 2005 and early 2008, over 50 hours of returnee interviews and survey responses from selected returnees.

Though primarily designed to address the needs of international students returning home, I trust this book will also be informative and inspirational to all friends of international students who serve them in various ways while they are away from home.

Thanks to those who have labored to put this great work together and above all to the Lord Jesus Christ—the source of every blessing!



Doug Shaw, PhD
President/CEO
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INTRODUCTION

When you read the title *New Horizons*, what does it bring to mind? “New” implies something different, and often better than before. “Horizon” refers to that place in the distance where the earth meets the sky—where sunrises and sunsets paint the heavens, hinting at peace, tranquility and promise. What does this imagery have to do with leaving the U.S. and adjusting to life back home?

First, both “new” and “horizon” deal with change. New introduces a change from the old. It brings with it a hope for something good—a new friend, a new car, a new medicine, a new job, a new home. Some people face anything new with caution, more comfortable with the familiar or known and perhaps a little suspicious of anything different. Others build high expectations into anything new, envisioning vast improvements over the old. A little of both attitudes might offer the best approach. Don’t expect the “new” to represent perfection, but neither should you expect all new things to bring about complete disaster.

Your new home might have more room, put you in a nicer neighborhood and offer more convenience to shopping, but it may also cost more and lengthen your commute to work. That doesn’t make it a better or worse home—just a new and different one. You evaluated the situation and decided that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. New always brings both advantages and disadvantages.

You, as an international student will go home as a “new” person—changed by the experience of living and studying in the U.S. Many things at home may also seem new or different since you left. These changes will without doubt fall into both categories—positive and not so positive.

People often imagine the horizon as a representation of the future—glowing softly off in the distance. It also marks the point where one thing becomes another (the sky and the earth). And just like the sky and earth seem to blend into one another way out there, the person you have become has also blended. Your home culture has intersected with the U.S. culture you experienced while living in the States. Your vision of the future may have changed because of this, and you probably look forward with some concern, uncertain about how to make these two very different cultures blend together.

Change is inevitable, or in other words, impossible to avoid or prevent from happening. You will face change throughout your life—you cannot avoid it. You will change, your country will change, the world will change. And change often creates challenge, resulting in both positive and negative outcomes.

Whatever changes you have undergone since you left home, whether changes in values, priorities, expectations or beliefs, they will all have many implications. If you expect it and use an objective viewpoint to recognize both the advantages and disadvantages they present, you will go home much better prepared for a healthy transition.

Think of change as opportunity. Just like the sunrise signals the end of night and the beginning of day, change signals the opportunity to grow and develop. Let's say you fell out of a tree as a child because you put your weight on a branch not strong enough to handle it. You broke your arm, but you learned something valuable about climbing trees, didn't you? You can use the changes in your life as opportunities to grow into a stronger, more complete person, even when the changes involve pain or difficulty.

This guide for readjusting to life back home specifically focuses on encouraging and supporting international students who have chosen the salvation that Jesus offers through His death and resurrection. While that does not mean that those who haven't made that commitment will not find value in the advice and guidance offered here, it simply means that this book will address the transition issues and challenges from a Christian perspective. If you consider yourself a seeker still searching for the truth about God, creation and the purpose of human life, you may find this book helpful as a resource for how Christianity can help you manage the difficult situations, questions and people you may encounter as you transition back home. If the exposure you have had to Christianity while studying in the U.S. has stirred your curiosity and you to want to know more, this resource and the bible studies included in this packet can help you continue learning.

For those who have committed their lives to Christ, the challenges presented by the changes in your life will certainly contribute to your spiritual growth. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 5, *"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation."*¹ The times you experience the most growth in your life will likely overlap with the times you experience the most challenges.

All the new information you have processed and gained has led to changes—and those changes can have quite an impact. They don't affect only you, but also others you have a relationship with who will feel the impact as well. What has made a difference in your life can greatly impact those in your sphere of influence—whether they sense a positive or negative impact depends on how you communicate and live out those changes. No matter who you are (or aren't) you can have an impact.

This book provides a wealth of information, advice and encouragement as you begin your road home again. Take advantage of those who have gone before and contributed their insight for your benefit. We hope it provides you the information and resources to help you make the most of your international student experience and the life you live as you look toward the *new horizons* ahead of you.

¹ Romans 5:3-4

CHAPTER ONE

Planning Ahead

The time has come to begin making specific plans for your return home. While you may not expect much adjustment and turmoil in going back to your country of origin, research and experience suggest otherwise. Not only have you developed new habits, relationships and expectations during your time away, the country you call home has also undergone changes during your absence.

In order to make this transition as smooth as possible, you should gradually begin working on specific preparations about four months before your departure. First, you must realize your need for advice and help in preparing for your return. Just like the first time driving in a new city, you need directions or a map to navigate the new territory. Another analogy might look something like this: If you don't feel hungry, you won't seek out food; but if you recognize your hunger, you will seek out food to satisfy it. Many returning students make the mistake of thinking that the return process will not require much adjustment since it involves a return to a familiar environment. Don't fall into that trap! Depending on how long you have been gone, how much you and those back home have changed and how much you have adapted to the U.S. culture, your return can actually require more adjustment than what you experienced when you first arrived in the U.S.

Ideally, you should participate in a *Returning Home* course, workshop or seminar to increase your awareness of the specific challenges returnee students often experience. If you cannot find that kind of workshop offered in your area, try to at least meet regularly with other students also planning to return home, or with a Friendship Partner or ISI staff member who can walk through the process with you.

Allow yourself plenty of time to work through the contents of this book. It offers practical, emotional and spiritual assistance and advice. Take advantage of any Christian material you can find to help you build a solid foundation, because once you return home, you will need to build a whole new network of support and encouragement like those who have surrounded, nurtured and mentored you and your faith in the U.S. *Chapter 10, Resources* provides a list of materials and sources that you can access not only during your transition, but also as you continue your life journey back at home.

In addition to laying a strong spiritual foundation for this new chapter in your life, remember that the practical aspects of moving require quite a bit of planning and organization that you shouldn't wait to address until the last few weeks of your time in the U.S. At the end of this chapter you will find a check list to help you keep track of the things you will want to take care of before leaving. If you begin working through this list before the last month, you will feel much less stress and upheaval during those hectic last days.

Financial

If you have set up accounts and made financial obligations while in the United States, you will need to begin the process of closing those down. If you have lived on campus, in

an apartment or with a host family, give them plenty of notice when you have decided upon your departure date. Most housing arrangements require at least a 30-day notice of your departure. This allows them time to arrange for cleaning, marketing and re-leasing your accommodations to future tenants.

If you have bank accounts, credit accounts, or other financial accounts like utility bills, provide them with notice of your expected departure and instructions as well as contact information for any paperwork that they will need to get to you after you have left. They can then forward any outstanding balances or return any deposits you paid in advance. You can take care of some of these in person, some via written correspondence and some by telephone. Make sure you know each company's requirements.

If you bought a car, furniture or any appliances while in the U.S., you will need to decide how you want to deal with those. Don't wait until the last minute—this will add unnecessary stress to an already hectic time. Advertise or put up notices about anything you wish to sell, or contact your friends at ISI if you would like to donate items for other students who will arrive the next semester.

Social

The longer you have lived in the U.S., the more friends you will have made and therefore the more people you will want to meet with to say goodbye. Once again, don't leave all these farewells until the week before you leave. Plan ahead during the last few months so that your schedule will allow you to have lunch or coffee with friends you have made during your time in the U.S. Depending on the role they have played in your life, you may want to give them a small gift to thank them for their friendship or remind them of you after you leave.

Make sure to begin compiling contact information for all those you will want to stay in touch with after you leave. At the end of this book, you will find a *Contacts* section that provides a few pages to help you collect all the pertinent information.

Emotional

Many international students have already returned to their home countries and you should take advantage of their personal experience and advice in preparing for your own return. Included in your *New Horizons* packet, you will find a DVD entitled *Welcome Home*. In just 15 minutes, you will hear from an assortment of students who share from their own experiences of "going home." The more people you can hear from or talk to who have gone through the "returnee" experience, the more prepared you will feel in facing your own return.

Ask your ISI representative to help you gather names and contact information for other students who have studied in the U.S. and returned to your country so that you can contact them to share and compare your experiences as international students. After returning home, you will find this opportunity to interact with others who have shared similar circumstances very valuable because your friends and family may not understand.

Upon returning home, many international students have struggled with feeling very judgmental and critical of certain things in their native countries since they have spent time in the U.S. You will see things through new eyes because of your broader perspective and worldview, and the inevitable tendency to compare cultures can leave you depressed and negative. What used to seem normal, you can no longer simply accept as part of life. Prepare yourself by thinking through the things that you may have become used to while in the U.S. and cannot expect back home. Some of these issues could include cleanliness, privacy, noise, friendliness, pace of life and independence.

Other people who have recently come to the U.S. from your home country provide an excellent resource as you prepare to return home. Visiting with them can give you an opportunity to catch up on current events, changes that have taken place and what to expect back at home. Their more up-to-date interactions and observations can help you adjust your expectations according to the changing times.

Thanks to modern technology, you can also find up-to-date information on the internet about different aspects of life back home. Libraries also have access to newspapers and publications from all over the world that can provide you with valuable information about the country you will return to and current events to help you as you transition back.

Spiritual

The changes in your spiritual self can cause some of the most difficult adjustments when you return home. While these changes have likely made an incredible difference in your life, you have probably benefited from a network of support and encouragement in the U.S. that has nourished this growth. When you return home, not only will you want to demonstrate these changes through your lifestyle and interactions, but you will need to do so while trying to build a new network of support and perhaps facing outright opposition from family, friends, colleagues or the government.

You must build a strong spiritual foundation for your continuing growth and development as a child of God. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “. . .*anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*” Live like it! Create good habits of bible study, personal devotions and prayer to help you maintain and grow your relationship with Jesus. But remember, you cannot do this alone—you also need other believers to walk along with you. You need to fellowship with others who have made the same life commitment as you have. This takes effort. The devil would like nothing more than for you to become discouraged and distracted by your life back home and gradually allow your faith to fade into the background.

Now, before you return, you need to build a strong foundation for your faith. Studies have shown that the amount of discipleship you get before you return home is directly proportionate to your growth or decline back in your native country. Take advantage of those around you who can disciple and mentor you. Participate in bible studies that will train you not only in good doctrinal principles, but in how to study the Bible. If you anticipate opposition to your faith, you will need to take extra measures to prepare yourself to stand up to the spiritual warfare you may experience.

In this packet, we have included an Ephesians bible study that you can use as you prepare to go home. Ideally, you could work through it with a group of other students during these last months in the U.S. Other options include doing the study with a friend, or working through it on your own. It will not only help you build helpful habits for personal bible study, but will also provide good information for your spiritual growth and nourishment.

This packet for returning students also includes the following brief bible studies that can specifically apply to you as you return home to your native land:

1. **Naomi**, in the book of Ruth, lived for a time in a foreign land and then returns to her home country.
2. In **1 Corinthians 8**, Paul addresses how to live out your Christian faith among others who do not believe as you do.
3. In **Exodus chapter 3** God calls Moses to return to the land of his birth.

Your ISI representative can also recommend other specific studies for you to work through now before you leave and after you return home. Some students who have gone back home have also benefited from participating in online bible studies via the internet. The important thing is to stay in God's Word, and to maintain accountability and support from other Christians.

PLAN AHEAD CHECKLIST

Four months before departure

- Ask ISI staff about a Returning Home seminar or workshop.
- Sign up for a Bible study with someone who can provide discipleship and mentoring for you.
- Begin working through this book.
- Spend daily time in prayer and seeking the Lord.

Three months before departure

- Make your travel reservations.
- Watch the *Welcome Home* DVD.
- Continue studying the Bible and spending time with other Christians who can disciple and mentor you and your faith.
- Begin scheduling times to get together with people you want to connect with before leaving. (Be sure to request their contact information for your files.)
- Plan outings to go places you want to see before leaving the U.S.
- Make connections with others who have recently come to the U.S. from your home country so you can catch up on the current state of affairs and adjust your expectations accordingly.
- Continue working through this book.
- Spend daily time in prayer and seeking the Lord.

Two months before departure

- Notify your landlord, the university and your host family of your expected departure date. (Give at least 30 days notice.)
- Continue scheduling times to get together with people you want to connect with before leaving.
- Make sure you have practiced and feel prepared to share your faith with others you interact with.
- Continue working through this book.

- Find out what notification and procedures utility companies (such as electric, telephone, gas, water, trash) and other accounts require in order to close out your account. Notify each one of your planned departure date and provide new contact information in the format each one requests.
- Ask your ISI staff representative for names and contact information for other students who have returned to your home country after studying in the U.S.
- Ask your ISI staff representative to help you locate churches and potential mentors in the area where you will live back home.
- Ask an ISI staff representative to agree to mentor you even after you return home.
- Provide your ISI staff representative with your contact information back at home so that you can stay in touch, get newsletters and receive notification about conferences, reunions and visits from staff to your home country.
- Spend daily time in prayer and seeking the Lord.

One month before departure

- Put up notices or advertisements to sell items you will not take home with you.
- Make arrangements with ISI representative about any items you wish to leave for international students arriving for the next semester.
- Get gifts for family and friends at home.
- Try to get in touch with some of the students in your home country who you have received contact information for and set up a time to meet once you have returned.
- Begin preparing for how you will share the changes you have undergone with your family and friends back home.
- Continue scheduling times to get together with people you want to connect with before leaving.
- Continue studying the Bible and spending time with other Christians who can disciple and mentor you in your faith.
- Spend daily time in prayer and seeking the Lord.

One week before departure

- Pack.
- Clean your apartment or room and leave it the way you would like to find it if you were the next resident.
- Say your final goodbyes.
- Make sure you have gotten contact information for everyone you want to stay in touch with.
- Make sure you have left your contact information with an ISI representative.
- Don't forget to spend daily time in prayer and seeking the Lord.

CHAPTER TWO

Embracing Change

Depending on how long you have spent in the U.S., many things could have changed when you return to your home country. Your education and experience in another country will no doubt have changed **you**, and the people and places you left behind will either have undergone changes as well or will frustrate you because they have not changed while you have.

Life inevitably brings change. If you can face the changes in your life pro-actively rather than viewing them as threatening or unpleasant, perhaps you can recognize the opportunities they present. The characteristics of change that usually upset people most have to do with the sense of a lack of control, disruption and/or shock. Knowing that you will return home and face a lot of change, you can minimize the negative impact of these adjustments by thinking through the changes and preparing yourself for them so that they don't take you by surprise. This will allow you to understand and deal with the upcoming changes in thoughtful, practical ways; embracing change, rather than fighting it.

Consider the person you were when you first arrived in the U.S. to study and then consider the person you have become since then. Most international students feel they have changed in *at least one, if not all* of the following categories by the time they go back home: **physical, emotional, financial, social, life purpose, intellectual** and **spiritual**. Because you as a person have changed, the way you interact with the world around you has changed as well. You have acquired a new worldview. When you go back into the environment you knew before you changed, you will likely feel an unusual sense of displacement. You may sense it because you yourself have changed while everything else seems not to have. Or you may sense it because you have changed and the environment you once considered familiar has also changed and no longer feels familiar.

In this chapter, you will consider a variety of potential areas of change. Take a moment to read the questions beginning each section to determine if they identify issues you feel pertain to your situation.

Physical (Personal Appearance)

- ? *Have you gained or lost weight?*
- ? *Have you changed your hairstyle, make up or appearance?*
- ? *Have you changed the way you dress or your sense of style?*

Obvious changes, like physical appearance will get the most immediate attention. If you have become fond of American fast food or conversely had difficulty finding food in the U.S. like you ate back home, people will likely notice and comment on the weight you've

gained or lost when they first see you after you return home. If they used to see you in business attire and you return wearing much more casual clothing, they will notice that. If you have changed the length of your hair, that will likely become an immediate topic of conversation when you get together with people you haven't seen since you left home.

While these obvious physical changes might represent only a fraction of the changes you've made in your life while in the U.S., as the most visible ones, they will likely receive the most attention initially. That may or may not bother you, but you should probably think about how best to respond to the frequent comments you will get about how you look and have a response prepared that you can use over and over again. For example, in the U.S. no one considers it a compliment when someone comments on having gained weight, while in some other cultures people see weight gain as a sign of prosperity or health. So, if you have gained weight, prepare yourself to hear about it and remember to consider the perspective of the person making the comment.

If you feel comfortable and good about the changes in your appearance, you can just wait for the novelty to pass. Do not allow other people's opinions to negatively affect how you view yourself. Sometimes visible changes can remind others that less obvious changes have taken place so that they won't just assume you are the same person they have always known. If you have changed the way you dress based on your time in the U.S., you don't have to adjust back to your previous style as long as you consider the new one appropriate back at home. As you probably know, people do make judgments and impressions based on how you look—make sure you realize the impression you create and that it does not cause problems in your interactions.

Physical (Surroundings)

- ? *Has your home country undergone growth?*
- ? *Will adjusting to a different level of pollution, crowding or congestion bother you?*
- ? *Has the landscape at home undergone dramatic changes? (like destruction, development, construction or deterioration)*

Just making yourself aware of what to expect when you return home can make a big difference in how you perceive and react to the physical changes around you. If you have stayed up-to-date with friends, family or someone who has recently come to the U.S. from your home country, you will have a more realistic expectation of the changes that have occurred during your absence. However, if you haven't really given it much thought and suddenly arrive to realize that entire segments of your city have given way to a new highway, or that war has destroyed the landscape, or what you remembered as a small, quiet little town has become a bustling city—then you might experience unexpected feelings of confusion or disconnection.

Likewise, if you have become accustomed to the atmosphere of the university town or city in the U.S. where you have spent your time studying, you will see your home country with new eyes. Perhaps you will go home with a greater appreciation for the highly developed public transportation system in your country. Or maybe you will feel greatly relieved not to have to talk in English all the time or worry about finding someone you can trust to fix your car. But, things that didn't bother you about your homeland before might now strike you as strange, annoying or unpleasant as well. Many returning students refer to their struggle in readjusting to the increase or decrease in commotion, dirt, crowds and pace of life. Others have trouble readjusting to a less stimulating environment. Some have become accustomed to faster and more convenient ways to accomplish tasks and begin to feel critical about how backward or less developed their country seems in comparison to the U.S.

While your readjustment period will likely include some degree of struggle as you readjust to the physical surroundings of your home country, you can ease the intensity by preparing yourself for what might or might not disturb you. If while in the U.S. you have come to appreciate the sanitation in public places or the courtesy in lines, take some time to realize what you can and can't do about the situation back home. First, realize how it will differ. Does your country have much higher or lower standards of cleanliness than what you experienced in the U.S.? Decide how you will respond to that difference. Will you allow dirt or pollution to affect you negatively? Will you feel out of place living in a more upscale or high class neighborhood at home if you have lived in an older, badly maintained area while studying in the U.S.? Will you do something proactive about your living situation or just conform to the way it is without allowing it to bother you? Be realistic.

If your home country has undergone a great deal of development during your absence, you could take some time to figure out how it has changed. A few ideas include talking to someone who has recently spent time there, looking up information online or in publications, or finding your area on Google Earth and zooming in to see how the changes will affect your commute, daily transportation or the neighborhoods where you spend a lot of time. Getting some feel for this up front, before you return, will decrease the amount of stress that it causes when you stand in your own city and feel lost.

Emotional

- ? *Have you become accustomed to more privacy than you had back home?*
- ? *Do you feel differently about relationships and people?*
- ? *Have you become more (or less) free to express your feelings?*
- ? *Do you have a positive or negative attitude about moving back home?*

Emotional changes can create some of the most awkward or self-conscious situations when readjusting to once-familiar family and friends back home. These people probably haven't thought about the changes you have undergone beyond the expected academic and perhaps physical ones. They might not realize that your experience in another country, with new people and new customs will have affected the way you see the world and other people. They think they know you and suddenly the way you react or think surprises them so they might respond disapprovingly or unsympathetically.

Often students who come to the U.S. have spent a majority, if not all, of their lives living in close quarters with their families. If you feel more independent now that you have spent time away from your family and in a more private environment, it might seem particularly difficult to go back to living in such close proximity again. You may feel that you would prefer to make your own decisions and enjoy your own space like you did while in the U.S. but family traditions and expectations can restrict those desires. This will create tension and possibly resentment within your family as they likely will not understand your perspective and simply expect you to blend right back in.

Once again, thinking through these situations before returning home will allow you to prepare to either accept their expectations or provide possible compromises and solutions that everyone can agree on. For example, if in the past your family always expected you to spend Sundays with them, out of respect for their expectations and traditions you could compromise by spending Sunday afternoons with the extended family after having attended church in the morning. Or perhaps you could agree to spend one Sunday a month with the family, and accept that you will miss church once a month. The more willing you appear to talk through these kinds of situations and expectations without flaunting your new-found independence or criticizing their ways, the less disrespected and resentful they will likely feel and therefore, they will be more willing to work with you on acceptable solutions.

Various non-Western cultures do not put a lot of focus on expressing feelings and/or emotions and affection. If you have become comfortable with more freedom in this area, you might find it difficult to go back to not expressing these things openly. Perhaps your family will appreciate you sharing more openly with them, especially if the things you share fall into the category of positive expression. However, some cultures view this openness as a weakness and consider displays of affection or emotion unacceptable or inappropriate. Also, if what you share seems negative, critical or selfish, your family and friends may wish you to keep that information to yourself.

If, however, you return to a culture that shows far more emotion and affection than the people you interacted with in the U.S., you might encounter difficulty in readjusting to that transparency. For example, many Latin American and African cultures tend to regard Americans as very emotionally suppressed and constrained, giving the appearance of indifference and formality. If it takes you awhile to warm back up to the cultural expectations, you might need to make a conscious effort not to seem uncaring.

You need to think and pray through what level of openness will allow you to feel comfortable without offending or embarrassing those you interact with. Culture plays a

large part in this subject, and just as you adapted to the culture of the U.S. as appropriate, you will need to determine how much you can appropriately express or hold back in your own culture. For example, just because you might have come to appreciate that American couples show much more physical affection than couples in your culture do, you cannot assume that everyone will appreciate your attempts to show them the difference. Or conversely, if relationships between men and women in your culture generally exhibit a greater degree of physical affection than you now feel comfortable with, make sure not to offend anyone by your reservations.

Your attitude about returning home will definitely make a huge difference in your ability to readjust. If you return with a positive attitude, looking forward to reestablishing relationships and building a future, you will transition much more smoothly than if you go back home grudgingly and constantly compare everything in your home country to the U.S. Too often international students return with an attitude of superiority that irritates their friends and family back home. You will find that people quickly become tired of hearing your critiques and how much things fall short in your country compared to what you experienced in the U.S. Remember that although a lot of people like to use the United States as a worldwide standard or benchmark, no matter where you come from, your home country has many features and qualities that surpass those in the U.S.

Take care to share your experiences in moderation and never with an attitude of arrogance. Unfortunately, everyone at home probably doesn't want to hear about all your experiences in detail, so you will likely need to establish relationships with others who have studied or will study abroad in order to talk in depth about your experiences as an international student in the U.S. Make a real effort to set up contacts that will allow you to do this. Your time away from home likely stands out as a huge milestone in your life, with life-changing implications and you need to be able to relate to someone about it all. For more information on establishing contacts with other international students, please see *Chapter 5, Creating a Support Network* and *Chapter 10, Resources*.

Maintain a positive attitude about your return home. If you need to create a visual reminder, make a list of things you appreciate about home and focus on those areas rather than on the things you regret. Someone coined the phrase "fake it 'til you make it" to encourage making the best of a situation by focusing on positive actions and attitudes until you begin to feel more positive. The feelings will often follow the action.

Financial

- ?** *Will your financial situation require you to depend on your parents in order to survive?*
- ?** *Do you feel indebted to your parents, employer or government because of the money they invested in your U.S. education?*
- ?** *Do you have a different opinion or attitude about finances/money than you did before you left home?*

Many international students who graduate in the U.S. expect their American education and/or degree to guarantee a good job and salary back home without an extended job search. However, intense competition for jobs today usually means that it takes longer to get a position; you might have to settle for less money than you would like; and/or you might have to take a position outside of your field of study in order to get work. Prepare yourself for any of these possibilities and then you get a great job with a good salary in your area of expertise you will feel blessed and excited.

Many cultures and countries in the world revolve around families as the core unit in society. Your family might expect you to simply move back in and participate in that structure, no questions asked. That will probably seem difficult after having spent time on your own, managing your own money and schedule while in the U.S. You need to mentally prepare yourself for this possibility and decide in what ways you will contribute and how much, if any, of your income you will set aside for your own use.

Many countries around the world have embraced the attitude that promotes earning as much money as you can, regardless of the personal sacrifice or cost. You will need to think through and decide how you will handle money, career advancement, and a materialistic mindset. Has your experience in the U.S. influenced you to feel more or less generous with what you have? Some people return to their own countries determined to reach a particular level of economic status or wealth, while others realize that their financial goals and priorities have changed.

Decide ahead of time what financial goals you will set and why. You will also need to spend some time thinking about what these goals will require of you personally. If you want a top job in a top company, it will likely require more time and energy due to the intense competition as well as location, travel, hours and other logistics. Are you willing to give up your freedom, time with family, friends and other personal priorities to meet the demands for such a position? If you accept a less-demanding position, you might have more time and energy to devote to other priorities in your life. Can you live with the smaller paycheck and possible dependence on others in order to make ends meet? These kinds of decisions will affect many aspects of your life, so think carefully and be realistic.

Sometimes when international students return home, they feel committed to repaying either the actual financial investment their parents, employers or governments made, and/or living up to the expectations these interested parties have because of their financial investment. They often feel they cannot make career choices based on their own free will since so many others have invested in their development through the education they received. If you find yourself in this position before your return, you need to consider the obligations you have and how you plan to fulfill them before you return so that the reality of it all doesn't overwhelm you.

In the end, you must decide how much you will allow finances to determine how you live your life. In spite of your commitments, you will need to set boundaries to avoid getting drawn into what many call the "rat race," loosely defined as a ruthless, never-ending competitive struggle for success. Decide *now* how you need to prioritize the top three areas of your life and then make a realistic plan that will allow you to live with balance.

Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13 both address this issue with straight forward language. *"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."* In other words, if you prioritize money and financial gain, your life will reflect that and your relationship with God and others will suffer. God tells us that He will not share His position of priority in our lives with anyone or anything else. (Deuteronomy 5:7-8)

Social

- ? *Have there been marriages, births, divorces and/or deaths in your family since you left?*

- ? *Have you maintained relationships with friends back at home while you lived in the U.S.?*

- ? *Have you changed in your attitudes or manners towards the opposite gender or your elders?*

- ? *Are you more or less conscious of social status or class than before you lived in the U.S.?*

Depending on the amount of time you have spent in the United States, your family may have gone through quite a few changes during your absence. For example, in a five-year absence, siblings could have gotten married, and/or had children; grandparents may have died; maybe your parents retired, etc. These kinds of changes affect the family dynamic, particularly in cultures where families form the backbone of society. Take some time to think through what events have occurred since you left and what consequences they will have on your family and therefore, on you as you return home. Many cultures highly revere the elderly and when one of them dies, it can move the hierarchy of the family down a whole generation. Or if your entire family used to live together and now your siblings have married and moved out, you might feel more pressure as the only child left living at home.

Another almost opposite situation could leave you feeling strangely uncomfortable with your family in a wholly different way. While you spent time in the U.S. you likely changed and grew in many ways, but your family might have just gone on as usual in your absence causing you to feel frustrated because nothing has really changed at home. Maybe you feel more independent and mature, but when you return home, everyone treats you like the sheltered younger child again. You wish they would have changed or at least acknowledge how you have changed, but they seem content to relate to you the way they did before.

It will likely take time for your friends and family to realize the ways in which you have changed. Don't worry. After sharing with them some of the ways you have changed, let

them see those changes in the way you live your life. Without flaunting it, show them the ways in which you have matured, always treating them with the respect and honor they deserve. Your actions make a stronger impression than your words when it comes to allowing your circle of influence to recognize and accept the changes that have taken place in your life. If you tell them you have become much more careful with money than before, don't spend money irresponsibly and you will actively demonstrate what you have verbally told them has changed.

Having lived in another country and culture you have probably developed new and different perspectives about relationships and social interactions as well. Decide what attitudes and actions you can appropriately display without shocking or offending your family and peers. Perhaps because of your time in the U.S. you have become more uncomfortable with social classes. Think carefully about what circumstances might allow you to express your concerns with social discrimination, so that you don't just appear uncaring or indifferent to cultural/societal norms and conventions. Not everyone will appreciate your new perspectives, so prepare yourself for criticism and try not to respond defensively. Remember, you don't want to act as if you feel superior just because you had the opportunity to study in the U.S.

All of Romans chapter 14 and the first seven verses of chapter 15 talk about the need to respect every individual at their own level of understanding. Don't condemn those who don't agree with your perspective, but rather look at it as an opportunity to demonstrate grace by not judging them according to the standards you have set for yourself. Your relationships will benefit much more from treating people with dignity and respect, in spite of differences of opinion than they will from having you push your convictions on them without regard for their feelings.

Whatever you do, don't become like the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They got so caught up in the "letter" of the law that they forgot the "spirit" (or reason) behind it. Look at the account of the man with the withered (deformed) hand in Matthew 12. The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the law because he healed the man on the Sabbath (a holy day) and the law said no work should occur on that day of rest. Jesus turned the issue back on the Pharisees and asked them if they would rescue their sheep if it had fallen into a well on the Sabbath. He told them that the law permitted him to do good on the Sabbath—he cared about the condition of the man, not the fact that according to the law he should not lift his hand to help someone in need.²

You may find that the friends you left behind when you left to study in the U.S. have totally different lives and interests than you do now. Time has passed for all of you and with time comes change. Don't expect to pick up with those relationships where you left off. You may no longer have the same interests or priorities. Your friends may want to meet after work hours and go to clubs and parties, whereas those activities may no longer appeal to you the way they once did. Without judging or offending your old friends, explain to them that you have different goals and objectives than you used to. Your social circles will likely change as you choose new and different activities to fill your non-working hours. Don't allow old friends to pressure you. Sometimes when you find yourself in a once-familiar environment, old habits can easily take over. By taking time to

² Matthew 12:9-14

think through the possible scenarios you could encounter, you can prepare yourself with well-thought out responses so you don't get caught off guard.

If you used to meet friends at a bar after work or school before you went to the U.S. to study, they will all expect you to fall right back into that pattern with them. Allowing that habit to begin again will make it much more difficult to stop. In a respectful and non-judgmental way, make it clear immediately upon your return that you have changed and therefore, the way you live has changed. Yes, you could possibly lose some friends who choose to make fun of your new standards or priorities, but they won't likely provide the best support and encouragement for the way you have chosen to live your life anyway.

And even the friends who stick around might not show the interest you would expect in your experience studying overseas. While they might show mild curiosity at first, you will probably find that they lose interest quickly. Since they cannot relate to the experiences you've had and have no understanding of the world you participated in, it will not mean much to them. Make sure you don't talk constantly about the U.S. or make continual comparisons with your own home country. That would certainly annoy your friends. Try to relate to them in their own lives and in areas you do have in common, then establish other relationships with people who have studied abroad to address your need to talk about those experiences. For more information on establishing contacts with other international students, please see *Chapter 5, Creating a Support Network* and *Chapter 10, Resources*.

Remember that the way you interact with others and how you live your life will have a much stronger impact on your social circle than simply the words you speak. If you choose to verbally communicate with them about the ways your life has changed, don't just expect them to accept that and congratulate you. They will watch you and make their own determinations about the changes you've made. If your walk supports your talk, that will get their attention. Even if you choose not to verbally communicate any changes you've made, people will notice if your life has changed in ways they can see and appreciate. One international student's wife told an ISI staff member how much she appreciated whatever had happened to her husband while he had studied in the U.S. as he had come home a different person. She saw the difference in the way he lived his life!

Life Purpose

- ? Have your goals and purposes changed because of the time you spent in the U.S.?*
- ? Are you worried that your family and friends will disagree with the purposes and goals you have set for yourself?*

When you left to study in the U.S., most everyone probably recognized your goal to earn your degree from an American university. Perhaps many of them also knew why you wanted this particular degree from this particular institution. When you return, without

even specifically thinking about it, they will assume your next goal involves using the education you got to further your career. While you probably do have that goal, it might no longer have first place in your heart based on your experience in the U.S., or your goals may have shifted in a different direction during your studies.

After all the time, money and effort you have put into earning your degree from an American university, you will need to think through all the options very carefully. For example, can you use your education to make a difference in your chosen career field in a way that you hadn't expected? Or can you use the skills you acquired in a different field that fits more closely with your new life purpose?

Perhaps you had originally planned to return home and make as much money as you could, moving up the corporate ladder quickly. But now you may not feel that making a lot of money and having all the worldly comforts ranks as high on your list of priorities. In order to reflect your new order of priorities, you might need to make some adjustments to your schedule. You can talk about your most important priorities a lot, but people will decide what your priorities really are based on what they see. Someone said "show me your calendar and your checkbook and I'll tell you where your priorities lie." That simply means that you will spend the bulk of your time and money on the things that mean the most to you. Make sure that the choices you make back home reflect the most important things in your life.

If your family expects you to work 60-80 hours per week because career and financial success have a high priority, they might not feel very impressed that you have decided to set boundaries on your work hours because you want to fellowship with other Christians or volunteer with a church or ministry. Likely your words will not convince them that you have made a wise choice. They will need to see how this purposeful prioritizing positively impacts your life before they will acknowledge its validity—and maybe not even then.

You will need to accept the fact that some people just will not understand how or why your purposes have changed. While you will not have to defend yourself to everyone, you will need to respectfully explain and then accept your differences if elders and family members question or invalidate your choices. You have a responsibility to certain people in your life and you must maintain that, but you must decide how you can make it work with the new priorities and purposes you have for your life.

Intellectual

- ?** *Do you feel that because of your recent education and experience you can now criticize and judge either the way things are in your home country or the way they are in the U.S.?*

- ?** *Do you expect that multiple companies will be eager and anxious to hire you when you return home?*

Many students who have studied in the U.S. offend their friends and family when they return home because they seem to think they now know everything and everyone should listen to them. Equally as offensive, students might complain about conditions in their home country and constantly compare them to the U.S., or talk with authority and superiority about how foolish they found this or that aspect of life in the U.S. These attitudes will not endear you to those you interact with back home as they will soon tire of hearing you complain, or about how great you had it in the U.S., or how much more you know than they do.

While your education and experiences abroad will undoubtedly provide you with a much broader perspective than you had before leaving home, don't allow that to generate conceit or make you critical or judgmental. Take the time and effort to appreciate things unique to your home country and don't always voice your opinion about things that no longer measure up to your new standards.

Because of your experience in the United States, your entire worldview has likely changed. Think of worldview as the framework of ideas and beliefs through which you interpret the world and interact in it. The term comes from the German word *Weltanschauung* which refers to the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world.³ Anytime you move outside of your familiar environment and experience something altogether different, you expand your view of the world. Once you have seen and experienced things that those around you haven't, it can become increasingly difficult to relate to those who have no concept of that world.

Your world has grown to include many sights, sounds and encounters that the average person in your home country has never experienced. You have witnessed and experienced events that they have never even considered which naturally affects how you look at and interact with the world around you. Consider yourself fortunate, but take care not to look down on those who haven't had the same opportunity.

You can use this expanded worldview to great advantage, but don't allow it to breed arrogance or criticism. Use your broader experience to benefit those around you, creating solutions and instigating improvements because you care about the people and your country—not out of self-importance, snobbery or embarrassment. Multi-cultural experience benefits everyone. The opportunity to see things from another perspective always enriches your life.

A brief story illustrates this point:

One day a rich father took his son on a trip to the country with the purpose of showing him how fortunate he really was. They spent a day and a night on the farm of a very poor family. Having witnessed their poverty first-hand, the father expected his son to come home grateful for the splendor of his privileged life, but when he asked his son what he had learned, he never expected the reply he got. The son answered, "I saw that we have a dog at home, and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of the garden, but they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lamps in the garden, they have the stars. Our patio reaches to the front yard, they have a whole horizon. We have a

³ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/worldview>

small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. "We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, but they have friends to protect them." His father looked at him, speechless. Then his son added, "Thanks Dad for showing me how poor we are and putting it all in perspective."⁴

Instead of focusing on all the poor family didn't have, the son saw what they made of what they did have and his perspective about his own situation broadened. He didn't pity them, as his father expected—he admired and respected them. So really, it doesn't rest on how much richer, better, more enlightened or advanced you have become, but how your heart-level perspective has changed. Use that expanded perspective to make the most of every opportunity.

While you should feel proud of your educational accomplishments and any experience you gained in the U.S., don't expect every other company back home to want to hire you. The world market has become a very competitive place and many people have a lot to offer. It shouldn't surprise you if you have to spend months in the job market to find a position. Don't take it personally and begin to question whether you should have spent the time and money, not to mention the effort to earn a degree internationally—it just reflects the current job market and the many qualified applicants all over the world.

Spiritual

- ? *Are you concerned with the reaction your family and friends will have regarding your spiritual beliefs?*
- ? *Will family customs and traditions conflict with your new spiritual beliefs?*
- ? *Will you need to build a whole new network of friends in order to live a strong Christian life?*
- ? *Has your church experience in the U.S. changed what you want in a church?*

If you return from the U.S. after committing your life to Jesus, you might find it difficult to imagine how much this decision will impact your life back home. If you have only lived a Christian life in the U.S., supported by other Christians, an active church, weekly bible study, mentoring and accountability, you may not realize how much this step in

⁴ Author unknown

your life has influenced you. Stop and think about what changes your decision to follow Christ has made in your day-to-day life.

Whether or not you specifically tell others back home about your conversion experience might depend on where you live and how it could impact your family, your job and your well-being. If you do not verbally communicate this change, will the changes in the way you live your life because of your faith be noticeable to those you interact with at home who knew you before? Will the things they say and how they treat you because of your faith have an effect on you? Will you feel so different from them that you find it difficult to spend time with them anymore?

Research shows that for most people who become Christians, it doesn't take very long before they stop associating with non-Christians socially. While on the one hand this means that they have formed relationships with people like them who can relate to, support and encourage their Christian walk, it also means that they no longer spend much time among non-Christians, reaching out as Christ did and sharing their faith. You will need to figure out an appropriate balance between establishing the support and nourishment needed for your faith to grow, and not alienating non-Christians by judging their lives or preaching at them.

If your family finds your new faith very disturbing, you will have to determine how you can still show them honor and respect while distancing yourself from their religious practices. In some countries, your Christian faith could expose you to persecution and oppression. Continue reading through the remaining chapters in this book as several of them will address spiritual issues related to topics such as *Anticipating Challenges*, *Communicating Changes*, *Creating a Support Network*, *Building Spiritual Nurture* and *Resources*.

As a student in the U.S. surrounded by churches and opportunities for bible study, you probably have gotten used to that casual availability, but once you return home the absence of such opportunities could make you realize how much you miss that aspect of your spiritual nourishment. Perhaps your church experience in the U.S. has led you to desire a similar church environment in your home country. Churches in other countries have different methods/styles of worship and preaching that you may not relate to as well.

Remember that the ultimate reason you attend church has not changed. Scripture calls us to come together to worship God and encourage one another in love and good works. Worship should not center on *us*, but on God. Certainly, church can provide a wonderful venue for social relationships, sincere emotional experiences and entertaining or pleasing activities. However, do not base your church experience on any of these things. If you go home to a traditional church where your participation and involvement don't seem to matter at all, refocus your perspective on the real reason for church. If you go to church seeking God and asking Him to meet you there, He will—it just may not be in the way you expect.

CHAPTER THREE

Anticipating Challenges

The changes we experience in life can often present special challenges, both positive and negative. Not knowing what to expect, not liking the changes, and/or feeling you have no control can all contribute to stress and tension during periods of change. In order to minimize the strain and maximize the growth and harmony during this transition period, you should take time to consider likely expectations and the challenges they create, and then come up with ideas for integrating the “new” you into your environment and relationships with as little conflict as possible.

Everyone has expectations, whether high, low or somewhere in between. Life experience influences each person’s individual expectations. If your wife always serves dinner at 8:00 p.m., you learn to *expect* her to do so. If your professor arrives late for class every day, you *expect* to have to wait for him if you show up on time. If you find an old discarded couch, you *expect* it to have torn upholstery and sagging cushions. People do not necessarily set out to create an expectation—it just happens naturally.

Upon your return from studying in the U.S., you will find that in addition to your own expectations, your friends, family and perhaps government or employer will also have certain expectations of you. You might expect to readjust to your culture quickly, get a great job offer or come and go from home as you please. You probably have these expectations without even really thinking about them. After all, because of your familiarity with your own culture, you probably don’t expect to have any trouble reintegrating. And if you earned a degree from an American university, you might expect that to give you an advantage over most of the people in the job market back home. And since you have become independent and managed on your own since you left home, you expect to continue that when you return.

It might surprise you to learn that each of the above examples often become areas of conflict for students returning to their home country after studying in the U.S. Expectations and reality don’t always meet, and can create challenges. In this chapter, you will have the opportunity to identify some of your own expectations, as well as those of others you will interact with back at home. Hopefully that awareness will encourage you to prepare to face and deal with those expectations realistically and to deal with the challenges they introduce.

Family

As you have seen in previous chapters, your family will likely expect you to fit right back in the way you did before. If you had lived at home before studying in the U.S., they may expect you to move right back in again when you return. If you spent your evenings in your room studying, they will likely, without even thinking about it, expect you to retire to your room and quietly read or write at the end of the day. If you argued about how much of your money to contribute to the family, they will expect the same arguments again.

And once you return to the familiar environment you will find that you could easily fall back into those familiar patterns again. If that thought depresses you, take advantage of this opportunity for a fresh start. You might begin by talking through how things might need to change once you return, but remember not to make your points as if everyone should automatically do what you want. Listen and show willingness to compromise when necessary. Another approach might be to settle back in, gradually showing others how you have changed, and helping them adjust their expectations over time.

For example, when you lived at home before going to the U.S., perhaps you ate your dinner, excused yourself and didn't come home again until very late. Now, when you return home, you could get up from the dinner table, thank whoever cooked the meal and begin taking dishes to the kitchen. If it does not go totally against cultural traditions, you might even bring coffee or tea to the table following the meal and sit down to spend a few minutes talking to your family. After a few evenings like this your family might begin to change their expectations.

To play this scenario out a little further, imagine that while having coffee together on Wednesday evening you mention that on Friday you'll miss dinner at home and won't get home until late because you have plans with some friends. Their expectations will shift a bit more as they realize that you have contributed to dinner and family time throughout the week and have respectfully and considerately let them know that you have other plans in a few days. Do you see how you could begin to alter their expectations over time?

If you have spent time in the U.S. away from your spouse and children, they may assume when you return that they will get to see you a lot more and then experience disappointment if your job or responsibilities consume the majority of your time. Realize the importance of taking time to talk to your family about what your job will require of you and letting them know how you will set boundaries, thereby communicating their value in your life too. Make sure to demonstrate your commitment by honoring those boundaries.

Social

Since your friends usually hold different expectations than your family, the tensions in those relationships might look a little different. Your friends probably expect you to return as much the same person they said goodbye to when you left. They will likely think you still have the same interests and priorities. The first few times that you see them after your return they might show a passing interest in your U.S. experience, but soon they will fall back into their old patterns. Maybe that means they'll expect you to go drinking with them after work, or expect you to meet them every Sunday morning for a football game. Before allowing yourself to get drawn back into old habits, evaluate which activities you want to continue and which ones no longer fit with the changes you've made in your life. You will find it much easier to break the habit before getting back into that routine.

Depending on how long you have been gone, your friends may have gotten married or taken jobs that have changed their routines as well. Perhaps their lives have changed so much that you will feel left behind and wondering what happened to your old circle of

friends. If you haven't really stayed in touch, you might want to contact one of them before returning to get a sense of how their lives have changed so that you can adjust your expectations accordingly.

Quite a few international students have mentioned the differences they experience in the way people interact at home and the way they interact in the U.S. Some people from other countries consider interpersonal relationships in the U.S. as more open, with friends more willing to talk about personal and significant issues. Upon returning home, it requires a certain amount of adjustment to adapt to more or less intimate and perhaps more or less superficial relationships.

Other returning students have experienced the opposite situation; the people they interact with in the U.S. seem perfectly content to talk at a superficial level, but not about anything meaningful. They observe that Americans hold a reputation for friendliness, but seem to steer away from personal conversations.

The same theory seems to hold true for casual interactions with people and strangers you encounter during the course of the day. Many international students have commented on the friendliness and courtesy they experience even while doing business at the grocery store or at a restaurant in the U.S. It can take some time to readjust to the less customer service oriented interactions often experienced outside of the United States.

Because you consider it your "home" country, it may surprise you to feel lonely or alienated upon your return. So much has changed and you may no longer feel like you belong. Accept these as perfectly natural feelings but don't allow them to incapacitate you.

Work

Some international students go to the U.S. to fulfill company requirements or training. In these cases, employers or companies might have particular expectations when you return. Whether you have earned a degree, a credential or valuable knowledge, the company will likely expect to get specific returns for their investment. These kinds of expectations often bring great pressure.

Or you could put the pressure on yourself by expecting that the companies back at home will line up to offer you a good job because of your American degree or experience. If this does not happen, it could cause you to question all the time, effort and money you (or your family) put into your education. The investments made for your education could convince you that you must find a job in your field of study in order to justify those investments. Don't let these expectations confine you. You may have to get creative to find the right position, or you may have to start out in a lower level position than you thought to get into the field you desire.

Sometimes your job can influence your social life if your particular career or rank overlaps with your time outside of the office. The demanding and hectic pace of the corporate world often requires many meals and evenings spent with co-workers or clients. Think about how these expectations will influence your personal life and whether or not you will find the evening activities compatible with your principles and morals.

Environment

The pace of life can vary greatly depending on what country and part of the world you come from. You may go home to find that life seems very relaxed and slow in comparison to your life in and around the campus you attended in the U.S. Or conversely, you may feel overwhelmed with the frantic pace back home.

Western European and Asian countries usually rank toward the top in pace-of-life studies while Latin American and African countries tend to populate the slower pace-of-life end of the spectrum. If you consider such factors as the length of the work week and amount of vacation time taken, Western European countries would drop out of the running with Asian countries. Using Japan as a benchmark, employees work an average of over 300 hours a year more than their counterparts in other countries like the U.S. and Germany.⁵

According to an ISI staff member who visited Asia,

“The Asians have every bit of the workaholic, driven, possessed-by-the-climb-upward attitude that you see in corporate America, but they add another dimension—an unimaginable, intense competitiveness. It doesn’t stop when you get the job—in fact, that signals the real start of the rat race. With so many people trying to get your job, you have to perform perfectly or you could lose your position. Work becomes all-consuming, just to stay ahead. Couples will split up geographically for years at a time just to maintain or enhance their position. They seem to live those ‘quiet lives of desperation’ that author Henry David Thoreau alluded to.”

You may have experienced a pace ranked anywhere from slow to fast depending on where you spent your time in the U.S. Certainly larger cities have a faster pace than smaller towns, and often university students experience a unique pace of their own. Regardless of your home country, you will likely need to adjust to a different pace and tempo as you settle back in.

Your time in the U.S. may have changed your perception about some aspects of your home country. For example, some international students return home and find that they have become much more aware of the noise level, the pollution or the crowding. Don’t harbor unrealistic expectations about the conditions at home. Recognize that some things you paid little attention to before could irritate you when you return home because you now have another frame of reference.

Don’t succumb to the temptation to view yourself as superior to your family and peers just because you have lived in the U.S. and seen the world outside of your home country. A broader worldview can leave you disdainful of those who still see things through a narrower lens, so you will need to take care not to offend them or treat them condescendingly. People can only filter things through their own grid of experience and you will ostracize them if you make them feel inferior or backward because of their more limited world experience. Remember to represent your American experience honestly,

⁵ Levine, Robert, *The Pace of Life in 31 Countries*, [American Demographics](#), November 1997

making it clear that you do not view everything American as positive or better, but sharing candidly about the not-so-positive aspects as well.

Spiritual

Your family system may advocate or promote certain spiritual expectations as well. Regardless of the label, most religious families, from Catholic to Buddhist to Muslim or any other, form expectations surrounding traditions and customs that relate to their religion. Because you have always participated in the past, they will expect you to participate when you return. If you have changed your beliefs, this could pose a problem. For more information about how to face these challenges, *Chapter 4, Communicating Changes* will address this topic more thoroughly.

You will also need to think about your expectations for spiritual nourishment and growth back at home. While you may have become accustomed to a specific method or style of learning or worship in the U.S., remember that people and churches worship in different ways all over the world. Even within one country you will find a wide variety of styles and different focuses, so don't decide that you cannot worship unless it conforms to your experience. Just as we see God interacting with His people in many different ways in the Bible, so too He interacts differently with His people all over the world.

What characteristics will you look for in a church back home? What criteria do you consider most important? Try ranking the following aspects of a church in order of importance **to you** [1 = most important, 9 = least important]:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| _____ Size | _____ Missions focus |
| _____ Distance | _____ Children's program |
| _____ Preaching quality | _____ Music |
| _____ Socioeconomics
(involving economic and social factors) | _____ Denomination |
| _____ Volunteer and ministry opportunities | |

Hopefully this ranking will help you as you go about your search for a church in your home country. If you get input from others about church possibilities (for example, the ISI Global Ministries office or an internet source), communicate your feelings about the areas you rank as most important. For more input and information, read *Chapter 5, Creating a Support Network*; *Chapter 6, Building Spiritual Nurture*; and *Chapter 10, Resources*.

Make sure that you set realistic expectations of the time you will spend reading and studying the Bible, fellowshipping with other believers and ministering inside and outside of the church. You may need to adjust your expectations from the amount of time you spent in these activities while in the U.S. because your circumstances will differ once you return home. Instead of classes and homework filling much of your time as they have in

the U.S., you will have to decide how to balance your devotional life, fellowship and ministry with work, family and social responsibilities.

Expect to have to make your spiritual growth and development a priority or it will not happen. You will probably find it easier to “cheat” on this area of your life than any of the other more tangibly demanding ones. Spiritual growth requires great *self* discipline. If you do not form open and honest accountability relationships, no one will monitor to make sure it’s happening like they might for other commitments.

Don’t get caught up in resenting the expectations you or others have for your return. Look carefully at your own expectations and be as realistic as possible. Take time to discuss everyone’s expectations with your family and with any others who you feel could benefit from clarification and/or compromise. Avoiding or ignoring the challenges will only allow them to intensify and cause further misunderstanding and conflict.

CHAPTER FOUR

Communicating Changes

Chapter Two discussed the variety of changes you might have undergone due to your experience as an international student in the U.S. If you have not already done so, take the time now to read through that chapter. It might surprise you how many changes you don't realize because they have occurred gradually during your time away. The more changes you recognize in your life, the more you can prepare for how to communicate them to your friends, family and colleagues back home. Remember, the people you will reunite with have not had the opportunity to become accustomed to these changes progressively like you did. They just have the "before" and "after," without the benefit of what came in between.

Of course the amount of time you have spent in the U.S. will have some bearing on how much you have changed, as well as how much contact you have maintained with people at home. Your personality will also influence the level of change you've experienced. Some personality types respond more slowly and carefully to change, while others tend to embrace it wholeheartedly. Some people actually isolate themselves and purposely only interact with their unfamiliar environment on a very limited basis.

As a university student, you have at least needed to interact with professors and other students at some level. The fact that you accepted the challenge to go overseas to pursue further education indicates that you probably have a more open approach to change than some there may.

Until you recognize and acknowledge the changes you have undergone, you will not realize how those changes might affect your life back at home. This goes along with those expectations discussed in *Chapter 3*. If you simply expect everyone to detect, understand and appreciate the ways you've changed, they will disappoint you. Some changes might actually shock or upset others, and you need to prepare yourself for a range of reactions.

Obviously, they will notice physical changes first. If you feel that any physical changes you have made will offend or disturb anyone at home, you need to evaluate now whether you feel comfortable enough with that change to maintain it, or if you need to soften or eliminate it before returning. For example, if you have decided to cut your hair or wear clothing that tradition in your culture considers inappropriate, then you need to decide if you will revert to the traditions of your home culture, or take the consequences for your nonconformity. If you decide to stay with the changes you've made, you can of course, expect to hear plenty of comments, so prepare yourself for how you will respond without communicating defensiveness or disrespect.

You might also experience stress in communicating emotional changes to your family and friends back at home. In many cultures, emotions have no place in the public arena or in the decision-making process, whereas in the U.S., people talk about their emotions more openly and acknowledge the ways that emotions can affect people and decisions. Take some time to evaluate whether you feel comfortable introducing a new level of emotional openness, or if that would cause too much turmoil. Like some other aspects of

your transition, this topic might benefit from a more gradual approach. You will need to decide how to handle this delicate subject based on your family dynamics and the social customs in your country.

Your attitude about returning home will definitely make a huge difference in how you communicate with those you left behind. Appreciate the good things about returning home. No matter where you come from, your country undoubtedly has numerous features that clearly outshine the U.S. If you feel you must constantly compare everything at home with what you experienced in the U.S., you will certainly antagonize those around you by insinuating that things at home don't measure up. This communicates an attitude of superiority. If you can maintain a positive outlook and convey enthusiasm about being home, reestablishing relationships and building your life, friends and family will feel more comfortable with you.

If you have developed a different approach to money during your absence, or need to consider how your financial situation will impact those in your family, make sure to sit down and talk about it soon after you get home. This can avoid unnecessary assumptions and tensions. After you have taken the time to evaluate your budget, communicate this information very clearly so that everyone involved will know what to expect. If you will need to live at home until you find a job that will support you, let them know how you plan to contribute to the family.

Remember, you can find other ways to contribute to the home and family besides financial. If you cannot give money, you could help with cleaning up after dinner, take responsibility for some weekly cleaning duties or transport/accompany younger siblings to functions or events as necessary. Your family will certainly appreciate whatever creative ways you can think of to help out while trying to gain employment or stability.

In the event you will need to live at home after you return, it may surprise you how difficult that seems after having lived independently and/or away from home. Once you grow up and leave home, the saying goes, "you can never go home again." Of course you can physically go home, but it will never feel the same once you have lived on your own.

You will do better to address the situation directly, rather than avoid it. If you intend to move out as soon as you get financially stable, state your goals to your family clearly but respectfully. Make sure they don't interpret your desire to move out as a personal statement of animosity or ill will, but rather a natural progression as you mature and become independent.

If you cannot move out of your parent's home in the foreseeable future, then you all need to agree on some ground rules that will allow you some measure of the privacy and independence you have become accustomed to while still maintaining an appropriate role and function within the family. Perhaps you can suggest changing bedrooms with another family member to afford you more privacy. Your family will also appreciate it if you communicate clearly about meal times. For example, if you do not plan to come home in time for dinner, make sure to give plenty of notice to the one planning the meals.

You may also need to discuss necessary adjustments because of changes in your life. Perhaps before you left, your parents relied on you to stay home and take responsibility for younger siblings on evenings when they had to go out. Rather than allowing them to

assume you will resume this role upon your return, perhaps you could suggest which nights you could make available if they should need you to care for any younger siblings.

Respectful communication must play a large part in making this situation work smoothly. It can help you avoid the tension that often accompanies assumptions. If you fuss and complain at every opportunity to let everyone know how miserable you feel because you have to live at home, they will not likely try to help you make the transition, or make adjustments for your needs. Make the most of the situation—it won't likely last forever.

Communicating the “new you” to old friends might seem like a daunting task. They might openly ridicule or alienate you because they don't agree with the changes you've made in your life. Or they might simply lose interest in you because your lifestyle, interests or perspective have changed. Naturally, friendships change over the course of a lifetime. You shouldn't expect to fit right back in with the same group of friends after a long absence and/or after significant experiences have changed you.

Romans 12:2 encourages you not to “*copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.*” Don't give in to the pressure to do things because everyone else does them. If your old friends no longer feel like the best fit, you may need to allow those friendships to fade away. When friends go out to a bar or to gamble after work and assume you will join them, tell them you have other things to do. Soon they'll realize that those activities no longer take priority with you. However, if you still enjoy playing football with a group of friends on Saturday morning, pick it back up. Allow them to notice how you have changed. If they ask questions, then you have an open door to communicate about some of the changes in your life without making it the focal point of your friendship.

You should probably try to talk to people personally about the changes you have made in your life, rather than in a larger group setting. Your ability to address questions or determine how someone has absorbed what you've said definitely improves in a one-on-one conversation. If word spreads before you have had a chance to talk to everyone personally, don't worry about it. If they have a genuine interest in you, they will probably approach you with questions and afford you the opportunity to have that conversation.

Remember you now have a golden opportunity to create new habits and expectations. How you live your life will make a stronger impression than what you say so don't get caught up in figuring out what you want to share about your life changes. Start by living out your faith and values, then be prepared to give an explanation anytime you get the opportunity. *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. . . 1 Peter 3:15.*

Stay alert to every opportunity, but don't become confrontational. Just as people don't want to hear you constantly talking about the U.S. or constantly comparing everything, they also don't want to only hear you preach to them. Jesus met people where they were and you should imitate the model He lived. “*You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*” Philippians 2:5

Personal conversations may not take place in your home country as easily as they did in the U.S. You might find it more difficult to engage with others in deep discussions or spiritual conversations. Don't force it. Make it clear that you would enjoy going deeper,

but let that happen naturally. If you pray that God will open doors for you and then maintain sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading, He will prompt you with appropriate words or comments at the right time.

Many international students go home afraid to communicate their new-found faith to their families, peers and colleagues. Sometimes ancient traditions and beliefs remain vitally important and binding within family systems. Sometimes governments exert pressure on their citizens to conform to a specific doctrine or system of beliefs. A conversion experience could insult and antagonize family elders, offend government leaders, or even lead to persecution, oppression and/or job loss. How do you respectfully, honorably and non-judgmentally reject the beliefs of your family and/or country without creating tension, conflict and bad feelings?

Each person must make a personal decision about how to handle this delicate situation in his/her own life. Take it to the Lord in prayer and commit yourself to following His leading. Psalm 25:4-5 says *"Show me the right path, O Lord; point out the road for me to follow. Lead me by your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me. All day long I put my hope in you."*

For some this means returning to risk areas without publicly sharing their conversion and new-found faith, but living as an "underground" Christian back at home. For others this means making a statement of faith and accepting the consequences, relying on the Lord to provide for and sustain them. In Isaiah 42:16 God makes a promise, *"I will lead the blind down a new path, guiding them along an unfamiliar way. I will brighten the darkness before them and smooth out the road ahead of them. Yes, I will indeed do these things; I will not forsake them."*

But don't assume this verse means God will make it all easy or work it all out the way you would like for Him to. Remember that in John 15 He says that since He experienced hate and persecution, you can expect to also; and in John 16:33 Jesus said, *"Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows."* Obviously, all Christians don't experience the same kind of trouble or all face persecution for their faith, but some do.

Christians face spiritual warfare on a daily basis. Don't pretend it doesn't exist, but don't let it overwhelm you either. Whether you live in a country that censors religious freedom or not, the devil will find any number of ways to distract or discourage you from following Christ. Be on guard. The enemy could come at you from any direction—family, romance, work, finances—he does not consider anything off limits. Use awareness as your best defense so that he doesn't get his foot in the door. If you've heard the tale of the frog in the boiling water, Satan uses the same principle. The legend goes that if you catch a frog and put it in boiling water, he'll hop right out; but if you put a frog in a pot of cold water and gradually turn up the heat, it will sit in the pot and boil to death. In other words, Satan doesn't always go right to the big things, or attack the strong convictions you have. He tends to start with little things to "warm you up." Then perhaps you let down your guard and before you know it, you've compromised on more important things. *Chapter 6, Building Spiritual Nurture* talks more about spiritual warfare.

Other chapters in this book refer to the fact that the way you live your life will speak louder than any words you may or may not share about your faith. While your family or elders may not respect your decision to follow Jesus, you can make it a goal to live in such a way that they have no choice but to acknowledge what a positive difference it has made in your life.

An article in the March/April 2007 issue of *Asian Report* quoted a high-ranking Chinese official as saying that previously the central government's view of Chinese who converted to Christianity as "One more Christian, one less Chinese," but based on the present quality of Christians in China, that has changed to "One more Christian, one better Chinese."⁶ This indicates the positive impact that Chinese Christians have had on the lives of those they interact with in China.

While this may sound very good, in order to live it out and become more like Jesus every day, you will need to make it a priority to feed your spiritual life—to nourish and grow your faith. As the apostle Paul makes very clear in his writings in the Bible, we cannot earn our salvation, nor can we sustain it on our own. He shows remarkable openness and vulnerability when he confesses in Romans 7 that even when he knows the right thing to do, he doesn't always do it.

Don't expect perfection from yourself or feel you have failed if you slip up and get mad at your brother one morning. You have not messed everything up. You will fail, and sin will darken your life; but don't stay there and give up. Even *if* your brother thinks, "Ha, see he's no different than he was! I knew it!" when you go to him and apologize, taking responsibility for losing your temper and making sure to communicate your love and respect for him, he will realize you *have* changed. Perhaps you will even strengthen your witness because you have made it clear that Christianity does not require perfection and relies on grace and forgiveness.

The more time you spend reading the Bible, in Christian fellowship and absorbing spiritual teaching, the more your life will reflect the mind and attitude of Jesus. The apostle John develops a wonderful word picture in John 15 when he talks about Jesus as the vine and Christians as the branches. "*Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.*" Don't isolate yourself from Christian influence and expect to grow in grace and truth. It will require time and effort to build a new network of support, accountability and mentoring, but your spiritual health will depend on it.

Perhaps your morals and ethics have changed since you left your home country. What you once considered acceptable, you now view as questionable. If bribery occurs regularly in your country, it may now bother you because you look at it differently now. Or you may now have reservations about the treatment of certain classes of people in your country. How do you react when faced with what others at home consider normal, but you no longer feel comfortable with?

Spend some time thinking about and studying what you feel Scripture says about the concepts you question and pray about how you should respond to the situation. Seek out

⁶ Wang, Rev. David. "Is God Chinese?" or worst "Is Chinese God?" *Asian Report* A Ministry of Asian Outreach. Issue 280 Mar/Apr 2007.

what other believers think about it. Examples in the Bible show believers in situations where they chose not to conform to the behaviors they disagreed with, as well as examples of those who felt God allowed them to go along with conduct that contradicted their beliefs, for whatever reason.

Look at Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the third chapter of the book of Daniel. Their convictions led them not to bow down before the king's golden image as the law required. They knew the punishment—the fiery furnace (death), but felt called to stand up for what they believed anyway and not pay homage to any other god. Their reply to the king takes into consideration both the fact that their God had the power to save them from the fire, but also that if He chose not to, their allegiance did not change.

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’” Daniel 3:16-18

Now contrast that with the account of Esther. In chapter 2, Esther received specific instructions from her God-fearing cousin Mordecai, who raised her, not to reveal her identity as a Jew to anyone in the palace. Verse 10 says, *“Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.”*⁷ These circumstances likely led to instances when she had to implicitly mislead, or at least deceive those around her to hide the truth of her nationality. Yet numerous Scriptures indicate that God does not advocate deceit, including 1 Peter 3:10, Psalm 5:6, Psalm 101:7, Exodus 20:16 and Leviticus 19:11, to name a few. For whatever reason, God honored what Esther did and used it for good, in spite of the fact that she consciously chose to deceive others.

You will have to wrestle with this kind of issue in your heart and sincerely seek God's leading to know how to handle the circumstances that test your convictions. Although your salvation does not depend on your adherence to the law, your life should reflect Jesus and follow His ways. Several passages in the New Testament instruct Christians to submit to leaders and authorities. (Look up Romans 13:1, Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Peter 2:13)

Depending on what country you call home, ISI might have information for dealing with issues specific to your country. If you have not received that information with this book, ask your ISI representative how to obtain it or contact the ISI National Office with the information listed in the *Contacts* section at the back of this book.

Remember, many of the Old Testament laws have acquired a deeper meaning because of the life and witness of Jesus Christ—the fulfillment of the law. Old Testament regulations no longer apply to Christians. In the 14th chapter of Romans, Paul talks about how we must each answer to God for what we did or didn't do. He says it's really not about whether we did it “right,” but about our obedience and the condition of our heart before God. You must remain adaptable and flexible, not rigid and uncompromising. Look again at the example that Jesus set. The Pharisees concerned themselves with the “letter” of the

⁷ Esther 2:10 (New international Version)

law, getting caught up in exacting (demanding) obedience, but Jesus concerned himself with the “spirit” of the law (God’s truth and purpose) and the hearts of people.

Sometimes you might need to use creativity to communicate your changed heart and life back home. Perhaps in the U.S. it seemed easy to participate in activities and events that demonstrated love, care and concern for others without a lot of effort on your part. However, in your country, you may need to come up with some ideas of your own that fit in with your culture and circle of influence. Get creative and don’t hesitate to “step outside the box”—in other words, you don’t have to do things the way they have always been done, or do what people expect. Jesus met people in their everyday lives and reached them there. What you do or say doesn’t have to look or sound religious—as long as it communicates God’s love, truth and grace. That will attract people.

In many countries your involvement may need to take the form of mercy ministry or creative outreach in order to shift the focus away from the issue of religion. When people see the good you do or enjoy the activities that draw them to you, perhaps they will feel more open to you and therefore, the message behind your actions.

As an international student you have now become a multi-cultural person, or someone made up of more than one culture. You may not feel you belong totally in the culture of your birth anymore, nor do you feel you belong totally in the American culture. You now have elements of both cultures mixed together in you, creating a “hybrid” person. In botany, scientists call the plant that results from crossing two plants containing different genetic information, a hybrid. Botanists usually do this to create a more desirable or useful plant; like a fruit without seeds, or a beautiful flower with a less fragile structure.

You too, now have more to offer because of your multi-culturalism. Instead of feeling strange or uncomfortable, or trying to stifle evidences of one or the other culture in your life, draw from both to enhance how you experience the world and interact with it. While most people can certainly appreciate the benefits of knowing more than one language, look further than that and recognize how many other advantages this multi-culturalism affords you. Not only can you benefit from other ways of doing things, but you can also relate to a whole other segment of people. Truly multi-cultural people, who embrace their hybrid status, often exhibit more tolerance, patience and openness, as well as less ethnocentrism [the belief in one’s own superiority or that only one “right” way exists].

While not fitting into either culture might sometimes cause you discomfort, it might also create some wonderful opportunities to help others feel less uncomfortable. Draw from your own experience of feeling awkward or out of place when you first arrived in the U.S. and use that to relate to people in your own country trying to adjust from another culture. Or perhaps you can use your multi-culturalism to help prepare other students who plan to study abroad, teaching them from your own unique ability and experience how to relate to other cultures.

Born into a “yellow” culture, you became exposed to a “blue” culture when you went to study in the U.S. and now you will go home as a “green” person because the yellow of your original culture blended with the blue of the U.S. culture, and combined to create green. Other groups of people in addition to international students can relate to this “green” concept and you may find that you can form valuable and beneficial relationships

with expatriates, missionary and military families, as well as many others. You don't have to do this alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Creating a Support Network

Hopefully, if you didn't realize it before, the time you spent away from home has helped you realize how much you need a good network of people around you. In the second chapter of Genesis, God created Eve because "it is not good for man to be alone . . ." God created humans with this need for fellowship, support and encouragement from other humans. Many of the New Testament books of the Bible originated as letters of encouragement and spiritual nurture to Christians separated by distance from their spiritual mentors and leaders. Don't try to do it alone.

As you prepare to go home, you will need to think carefully about who can help you through the transitions. Ideally, you have built relationships with people you can talk honestly to and relate with. Anytime you go through a big transition it helps to talk things over with someone who cares and will stand with you.

Perhaps during your time in the U.S., you have developed a good relationship with an ISI staff person, volunteer or Friendship Partner. These people have come to know you and can understand the challenges you will face in returning home. The person who gave you this book realizes the importance of this transition in your life and wants you to prepare for it. ISI considers it part of the full-cycle of ministry to nurture, support and mentor students once they return home. Take advantage of that kind of friendship and make a point to continue to maintain relationships with people you can turn to when the going gets tough or you face unexpected challenges.

The ISI National Office fully supports those staff and volunteers who have befriended and encouraged you during your studies in the U.S. In addition to maintaining your relationship with them, the ISI Global Ministries Office would like to include your contact information in their database so that you can receive support, encouragement and perhaps even names of other students who have returned to your country after studying in the U.S. The Global Ministries Office has also begun developing a periodic newsletter for students who have returned home, and can offer personal assistance in helping you find other believers and churches back at home.

Previous chapters have alluded to the fact that your friends and family may not show much interest in your international experience and broader perspectives. Countless returning students have indicated their desire to have other people to talk to who have studied in the U.S. Make an effort to obtain names and contact information for anyone who has returned to your area, as you will certainly appreciate the opportunity to relate to someone who understands what you have experienced. Of course, no one will have had exactly the same experiences you did, but sharing the similarities and differences will likely prove stimulating to you both. Getting together occasionally can provide a valuable outlet as you readjust to your culture.

If your ISI contacts do not have specific information for other returning students, feel free to contact the Global Ministries Office at the ISI National Office to request contact information for those who have returned to your home country before you.

ISI also has some excellent materials that you may find useful. You can order books, bible studies, country profiles, DVDs and more from the National Office. You will find the telephone number, website and email address in the *Contacts* section at the back of this book, as well as a list of some of the resources available in *Chapter 10, Resources*.

If you sign up for free membership on the ISI student website [www.internationalstudents.org], you will have access to materials and resource items available specifically for students. If you order the hard copy materials before you leave the U.S., shipping will cost less and they will arrive sooner.

You can also do some research online to find out about creative ways to keep feeding your spiritual self once you return home. Technology has made available some great interactive bible studies and other useful tools that you can use no matter where you live. Since you will likely encounter fewer opportunities for fellowship and study once you return home, you will have to take the initiative and discipline yourself to take advantage of the many ways you can continue growing and maturing in your faith.

According to interviews and feedback from returning students, keeping your faith active once you return home requires much more than simply finding a church. Settling into a good church can prove challenging enough, but those who get involved in ministry and serving within a church maintain the most solid Christian walk. Don't allow yourself to get comfortable just sitting through an occasional church service—get involved. Yes, it does take time and energy—both of which you might find in short supply, but your spiritual health depends on it.

Jesus called his followers to serve, and His life exemplified that. Serving others takes the focus off you and glorifies God. Matthew 6:33 says, *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*⁸ If He called you to a specific service, He will equip you to do it and will bless you for it.

You will not find a church that completely matches the one where you worshipped in the U.S. Accept that fact and decide what priorities your home church must meet. Will you find it more important to have a fellowship that meets close to your home or work, or will you prioritize the style of worship and commute a little further to get what you want? Christians have the same tendencies as other humans to want things done their own way, but the truth remains that the Bible calls believers to meet together with other Christians—regardless of whether it meets their requirements or not. First Corinthians 12 talks about the different gifts the Spirit gives to all believers and Paul exhorts them each to put their gifts to use in the context of the Christian community. If you do not attend church or meet with other believers, you share the responsibility for an incomplete Body. Using Paul's metaphor of the body, your lack of participation in the church Body could leave your church without an eye or a hand. Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 for a better understanding of this visual imagery.

It really has nothing to do with feelings, although sometimes positive emotional experiences come out of our church involvement or relationships. We do it for God, for our own growth and because He made us to worship Him. Make no excuses—just do it.

⁸ Matthew 6:33 (New International Version)

Whether it meets your felt needs or not, you need to attend and participate out of obedience to God. He can work through any circumstance, but you must do your part.

Satan will certainly jump in to discourage your participation with a group of believers. He will consider it a victory to affirm your feelings of weariness, convince you that you had too much else to do, or persuade you to believe that the churches just don't meet your needs. He knows that the less input, support and encouragement you get from other Christians, the less likely it becomes that you will grow and threaten his reign of darkness around you.

Don't avoid going to church because you can't find one you like. Your church experience back home may look very different than what you became accustomed to in the U.S. Instead of a beautiful church building with stained-glass windows, comfortable seats and a practiced choir in matching robes, you may find yourself in a church that meets in the basement of a run-down building where the off-key music echoes off concrete walls and people sit on mismatched, uncomfortable chairs. It doesn't matter. You may have enjoyed contemporary, vibrant music and practical, engaging sermons while in the U.S., but can't find anything but a dry, ritualistic church run by an uninspiring pastor back at home. Worship anyway. Matthew 18:20 promises ". . . *where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.*"

If you have spiritual needs that go unmet at your church, then find or start a bible study or fellowship group to address those gaps. Perhaps others around you have similar unfulfilled needs and you could join together to create a solution. Pray about your situation and pay attention to how God leads you.

Make sure to build relationships with others who believe like you do, but don't fall into the trap of surrounding yourself only with other believers. You will need to have at least one person who can mentor and disciple you spiritually; someone you look up to and who will challenge you not to settle for "milk" but to progress on to "spiritual meat." (See Hebrews 5:11-14.)

You will also need a friend (or several) who can walk the road with you, sharing the daily struggles and triumphs. Choose carefully after having spent some time worshipping together. Deeper relationships often grow out of small groups or bible studies where you have the opportunity to communicate more personally and intimately than in a church setting. Don't shy away from wisely and appropriately sharing the real struggles and problems you deal with simply because you feel like the only one who has them or because you feel someone might judge you unfavorably. The right people can provide the support and encouragement you need if you will allow them to. This can also release others to share their vulnerabilities and real issues and to experience the support and grace God intended for the Body. Galatians 6:2 instructs Christians to bear one another's burdens and in so doing, obey Christ.

Make sure that you also make room in your life for non-believers and those with a less mature faith. This opportunity to reach out, befriend, encourage and cultivate relationships could bring others to salvation or nurture them in their faith. In Romans 14 and 15, the Apostle Paul encourages Christians to accept others without judgment and to encourage those with weaker or less mature faith. So as you build your network of interactions, be sure to include those you can disciple, just as others have disciplined you.

Once you have accepted Christ's sacrifice and committed your life to Him, you have a responsibility to share what you have discovered with others.

You can also use your experience abroad to positively influence others who plan to study in the U.S. Because you have done it, you can provide valuable insight, advice and contacts for those trying to accomplish the same thing. Think about what you wish you had known before you left home. Think of who you know in the U.S. that could help other new students who will arrive to study. Give potential international students ISI contact information and websites. The ISI student website has hundreds of pages of information to help with practical details and valuable advice, for both before and after students study in the U.S.

Think of it as making the most of the challenges you faced and lessons you learned by passing along tips and pointers to help others prepare. By the time they return home again, you will also have valuable experience regarding transitioning back that could certainly benefit them. Who knows how many lives you could bless in this way?

You must realize the importance of a support network—on several levels. Spiritually, you cannot isolate yourself and expect to develop and fulfill every aspect of your character as God intended. Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages believers to “. . . *think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And . . . not neglect . . . meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another . . .*” Certainly, you must maintain an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, as well as your personal devotions and growth, but that cannot make up your entire spiritual walk. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 details some of the benefits of sharing your walk with others:

“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer.”

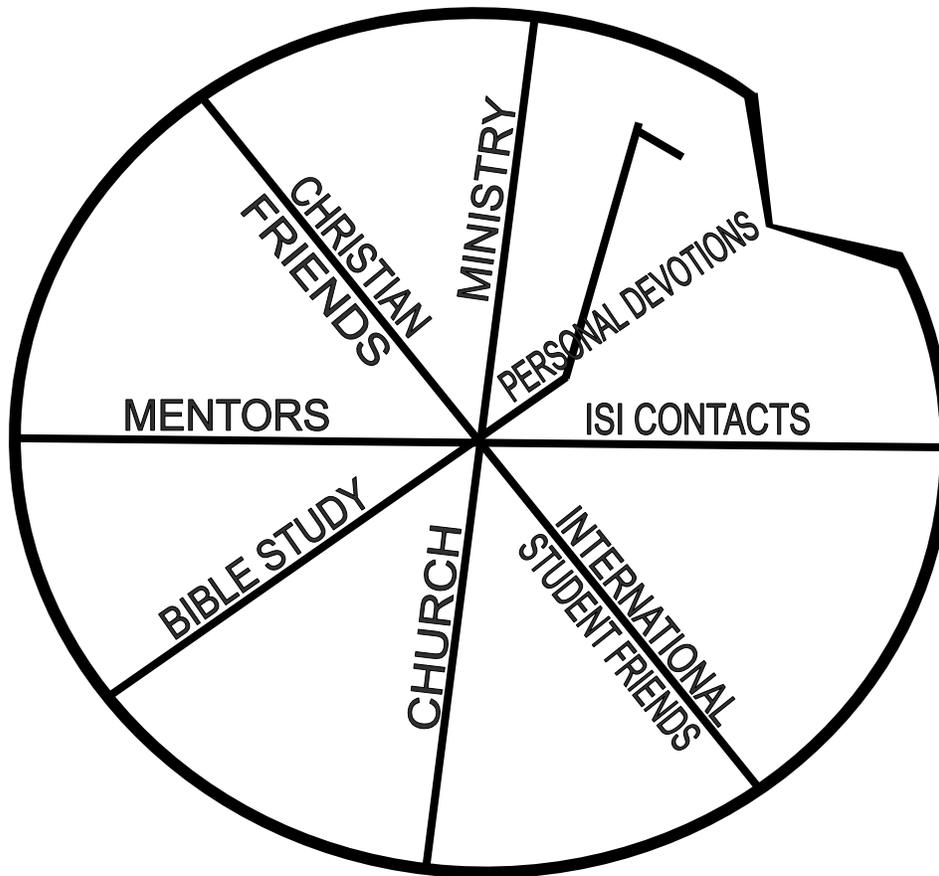
Emotionally, you will benefit from having others you can turn to when you feel upset, discouraged, overwhelmed or lonely. Don't try to do it all alone—your emotional health will suffer if you hold everything inside or pretend you don't care. Other people can provide perspective, insight and encouragement that can help you deal with your struggles.

But remember, building this kind of relationship takes time and effort—it doesn't happen instantly or after one cup of coffee. As with a seed, you must nurture and cultivate relationships with this kind of potential. You may only have one friend like this, or you may have several, but you probably won't have more than that due to the level of intimacy involved. Make sure your relationship doesn't center only on your needs, but on the other person's needs as well. Listen when they need to talk about their struggles, give your perspective, insight and encouragement, and make an effort to do considerate things that will communicate your care and concern. Mothers often tell their children on the first day of school, “If you want a friend, be a friend.” That sounds like good advice.

As far as maintaining contact with the ISI staff and volunteers you've built relationships with while in the U.S., don't let those connections fall away because you won't live near

each other anymore. Thanks to modern technology, you have numerous options for staying in touch; email, letters, telephone and Skype, just to name a few. These people care about you and how you readjust to your home culture. They have access to materials and resources to help you as you transition, grow and thrive. They will listen to you, advise you and pray for you—you never know, they might even come visit you!

You must realize that because of your expanded worldview and your faith, you now occupy a precarious position, vulnerable to opposition and attack. Perhaps people back home no longer think of you as one of them because you have come back a changed person. In order to face this resistance and grow through it, you will need to rely on a multi-dimensional support network. As the saying goes—don't put all your eggs in one basket; because if you drop the basket for whatever reason, you've lost all your eggs. Spread your eggs between several baskets—church, bible study, personal devotions, Christian friends, friends who have studied in the U.S., a mentor, etc. That way you won't rely entirely on one to maintain your equilibrium or stability. At any given point in your life one may seem more important than the others, but over time this will shift and flow between them all, creating a healthy balance for you and your spiritual development. Think of it as a wheel with many spokes; if any of the spokes break or weaken, it compromises the function of the whole wheel.



CHAPTER SIX

Building Spiritual Nurture

Three of the four gospels give an account of Jesus' *Parable of the Sower*. Matthew, Mark and Luke all relay the "story" as Jesus told it to the crowds of people gathered around, and then a few verses later they all include Jesus' explanation for the meaning of the parable. The story describes a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Since Jesus attracted crowds of ordinary people, he told stories with concepts familiar to them; they understood planting and harvest and could easily follow Jesus' illustration.

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."⁹

While everyone could visualize this story, even his own disciples didn't understand the lesson in it, and asked him later to explain.

"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."¹⁰

Now that you've read through how each seed fared based on its location in the various soils and Jesus' explanation, read back through the meaning of the parable and see which kind of soil you have planted your seeds in. Those seeds that fell on the hard, dry path didn't even get a chance to put down roots before they got trampled, blown away or eaten by the birds. Has your heart hardened so that the seeds of faith can't break through? Have those seeds gotten trampled, blown away or eaten by ambitious predators? In your situation, perhaps those predators include friends, family or colleagues who stand in opposition to your faith. Have you allowed their hostility to trample those delicate seeds of faith?

What about the seeds that fell on the rocks? Did you get excited about your new faith, but then fail to provide the care and nurture necessary to encourage the development of roots? When the wind blows or the sun beats down, you'll need to dig down deep for sustenance or the fragile seeds of your faith will not withstand the challenges of life. When you go home, circumstances will test your faith. Satan knows your vulnerabilities, and he will not hesitate to put your fragile root structure to the test. He will put as many

⁹ Luke 8:5-8 (New International Version)

¹⁰ Luke 8:11-15 (New International Version)

rocks in your soil as he can, and rocky soil makes it very difficult for plants to find nutrients and build strong roots.

Think about those seeds that fell on the thorny ground. Have you allowed a busy life and distorted priorities to choke out your growth? Cultivating your faith does require discipline and careful nurturing, but the weeds and thorns spring up without any care at all. Have you ever had a garden and noticed how you really have to care for and nurture the plants you want to grow, but you don't have to do anything to encourage the weeds to get going. Your spiritual development can easily slip under a lot of stress and pressing demands. Since maintaining your spiritual vitality does not have the obvious side effects that going without eating or not getting a paycheck does, you might let it slide first. Before you know it, it has gotten choked out by all those other demands on your time.

But finally, the seeds that fell on good soil became productive because they could take root, dig down and find nourishment and sustenance. They developed a strong root structure that could withstand the elements of life in this world. The health of your root structure will determine your growth. Just like when you move a plant from one container to another or put it into the ground, you must keep the roots as intact as possible in order to allow it the best chance to reestablish and thrive in its new environment. As you transplant back home, you will need to take good care of your "roots" so that in the challenging days of transition, you can continue to receive nourishment and sustenance through them.

Just like a plant needs sun, water and nutrients to grow and produce, you too need spiritual nourishment. Reading, studying and applying the Bible, meeting with other believers, worshipping God, memorizing Scripture, developing your gifts, serving others—these all qualify as ways to nourish and nurture your spiritual health and calling in Christ. If you don't water a plant for a few days, it will get dry and fragile. Think of your spiritual life the same way—if you don't spend time in the Word and prayer, you will become spiritually dry and fragile.

Personal time with God will contribute to the development of a healthy root structure. In the same way that you build relationships with other humans by spending time with them, so too does your relationship with God grow deeper by spending time reading His book (the Bible) and talking with Him (prayer). The more you study Scripture, the more you will learn about God's character and how Jesus conducted his life on earth. Ephesians 5:1-2 says to *"Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ."*

Set aside time every day to read your bible and pray—not just to check it off your list of things to do, but to learn, grow and mature in your faith. A plant that gets fertilizer and water can yield healthy flowers and/or fruit because it has the necessary nutrients to pour into what it produces. According to the fourth chapter of Ephesians, you should *"take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you."*¹¹

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages believers to think about true, honorable, admirable, excellent things—mind nourishment. In his letter to the Colossians, he urges

¹¹ Ephesians 4:24 (*The Message*)

Christians to set their minds on things above—again, mind nourishment. In a modern technological context, you could compare this idea with the phrase “garbage in, garbage out.” Just like a computer, if you don’t put the information into the hard drive, it cannot bring it up for you. Luke’s version goes like this: *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”*¹² What you think and talk about as well as what you do will reflect what you have put into your mind and heart.

Memorize Scripture verses that you can then refer to throughout the day. Psalm 119:11 says, *“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”* If you can call up a pertinent verse or passage in the midst of living your daily life, your character will begin to reflect Christ much more fully than if you have to look the verse up later and think about how you should have reacted in a given situation.

But beyond just putting the information in your heart and mind, you need to access it and let it make a difference in your life. James put it well in verses 23-25 of the first chapter of his book:

*Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.*¹³

If you looked in the mirror and saw that your hair needed combing and you had a black smudge on your chin, but just walked away and went out the door to work, what good did it do for you to look in the mirror? If you study the Bible and realize that the way you talk to your spouse does not seem to line up with the guidelines God has given for interacting with others, it should make a difference in your life. Don’t just read about it and then go back to the way you’ve always done things before. Comb your hair and wash your chin—take action to move toward resolving those discrepancies between your life and the life God has called you to.

But you can’t just rely on yourself. You need the outside perspective, insight and involvement of other Christians to become everything God intended for you. The Body of believers should build one another up by encouraging, strengthening, challenging and supporting each other—not only on Sunday, but all the days in between. By committing yourself to a church, you practice discipline and establish good habits, but you also build connections with other people trying to become more like Christ. Hebrews 10:24 encourages Christians to *“. . . motivate one another to acts of love and good works.”*

So, while church should ideally enlighten and educate you spiritually, beyond that it provides you with the opportunity to build relationships with others who have similar

¹² Luke 6:45

¹³ James 1:23-25 (New International Version)

views and purposes. In the midst of a world that promotes immorality, corruption and perversion, your church should provide a safe haven and timely reminder that you aren't the only one trying to do things differently.

Chapter 5, Creating a Support Network, talks specifically about the importance of joining and participating in a church body. You should make it a habit to attend, not out of ritualistic obedience, but because your faithfulness will produce valuable fruit in your life and that of others. And don't just attend—participate, get involved! Sitting in a church pew can become a form of passive entertainment if you let it. Everyone can do something!

This goes back to the passage in 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul talks about every believer having different gifts to contribute to the body. Verse 7 says *“A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.”* For some, teaching the children's Sunday School class amounts to torture, but for others, it fits perfectly with their gifts. You don't have to sing beautifully, pray confidently or feel comfortable talking to strangers to contribute to your church family. Plenty of behind-the-scenes activities make a huge difference in the smooth operation of a church service or event.

You can go through a spiritual gift analysis to figure out how God has uniquely made you, and then discover ways to serve that fit with those giftings. An eye trying to function as a foot causes problems both for seeing and for walking! To access an online spiritual gift analysis that you can complete on your own, go to <http://buildingchurch.net/g2s.htm>. After reading through the introduction and instructions, click on the selection that reads **“Begin the Gifted2Serve inventory!”** at the bottom. This site will help you learn about the spiritual gifts, assess which gifts you have, and then figure out how to implement them practically.

In addition to the relationships you develop with others at church, you can also build one-on-one accountability and friendship through a mentoring relationship. Accountability means making yourself responsible (accountable or answerable) to someone else in the interests of developing and maintaining your own growth and integrity. Accountability requires honesty, vulnerability, the willingness to address weaknesses and challenges and then to make changes.

To use a non-religious example, people trying to lose weight often do better when they have to keep track of and turn in a record of what they have eaten in a given period. They “give an account” of their dietary intake and therefore, take responsibility for it. If Susan has asked Jane to keep her accountable for what she eats, Jane can help her by encouraging her compliance, praising her progress, helping her stay motivated, and challenging her to set goals and make specific improvements.

The Bible shows how Paul served as a mentor to Timothy; teaching, encouraging, challenging and loving him like a son as he matured in his faith. Timothy, in turn mentored other believers, sharing what he had learned from Paul for the benefit of others.

Because Paul had invested himself in Timothy's life, Timothy knew that all of Paul's input came from love and a desire to help sharpen him.

Take a look at the Christians in your life. Choose someone who has walked with God for awhile and demonstrates the qualities of Christ that you would like to develop in your life. While ideally your mentor would live nearby, in today's reality they may actually live around the world and still interact with you on many levels. Whether you make it a formal mentoring relationship in which you ask him/her to regularly counsel and teach you, or you just go to him/her for advice, prayer and accountability, you will benefit spiritually. Even non-Christians realize the advantages of having someone with more expertise or experience in a particular area to provide valuable insight and input into their lives.

Then, although you don't feel like a very mature or strong Christian, try to find at least one person in your life that you can mentor, passing along what you have learned. Think about how much you have appreciated those who have invested themselves in your life and do the same for someone else. It will amaze you how much you will grow and benefit from this kind of relationship too.

In addition to attending church, you should get involved in a bible study or small group. At church you worship corporately, get biblical feeding and interact with other believers. In a small group or Bible study, you can build more personal relationships. As you meet together weekly or bi-weekly, your relationships will deepen and you can share struggles and triumphs, pray specifically together, and talk through what you study in the Bible, asking questions and building camaraderie.

The small group setting will help you realize that everyone struggles and faces challenges, because you can't always see that in the larger church setting. If you don't know a person's struggles, how can you help? If someone asks for prayer for their upcoming move, you now know to offer your help on moving day, or to provide a meal, the use of your vehicle or to care for their children during the afternoon. This gets you involved with the everyday life of other Christians so that you can serve and encourage one another more specifically.

Yes, it takes time and energy to commit to a small group or a bible study, but what you gain from it will far outweigh the cost. Making church and small group study a priority will help ensure that your roots grow deep and strong. You will need this depth and strength when you face the challenges the devil will throw at you.

Depending on where you live, you will experience spiritual warfare to some degree. Many international students return home to discover that Satan has erected numerous obstacles in an attempt to discredit them and cause them to doubt their faith and/or God's power. Satan will try to discourage you during this stressful transitional period of your life. The devil does not want you to gain confidence, credibility or momentum as you enter this new phase of your life. You pose a real threat to him because you return home enthusiastic about your faith; it has changed your life and you want to share it and spread

it among your friends and family. Expect opposition. If the devil can stop this ball before it starts rolling, he has a much greater chance of success.

In some countries of the world, Christians face strong opposition. Your decision to follow Christ may mean that you will face persecution unlike anything you have experienced before in your life. This kind of hostility has taken place since the days of the Apostles, and you can certainly find plenty of references to it in Paul's New Testament letters. Even King David faced certain types of persecution during his reign over Israel, and many of his Psalms can speak to your heart as you too desire protection, victory and power just as he did when facing battles and enemies on every side.

Dig your heels in and rally your support network. Peter puts it strongly in the fifth chapter of his first book, "*Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are.*"¹⁴ Can you visualize a lion pacing back and forth on his huge paws, baring his sharp teeth and roaring ferociously as he looks for something (someone!) to devour? You cannot face him in confusion or weakness—you must put on the full armor of God as described in Ephesians 6:10-18.

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of **truth** buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of **righteousness** in place, and with your feet fitted with the **readiness** that comes from the gospel of **peace**. In addition to all this, take up the shield of **faith**, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of **salvation** and the sword of the Spirit, which is **the word of God**. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*¹⁵

The Ephesians bible study included with this packet provides an excellent tool for helping you learn and apply God's Word to your daily battles. Use it to build up your knowledge, strength and weapons as you face the spiritual forces of evil all around you.

Unless you have prepared yourself and stay plugged into God's power, the battle will overwhelm you. Satan fights unfairly, and you **will** grow weary. For this reason, you must have the prayers, support and encouragement of other Christians. Write out Scriptures on cards to carry in your wallet or purse, or slip into the visor of your car. These constant reminders will begin to put down roots in your mind and heart. The verses

¹⁴ 1 Peter 5:8-9

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:10-18 (New International Version)

below can get you started, but seek out others that the Lord leads you to in your own personal study:

Have you never heard? Have you never understood? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding. He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.
Isaiah 40:28-31

I pray to you, O LORD, my rock. Do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you are silent, I might as well give up and die. Listen to my prayer for mercy as I cry out to you for help, as I lift my hands toward your holy sanctuary.

Praise the LORD! For he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving. The LORD gives his people strength.

Psalm 28:1-2, 6-8

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. And we are confident in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we commanded you. May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.

2 Thessalonians 3:3-5

If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so you can endure.

1 Corinthians 10:12-13

Upon returning home you will find it very tempting and natural to fall back into your old habits and patterns of behavior. You will need to make a conscious effort not to “*copy the behavior and customs of this world.*”¹⁶ God wants to transform you into a new person by

¹⁶ Romans 12:2

changing the way you think, act and live. He has already begun that work in you, both through your international experience and through the people He has brought into your life. Do your part by spending time in the Word, hiding it in your heart, participating with other Christians and developing your spiritual gifts. James 4:8 promises that if you draw near to God, He will draw near to you. In Jesus' own words, *"And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*¹⁷

¹⁷ Matthew 28:20

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reintegrating the New You

reintegrate v. **1.** to bring somebody back into a group or larger entity after a period of time away **2.** to make something whole or united again¹⁸

You probably have an idea in your mind of how you imagine your return home. Perhaps you expect your friends and family to welcome you with open arms and listen to your every word. Perhaps you expect things to just pick up where they left off. Or maybe you feel nervous and unsure of your welcome? No matter what you've imagined, prepare yourself for an initial "high" that will likely wear off within a few days or at the most a few weeks.

Usually when you spend any length of time away from home and familiar people and places, it can seem refreshing and comforting to return; almost as if you can relax into your own space again. But it doesn't take long for that to wear off. You may begin to notice all those things that bothered you before. Or you might remember certain aggravations that you had forgotten about and feel irritated dealing with them again. Your moment in the spotlight as the center of attention won't last long and you may resent the fact that either so little has changed at home or so much has changed that you don't know your place anymore.

The more realistic your expectations, the less stress and resentment you will feel. Understand before you return that the experiences you've had and the changes in your life will color the way you see everything at home now. Don't expect everyone to understand your new perspective—remember their world has continued much the way it did before you left. Exercise patience, gentleness and respect so that you don't come across as acting superior or more important because of your time in the U.S.

Don't feel guilty about the letdown you will likely experience after returning. Focus on developing the fruits of the Spirit in your life to keep you positive through this transition period. If you consciously work on incorporating love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control¹⁹ into your daily life, it will take the focus off the disappointments or oppositions that lie outside your control. You can incorporate these characteristics into every area of your life, so challenge yourself to do so.

Give yourself time to reintegrate back into your culture and country. Just like you didn't immediately adjust when you arrived in the U.S., you will need to allow yourself time to change gears. Even though you have the advantage of familiarity with the culture in your home country, having spent time away and immersed in another way of life, you will need to get used to it again. This "reverse culture shock" often comes as a surprise to many returning students. Many wonder "How can you experience shock going into a culture you grew up in?"

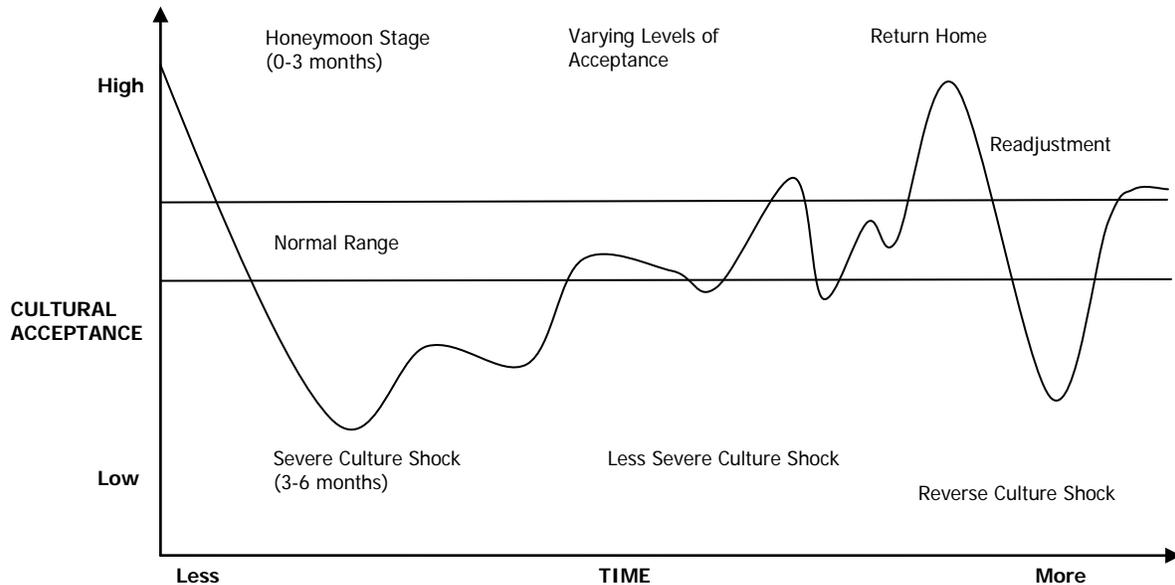
¹⁸ Encarta Online Dictionary

¹⁹ Galatians 5:22-23

Although culture shock generally describes the anxiety, confusion and feelings of disorientation people experience when exposed to an entirely different culture or environment, a similar effect can occur after spending an extended amount of time in a foreign environment and then returning to the familiar one. Sociologists call this phenomenon *reverse culture shock*. One of the reasons for this reaction stems from your expectations. When you arrived in the U.S. you naturally expected to have to adjust to an entirely new way of life, but upon returning to the culture you grew up in, you may not expect to feel disoriented, anxious or confused. In your new environment in the U.S. you had to make adjustments that affected your perceptions, habits and even values. You have now changed as a person, and depending on the length of time you've spent away, your home country may have changed as well. During your absence, you may have built up a mental image of home that does not match reality.

The symptoms of reverse culture shock look very much like the symptoms of culture shock, including headaches, changes in sleeping and eating habits, listlessness, depression, and a loss of interest in things you usually enjoy. One of the best ways to ease the effects of reverse culture shock involves preparation and expectation. Expect to feel some letdown or disorientation. Don't assume you can just step back into your old habits and routines. Give yourself time; don't expect to feel at home in a matter of days, weeks or even months. Gradually, you will notice that the effects of reverse culture shock don't feel as overwhelming as they did at first.

Study the diagram below to see the pattern of a "typical" culture shock cycle. As you can see, the same basic emotions repeat themselves once the student gets to the Return Home stage in the cycle. This phase begins with the same "honeymoon" stage of exhilaration and elation because the returning student has forgotten all the unpleasant things about home and looks forward to all the good things they missed. They often anticipate returning as a celebrity and don't realize that the "mountaintop high" they may have experienced during their time in the U.S. does not extend to the reality of life "back in the trenches," to borrow a military expression referring to the grit, grime and tedium in the day-to-day life of a soldier.



That short-lived euphoric phase passes quickly once the student faces “real life” at home once again, leading to a sharp plunge into the low cultural acceptance period of reverse culture shock. During this phase the student experiences dissatisfaction, resentment, chronic complaining, impatience with others, glorification of life back in the U.S., extreme withdrawal and introspection.

Depending on how you handle this stage of reverse culture shock, you might wallow there for quite a while before beginning to make the necessary adjustments to cope and adapt. Regardless of how much you try to prepare yourself, realize that this unpleasant phase is just part of the process and don’t allow yourself to stay stuck there or feel like you will never fit in again.

The better adjusted and integrated you became while in the U.S., the more reverse culture shock you will experience when you return home. Try to remember what coping skills worked well for you when you went to the U.S. and try putting them into practice as you readjust to life back home.

Rather than constantly comparing or criticizing the differences between your home country and the U.S., respect both cultures without having to label one as better or worse than the other. Avoid constantly bringing up how much faster, cleaner, more convenient everything might have seemed in the U.S. Those actions will quickly antagonize your friends and family. On the other hand, if you feel a particular delight in enjoying your favorite food again or visiting your favorite restaurant, feel free to comment on how wonderful it feels to experience it again. Recognize and appreciate how things differ, but focus on the positive instead of getting bogged down in negative comparisons.

Allowing yourself to get caught up in all the things you don’t like will drag you down. Instead, count your blessings. Sometimes it takes work to get your brain thinking that way, but once you get started, you’ll find you have much more to give thanks for than you realized. You could challenge yourself to go through the alphabet, thinking of a

blessing that begins with each letter or a blessing that offsets each negative thing you think about.

For example, if your family does not understand you and gives you a hard time about your choices, you can decide to give thanks that you *have* a family. No matter how much they frustrate you, having a family far outweighs not having one at all. Or if you feel suffocated by the heat, take solace in the fact that your heating bill won't take a huge chunk out of your pay check.

Make a habit of counting your blessings—it will get easier and easier the more you do it. Not allowing yourself to wallow in self pity or negativity will help you maintain a positive outlook. In Philippians chapter 4, Paul says *“I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”*²⁰ Remember that Paul, the author of that passage, suffered beatings, shipwrecks, hunger, arrests and time in prison, just to name a few of his trials. That should inspire you.

We are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, *“Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”* And while you may not realize it, people will notice. Your attitude speaks loudly to those you interact with. As contagious as germs, attitudes have a great affect on people. Try it sometime—mumble and complain to the next person you interact with and see what kind of attitude they respond with. Then use positive words and body language to someone else and see what a difference it makes in their reaction.

Staying healthy has a wonderful affect on your mind, so take good care of yourself. Exercise releases endorphins (biochemical compounds that produce a sense of well-being) so that you naturally feel more optimistic. Set daily goals and stay active so that you don't allow yourself to become negative or depressed.

Now that you have experienced how culture shock feels, and you have exposure in more than one culture, perhaps you can help prepare or coach others who plan to study in the U.S. or have come to study in your country. Hearing firsthand from your personal experience can greatly benefit others. Don't gloss over the tough stuff and make them sound minimal—tell them how it really felt and what you wish you would have known. They will pay more attention to someone who has done this before them just like you would more likely accept rock climbing advice from someone who has actually done it.

Many international students who return home would describe their time in the U.S. as a “mountaintop experience.” This expression refers to the account in Luke 9 when Peter, James and John went with Jesus to a mountaintop to pray. During that incident the disciples caught a glimpse of Jesus' glory, seeing him in conversation with Elijah and Moses, witnessing God's splendor and hearing His voice from a cloud.²¹ Their lives must have seemed quite pale and dull in comparison after that experience!

²⁰ Philippians 4:12-13

²¹ Luke 9:28-36

In the same way, perhaps your life back at home will feel dreary in comparison with the experience you had in the U.S. Settling back into “real life” can seem like such a letdown. It should help to know that this kind of reaction quite naturally follows an adventure. Knowing to expect it will help, as will any measures you can take to compensate for the letdown. A few suggestions might include a once-a-week outing that you truly look forward to; like a concert or worship service, a Bible study or gathering with other believers to encourage and uplift one another, coffee with someone who has studied in the U.S., a football game or a picnic. Some people find it helpful to set measurable goals that allow them to track their progress as they move toward achievement.

All these suggestions can help you feel less alone, discouraged or bleak. A wise proverb says “*All work and no play make Jack a dull boy,*” meaning that if your whole life revolves around work and you never do anything for fun, life will naturally seem tedious. Attending to other parts of your life does not make you irresponsible; it makes you more complete and well-rounded. Hopefully you learned that lesson as an international student—even though you took your studies very seriously, you needed to take time to relax and do other things that didn’t have anything to do with your education.

If you come from a culture where family expects to have first priority in your life, you might feel undue pressure to cater to your family’s every expectation. Communication and conversation about this will help clear any tension. Respectfully and gently let them know that they matter to you very much. Explain to them how your life has changed since you left home and that even though you have come home a different person, they still play a very important role in your life. Let them know that you have developed some new priorities and that you would like to have their support in figuring out how to balance everything in a healthy and God-honoring way. Maybe you could even explain to them how you have become “green” because of the blend between the “yellow” culture you grew up in and the “blue” culture you just returned from. Try to help them see this as positive by sharing some specific examples of how it can benefit you (and them).

Make sure your family doesn’t feel rejected or that you have replaced your commitment to them with your commitment to God. Communicate clearly that you honor God when you honor your family. If appropriate, you might share with them the first few verses in the sixth chapter of Ephesians: “*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother. . .*”²² This could help them realize that your faith does not seek to tear you apart from your family, but that it actually encourages some of the very concepts they value.

It will take time to determine how best to balance your obligations at work, at home and in your personal life. While you probably relied on the generosity, support and backing of individuals or an organization for your American education, you should not feel that it has bound you in servitude. Acknowledge your gratitude in all the ways you can, but do not allow your sense of obligation or duty to conflict with your principles or beliefs. Explain why you do what you do or don’t do what you used to do, but communicate with gentleness and respect.²³

²² Ephesians 6:1-2 (New International Translation)

²³ 1 Peter 3:15

If the life choices you've made make someone else angry, don't respond to them in the same way. As you have read several times in this book, how you behave will speak more loudly than the words that come out of your mouth. In Matthew, Jesus encourages people to "turn the other cheek," or not to return evil with evil.²⁴ How many times did He have to walk away from a volatile situation? Exercise those fruits of the Spirit and don't purposely antagonize anyone. You will have to decide how best to handle sensitive areas.

Remember Daniel who prayed three times a day in spite of those who purposely had the king issue an edict making prayer to anyone but himself illegal.²⁵ The Bible says they could not find any fault with the way Daniel lived his life so they had to set a trap. The only way they could incriminate him involved taking something Daniel did out of his commitment to God and making it illegal. Daniel could have panicked. He could have told God he'd get back to Him when things settled down. Instead, he just kept living his life the way he believed God had called him to—and God honored that, in the end. Read the whole incredible story in Daniel chapter 6.

Knowing ahead of time what others will expect of you allows you time to think about how you will handle it and avoid feeling trapped when in a sticky situation. For example, students returning to Japan where families often worship their ancestors need to think through how to respond to specific circumstances that will likely arise because of their commitment to Christ. Each individual must decide what they consider appropriate or inappropriate without dishonoring either their family or their Christian faith.

Your reintegration will go much more smoothly if you have a strong support network. Don't try to do it alone. You will need the encouragement, prayer and perspective of others to make it through the difficult days. You do not demonstrate weakness by reaching out to others. Hundreds of years ago John Donne wrote, "No man is an island." The meaning behind this phrase comes down to the fact that human beings all affect one another and do not thrive in isolation from others. The Bible clearly encourages loving relationships and refers to the benefit of "iron sharpening iron" in Proverbs 27:17. For these reasons, solitary confinement in prison further punishes extremely dangerous prisoners or those who have not complied with the expectations of the system. This lack of human interaction can lead to mental illness, depression and hopelessness. Take care not to isolate yourself for any reason, whether because of your international experiences, your education, your job or your faith. Stay connected to people and don't shut them out—after all, even Jesus had his own support network when he walked the earth.

Within your support network you should include others who have studied in the U.S. Connecting with other "green" people who have also struggled with reintegrating and figuring out how a green person can fit back into a yellow culture will give you hope. Spend time talking about your experiences and sharing how different you feel from those who stayed behind. You will benefit from having at least one other person who can relate and eagerly expresses a similar need to talk about it. Take advantage of the opportunity to talk freely with someone without having to worry about offending them. For more information about the importance of building strong relationships, please read *Chapter 5, Creating a Support Network*.

²⁴ Matthew 5:39

²⁵ Daniel 6:1-16

Reintegrating back into your family can create quite a bit of stress. Depending on the length of your absence, many changes may have taken place. Then again, you might feel like the only one who has changed and experience frustration because everyone expects you to fit back in the way you did before leaving. Either way, expect some level of stress.

For example, if your spouse did not travel with you, but stayed and managed the home and family while you studied in the U.S., you may feel like an outsider in your own home. Out of necessity your family will have worked out a system that does not include you and it will take time to adjust to having you back and available again. Don't sulk about no one needing you or acknowledging your presence. Do little things to show your desire to step back in and assume a role in the family again. Ease the responsibility your spouse has assumed during your absence by pitching in and helping out so that he/she can begin relying on you as part of the team again.

On the other hand, if not much has changed, you might find yourself frustrated with the fact that no one realizes how much you have changed in spite of their lives continuing in the same cycle. Rather than getting irritated with everyone for their stagnancy or predictability, communicate the changes you have undergone with patience and respect. If some of the changes clash with the way others do things, sit down and talk about it. Perhaps once they understand why you do what you do, or don't do what you previously did, they can work with you to accommodate the "new" you. But remember, you too will need to compromise. Don't just expect others to cater to you.

If your father expects everyone to gather to worship an idol or an ancestor, perhaps you could explain to him that out of respect for the family you will accompany them, but that you can only worship God. Expect some tension or conflict when your new beliefs conflict with your family's traditions and beliefs. You can pay tribute to those who came before you without worshipping them, but don't let your behavior cause unnecessary conflict for those who know about your faith. Even among other believers, Christians should use wisdom and discretion in every action and communication. As Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 8, you must not allow your personal freedoms to cause someone else to stumble in their faith.²⁶

Roles might require a bit of redefinition upon your return. Without sounding arrogant or self-important, you may need to discuss adjustments that will help accommodate the changes that have occurred, whether in your personal life or in the family in general. Remember, they have remained in the same environment and may not realize that the same old routines no longer provide the best solutions in the new circumstances.

Try to pay careful attention to the dynamics and relationships at play in your family. Does your mother tend to indulge the younger children and hold higher expectations for the older ones? Does your father require the females in the family to serve the males? Do your parents give more credibility to the sons working outside the home, and perhaps offer less support to the daughters doing the same? Possibly because of your American education, your parents might expect you to carry more of the financial load at home or conversely, they might spoil or fuss over you as a reward for your scholastic accomplishments.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

The time you've spent away might make it harder for you to readjust to this kind of behavior if you have become accustomed to a different way. What seemed normal to you before might now bother you because you have developed a broader perspective. Rather than allowing these issues to irritate you, you will need to recognize which ones will likely never change due to the cultural influences and accepted norms in your country and which ones you could actually influence. Reinhold Niebuhr's now famous Serenity Prayer applies well in this situation: "*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*"

Don't make an issue out of everything that irritates you. Another popular saying encourages you to choose your battles wisely, meaning that you can't contest everything you disagree with, so you should pick only those issues most important to you and try to make a difference in those areas.

Having received at least some portion of your higher education at an American institution, you will probably notice differences in the way your country conducts business in contrast with the U.S. Some international students have returned to their home countries to realize that they need to adjust certain aspects of their training to fit into the work place at home. As a very minor example, many U.S. companies now abide by a "business casual" dress code which allows more informal attire at the office. If you have gotten used to men wearing polo shirts and khakis to work and then return home to find that all the men wearing business suits everyday, you will need to make an adjustment.

Many other discrepancies could cause more substantial modifications. *Chapter 3, Anticipating Challenges*, refers to a study that evaluated the pace of life in more than 30 countries around the world.²⁷ According to those results, the pace of life in the U.S. ranked behind 15 other countries. The same study showed that European countries have a much shorter average work week than even the U.S. whereas Asian countries tend to require a much more intense and demanding commitment from their employees. So, depending on what country you call home, you may find yourself in a much more lenient work environment and thus have the luxury of relaxing your pace, or you could find yourself having to gear up for a much more demanding and stressful situation.

Knowing what to expect ahead of time will help you prepare yourself, so do what you can to get a feel for the adjustments necessary for your employment back at home. Talk to friends and family with a variety of jobs in your own country to get a general idea, but also try to get specific information from others who work in the same field as you will at home. If you allow yourself time to sit down and work out a possible daily schedule before you return, it will help you maintain a "big picture" or broad view to ensure that you don't get caught up in the hectic pace, and feel controlled by obligations and expectations that don't honor your commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Much like a college student who works out a daily schedule for classes, study time, social activities and work commitments, you will need to set boundaries to avoid overextending yourself. Don't let it surprise you to find yourself feeling pressure from your friends and family in addition to your employer. Even in countries that don't experience such a hectic

²⁷ Levine, Robert, *The Pace of Life in 31 Countries*, [American Demographics](#), November 1997

work pace, social obligations can overwhelm you if you don't create boundaries and establish priorities to help you maintain balance in your life.

Remember the story of Mary and Martha when Jesus stopped by their home to visit. Luke describes it like this:

As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."

But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."²⁸

Jesus did not respond this way to condemn Martha for her hospitality, but rather to help her realize that she needed to balance her duties and obligations with building relationships to others and cultivating her spiritual self. The lesson here involves balance; no one area should control your life.

Once you find yourself back in your familiar environment, it will require a conscious effort not to fall back into your old habits. The best time to establish new routines will come immediately after you return, before you have a chance to slip into those old patterns again. For example, if you used to hang out at bars or spend your evenings after school or work going to clubs with your friends, don't assume you will do this only a few times and then stop. You've made the break and if you want to establish new patterns, start immediately.

Tell your friends clearly that you would love to get together with them at a local restaurant on a specific evening, but that you have changed your habits and priorities so hanging out at bars and clubs no longer fits into your life. If they really care about spending time with you, they will make the effort. If, however, they really only wanted to spend time in bars and clubs, you haven't really lost any friends.

You will have to get used to seeing things differently than those around you. Your expanded worldview does make you different—not better or worse, just different—than your peers and family. Don't pretend or try to fit into a mold you have outgrown. Hopefully you will never stop growing and changing throughout your life as you process new and diverse information and experiences.

Reintegrating back into life at home will take time. You will face situations that you did not foresee, and some of the areas you might have expected to struggle with may actually surprise you with their lack of complexity. Stay flexible and positive. It might help to write down a few goals or keep a timeline to provide some accountability, but remember

²⁸ Luke 10:38-42

to be realistic and give yourself some grace as you readjust. Maintain a written list of priorities so you can check in weekly to make sure you have taken the steps necessary to uphold them. Don't get discouraged if you feel you haven't met your own or others' expectations. Take heart in Paul's encouragement to the Colossians:

Be assured that from the first day we heard of you, we haven't stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works. We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.²⁹

²⁹ Colossians 1:9-12 (*The Message*)

CHAPTER EIGHT

Putting it all Together

Whether you had realized it or not before you read this book, you must certainly recognize now how you have changed as a result of your experience studying in the United States. Just like a young child learns and grows from each new interaction with his or her environment, your new interactions and experiences in the U.S. have molded and developed you so that now you return home a different person.

This chapter and the next will allow you an opportunity to personally work through some of the concepts presented in this book and how they apply to YOUR situation. Although thousands of international students come to the U.S. to study, the range of diversity in backgrounds, cultures and goals contribute to a unique experience for each one. Not all Chinese students will respond the same way to their international experience just like not all students attending school in Boston will respond the same way to their environment.

Take some time to think about the questions presented in this chapter. If you dedicate some quality time and honestly consider your answers, you will give yourself a head start toward reintegrating the person you have become into life at home. You can decide whether or not you want to write down your answers or simply talk through them with someone—some people prefer to use these kinds of questions to stimulate their thought processes, while others benefit from writing down their thoughts and feelings to help process them. Do whatever works best for you; the goal is to provide you with tools that will help guide you through this transition period.

Perspective

perspective *n.* **1.** a particular evaluation of a situation or facts, especially from one person's point of view **2.** a measured or objective assessment of a situation³⁰

Think through the ways your perspective or point of view has changed since you first arrived in the U.S. Many factors affect your perspective, including what other people say, what you see and hear, and most importantly, what you experience. Before you came to the U.S. you could only evaluate America based on what others told you and what impressions you formed from the media. If you came to America expecting everything to look the way movies, TV shows and/or newspapers represent it, your perspective surely changed once you actually experienced the real thing. Based on your own encounters and perceptions, you formed a more accurate opinion. While other people can certainly contribute valuable input, you must never allow your own opinions to form solely based on what others say. An old Native American saying goes like this, “Don’t judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” In other words, you can’t truly know about something unless you experience it firsthand.

³⁰ Encarta Online Dictionary

List some new perspectives you have gained and/or how your perspectives have changed during your time away from home.

For example, before she came to study in the U.S., Keli's perspective of the American lifestyle came from her very limited exposure to American TV shows and what she read and saw portrayed in the media. She had the impression that all Americans lived in immaculate mansions and wore only the latest fashions. When she had a chance to visit some Americans in their homes and interact with them personally, she realized that not all Americans portrayed this lifestyle at all. Her perspective changed based on her personal experience.

I have a new perspective about _____

because. . .

I have a new perspective about _____

because. . .

Do you think your new perspectives have made you more or less patient with other people's views?

More patient because . . .

Less patient because . . .

My new perspectives probably won't be very popular at home because . . .

Growth

Everyone has weaknesses, and sometimes new experiences can call attention to those weaknesses. While facing these imperfections can take you outside of your "comfort zone" (the place you feel most comfortable), it can also force you to develop those

weaker areas. If you break your right hand and have to rely on your weaker left hand to manage until it heals, your left hand will gain dexterity and strength it didn't have before.

For example, John tends to focus all his energy on his education. He spends most of his time at the library or studying in his room. He doesn't take time to meet people or do social things. However, once he arrived in the U.S., John needed to improve his English language skills, so he started working one-on-one with an English tutor. His tutor took him places to use his English in practical settings and organized social gatherings to meet with others who wanted to improve their English. These settings forced John to focus on more than just his education; he formed good friendships that stimulated not only his English-speaking skills, but also his social skills.

What specific weakness(es) has your time in the U.S. forced you to face?

Weakness(es):

What circumstances brought out these weaknesses?

How do you feel you have grown in this area?

How do you feel you would handle a similar circumstance differently now?

Values

People tend to form values based on what they consider important. If a company feels that an American education will significantly impact someone's ability to do a job well, then they will highly value the degree you received from a university in the U.S. However, if you go home and try to get a job with a particular company that does not consider an American education as important, they will not likely value your degree any more than anyone else's.

Usually, seeing the world from another perspective tends to change your values to some degree. You may come to realize the value of something you always took for granted, or you may no longer value something that you realize doesn't matter that much to you now.

What values have changed in your life since you arrived in the U.S.?

For example, when Ana left home she thought she would really miss her car. She loved zipping around everywhere and getting there fast. When she settled into her university town, she thought she would head straight to a used car dealership to find a car. But after the first few days, Ana realized she actually enjoyed the fresh air and the exercise of walking. She made many friends along her daily commutes and appreciated the opportunity to unwind and slow down after a long day of classes or work.

I used to value _____

but now I realize it's not that important because . . .

I used to value _____

but now I realize it's not that important because . . .

I **didn't** used to value _____

but now I realize how important it is because . . .

I **didn't** used to value _____

but now I realize how important it is because . . .

How do you think your friends and family back home will react to these new values?

How will you respond to them?

What difficulties do you anticipate facing because of your new values?

Attitude

The Power of Attitude

"Our lives are not determined by what happens to us, but by how we react to what happens; not by what life brings to us, but by the attitude we bring to life. A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events, and outcomes. It is a catalyst...a spark that creates extraordinary results."³¹

To quote former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, "Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference." It seems that in every field, you come across references to attitude. You hear about it in sports ("She really believes she can win."), in school ("He has a bad attitude."), in parenting (Don't have that attitude with me."), and in popular psychology ("Think positive.").

Think back to the attitudes you had when you arrived in the U.S. . . Did you have a bad attitude about living in a small town? A big city? . . Did you have a good attitude about living with a host family? Living in the dorm? . . Did you have a bad attitude about other religions? . . Did you have a good attitude about improving your English?

For example, if you joined a class or group to practice your English, but went expecting to feel embarrassed and shy, you would get much less out of the experience than if you went hoping to meet others who also wanted to improve their English and feeling determined to achieve a new level of skill.

The way you feel going into something will greatly affect how you experience and perceive it. Sometimes humans want so badly for their experience to confirm their expectations that they refuse to admit the inaccuracy of their expectations and fake their response. For example, instead of admitting that they actually enjoyed the party, the girls pretended to act bored.

Have your attitudes changed since coming to the U.S.?

Can you think of a specific example where a bad attitude affected your experience negatively?

³¹ Successories Motivational Products, www.successories.com

Can you think of an example where a good attitude enabled you to get more out of a situation than you would have expected?

Think back to a time when you had a bad attitude about something that you ended up enjoying or benefiting from. How much sooner could you have enjoyed it or gotten something positive out of the experience if you had entered it with a neutral or good attitude?

How do you think your attitude about going back home has affected you (either positively or negatively)?

“Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.”

Ephesians 4:23-24

Worldview

worldview *n.* a comprehensive interpretation or image of the universe and humanity³²

The more you see and experience of the world, the broader your worldview will become because you have formed your image of the universe and humanity from a much wider frame of reference than just your corner of the world.

Perhaps in some countries of the world where coffee plantations employ a large number of manual laborers to meet the export demands, the workers only see their tedious, back-breaking work as lining the pockets of the rich landowner they catch glimpses of as he rumbles past in his luxury SUV. These workers don't have the advantage of a broader worldview that recognizes how those coffee plantations supply huge companies like Starbucks who sell coffee-themed drinks to millions of people a day. They have only a limited worldview.

On the other hand, someone buying a mocha latte at Starbucks has a limited worldview as well, seeing only the high-priced cup of caffeine as a way to wake up on the way to class and failing to realize all the labor and

³² Encarta Online Dictionary

negotiations that go into making that connection all the way back to the coffee bean pickers.

If either of those people at opposite ends of the spectrum had seen more of the world, their worldview would expand to include more than their own experience.

Living in another culture provides a terrific way to broaden your worldview. While this does not make you better or smarter than anyone else, it does give you more data to process when interpreting life and the world around you.

Since you have lived in the U.S. now, your worldview has expanded to include more and different types of information. Once you have looked at the world from a broader perspective, you will never see it the same way that you used to. Instead of just seeing the world through yellow glasses (the viewpoint you learned from your home culture), or just through blue glasses (the viewpoint you learned from the U.S. culture), you now see it through green glasses, combining data from each of those perspectives.

Think back to the worldview you had when you first arrived in the U.S.

How has what you've seen and experienced changed your worldview?

You will need to take care not to come across as superior or patronizing (treating someone as if he/she has less intelligence than you do) when you return home. Use your expanded worldview to improve the world around you, not to belittle it.

Name one way you could use your expanded worldview to benefit someone or something back home.

How will your expanded worldview change the way you interact with others back home?

Will your broader worldview pose a threat to anyone or any establishment back home? If so, how will you respond to that?

Impact

impact *n.* the strong effect that something or somebody has³³

The amount of impact something has on you depends upon how much it affects you. If your roommate starts smoking, it will likely have a pretty strong impact on you. All your clothes and furniture will smell like smoke and you will inadvertently inhale smoke when you spend time together. However, if your professor takes up smoking, you may not feel the impact in the same way. If you only see him up at the front of the classroom during lectures, his smoking doesn't really impact you at all. If he frequently wanders around the classroom to get a close look at his student's work in progress, it might impact you slightly more as you smell the smoke on his clothes or breath. Or if he has taken to arriving late for class because he wanted to finish his cigarette—perhaps it impacts you a little more.

So, for the purposes of preparing to go back, you need to think about what impact your experience studying in the U.S. will have once you return home.

First of all, who will feel an impact from your return? Your absence will have affected many more than just yourself, and your return will as well. Beyond just the physical difference your presence makes, the fact that you return as a different person will certainly impact other people. Think about who might feel this impact and how . . .

For example, when Boris left to study in the U.S. he said goodbye to his 6-year-old daughter and his 2-year-old son. When he returned four years later, his son didn't remember him and his daughter had grown up so much that she had become shy around her father. Their lives would feel the impact of a father around the house because day-to-day routines and habits would change to accommodate him, but he would have to work to gradually gain their trust and build back their relationship.

Who will your return impact physically?

Who will your return impact emotionally?

Who will the changes in your life impact the most?

How do you feel that the changes in your life will “rock the boat” or disturb the balance for your family and friends back at home?

³³ Encarta Online Dictionary

What new group of people can you impact because of your experience in the U.S.?

In what ways could your new worldview positively impact people in the future?

In what ministry could you have the most impact once you return home?

Read Matthew 28:19-20. What impact will these verses have on you as you interact with others back home?

CHAPTER NINE

Developing Your Plan

Hopefully, after all your years of schooling, you have realized the importance of developing a plan when you begin a project. Organizing your data helps you make sure you have covered everything that you need to and that you follow a realistic process. You should have the same approach to your return home. The more completely you develop your plan for this transition period, the less likely you will feel overwhelmed by the details, or the emotions and reactions that you and others around you experience. Even after reading this book and acknowledging the upcoming challenges, you will still need to take the time to apply the specifics to your life. This chapter will help make sure you process the various elements of your transition and therefore, increase your chances for a successful re-entry.

First, you must assess yourself honestly to determine how you have changed, developed and grown over the period of time you have lived away from home. Think back to the concept introduced in *Chapter 4* where your yellow viewpoint blended with the blue viewpoint you gained from living in the U.S., giving you a unique green perspective. While this blending of cultures has probably left you feeling you don't fully belong in either culture anymore, if you take a more objective view of the situation, perhaps you can realize what an advantage this larger perspective provides.

Because of this green perspective you have gained during your time away from home, and the unique viewpoint this cross-cultural experience offers, you will have the opportunity to influence things you might never have considered impacting before. Your ability to see things from this blended vantage point can certainly work to your benefit, as well as that of others.

List some specific ways your experience in the U.S. has changed your outlook.

Who and what might benefit from this new outlook when you return home?

Sometimes people can look back to a particular incident in their life and recognize how it changed their life, but other times, they can look back and appreciate how a whole series of events worked together to change their outlook. Your relocation to the U.S. probably initiated a chain of events that have gradually changed your life over a period of time, but if you also chose to accept Jesus as Lord of your life while in the U.S., that one event likely had an immediate impact as well.

While many new Christians mistakenly expect that everything should feel and become different instantly once they have committed themselves to Jesus Christ; in reality, God works in hearts and lives over entire lifetimes to change them to become more like His Son. Hopefully you realize that even after your decision to follow Christ, you will still struggle and sin and fail—and that doesn't invalidate your faith. But with Jesus in your life, you won't face things alone; keep getting back up and moving forward. Look at what Paul says in Philippians 3:12-14:

"I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us."

It should certainly encourage you to realize that you don't have to have your life all straightened out in order to live for Jesus. Think about how you have grown and developed since you left home. Not only have you gained academic knowledge, you have also likely developed new emotional, spiritual and social dimensions. As a work-in-progress, take some time to look at what aspects of your character have undergone growth since your arrival in the U.S. It might surprise you how much this experience outside of your comfort zone has stretched and grown you in unexpected ways. Although humans often feel more comfortable with the familiar and predictable, they tend to experience the most growth and development when pushed outside of that security.

List some areas in your life where you recognize growth and development since you left home.

What impact can you see these developments having when you return home?
(Either positive and/or negative impacts)

Depending on your individual circumstances, you will experience a unique set of tensions and challenges when you return home. After having read through this book and realizing common challenges other students have dealt with in returning home, you will need to spend some time thinking about your own situation and what issues pose the most likely areas of conflict for you. Since this book addresses international students from all over the world who return home after studying in the United States, it must cover a wide range of potential situations. For example, if you live in an African country, you will likely have less concern about how to manage the hectic pace of the corporate world than if you

live in Hong Kong. Or if you live in Latin America, you will likely have less concern about the difficulty of finding a dynamic church fellowship than if you live in China. Take what you can from the scenarios presented in this book and use them to stimulate your mind to think about potential tensions that will arise in your own circumstances.

Referring back to *Chapter 1, Planning Ahead* and *Chapter 2, Embracing Change* you will remember a number of practical areas where students returning home often experience tension and anxiety: **physical, emotional, financial, social, life purpose, intellectual** and **spiritual**. Think through the topics presented as potential areas of concern during this transition. As you work through the questions below it will benefit you most if you personalize them to your own situation and develop a plan for how you will adjust them to fit into your new life back at home. The more specific you are, the more good it will do you.

How has your view of finances changed since you left home?

How will these changes cause tension for you or your family?

What physical changes have you made that friends and family back at home might not understand or appreciate?

How will you respond when people confront you about those changes?

How will the changes you have made in your life alter who you spend time with back at home?

How will you explain or handle communicating why you now do what you did not used to do, and/or no longer do what you used to do?

What three areas do you think will present the most challenge for you when you return home?

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial | <input type="checkbox"/> Social | <input type="checkbox"/> Life Purpose |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional | |

Why?

Verbalize a strategy for handling each of your top three challenges—not just once, but over the long term.

For example: Intellectual—In order to avoid settling for a job that will not use my skills and abilities, every week I will commit to looking in the newspaper classified advertisements, networking with people in the field I want to work in, visiting at least one company in my field, and sending out three resumes.

Since transitioning back home will likely “stretch” you outside your comfort zone again, what problem areas should focus on developing in order to help you deal with the challenges you will most likely face once you return home?

For example: I tend to get all excited about something new, but then lose enthusiasm and revert to whatever seems easiest. I need to write down a practical set of weekly goals that will keep me consistently focused and motivated.

Your unique experience has certainly affected your personal mission or vision. Just as businesses and corporations have recognized the value in identifying and verbalizing a mission or vision statement (a brief written declaration of purpose), so too should individuals recognize the value in expressing their own personal purpose. When you have such a statement, you can evaluate everything, determining whether or not it contributes to your ultimate mission. A useful mission statement should cover two issues: what you wish to accomplish and contribute, and who you want to become—the character strengths and qualities you wish to develop.

Put into words a personal mission statement for your life.

Some people find it helpful to write down specific steps or goals to keep them focused on fulfilling their life mission statement. This allows them to keep track of what they need to do or have done to achieve their objectives. Once you settle on a personal mission statement, you could display it in a prominent place and place note cards underneath it listing practical steps that will contribute to accomplishing that vision in your life. When you achieve any of the steps on one of the *note cards*, you could make a large colored star on it, instead of removing it so that you can see how you are fulfilling your personal mission and feel encouraged and spurred on in your efforts.

Using the personal mission statement you created above, list three practical steps or goals that will help you contribute to its fulfillment.

How do Jesus' final words to his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 fit into your life mission?

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Your spiritual walk has probably benefited from mentoring and support from the Christian community and church body while you have lived in the U.S. However, when you return home you will have to work hard to establish a strong network of Christian friends who will help nurture and encourage your spiritual growth. As you have read throughout this book, you cannot do this by yourself. God did not intend his children to “go it alone.” Think carefully about how you will build community and accountability with other Christians while also creatively reaching out to touch the lives of others. Once you have discovered your spiritual gifts, you will need to figure out ways to implement them both inside and outside of the church.

*If you have not done so yet, find out what spiritual gifts you have by going to <http://buildingchurch.net/g2s.htm>. After reading through the introduction and instructions, click on the selection that reads “**Begin the Gifted2Serve inventory!**” at the bottom. This site will help you learn about the spiritual gifts, assess which gifts you have, and then figure out how to implement them practically.*

How could spiritual changes in your life impact the way your friends, family, or colleagues behave toward you?

How will you respond to opposition about your decision to follow Christ?

Don't respond to this question spontaneously, but take time to think and pray through it. If necessary, contact an ISI representative to discuss possible strategies.

Name three things you can (and will) do to nurture your spiritual development once you return home.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.³⁴

³⁴ Romans 8:28-39

CHAPTER TEN

Resources

To assist in your transition back home, this chapter lists a variety of resources available to you. Since they all have specific purposes, you will gain the most from investigating all of them.

www.internationalstudents.org

ISI created this website specifically for students who choose to further their education in the U.S. Hundreds of pages cover topics helpful both before and during your stay, as well as a section designed just for students returning home again. Practical, informative, insightful and thorough, you will want to bookmark this site and visit it over and over again.

ISI Field Staff, Ministry Representatives and Friendship Partners and other volunteers

People who choose to work with ISI do so because they want to reach out to students from all over the world who come to study in the U.S. They want to help you adjust, make friends and learn about the culture you have come to live in. Because they develop individual relationships with students, ISI representatives come to care personally about the lives and futures of these students, even after they leave the U.S. Many ISI representatives even plan trips to visit and encourage students once they have returned home.

These friends and mentors can walk alongside you as you adjust to life back home, encouraging and nurturing you emotionally, mentally and spiritually. They will understand much of the stress you experience during this time of adjustment and can offer a listening ear and wise words of counsel when you feel alone, persecuted and/or uncertain.

If you have not formed a lasting relationship with either a Friendship Partner, other volunteer or an ISI staff person while living in the U.S., contact the ISI National Office (information located in the *Contacts* section following this chapter) to get in touch with someone before you leave.

ISI Global Ministry Office

The express purpose of the Global Ministry office involves providing support and encouragement to students who have returned home after studying in the U.S., and to staff located in several areas around the world who support and follow-up international students either before or after their American experience.

Some of the ways this office fulfills its objectives include compiling and maintaining a confidential database of returnees for support and encouragement,

providing possible mentors back home, coordinating overseas trips and conferences, developing a periodic newsletter for returnee students, and managing resource referrals.

To contact this office directly, email global@isiwebnet.net or call the ISI National Office (listed in the *Contacts* section following this chapter, and ask for Global Ministries.

Other international students who have returned home to your country

Communicating with others from your country who have also studied in the U.S. for a period of time will allow you an opportunity to talk about issues and feelings that your family and friends can't relate to. If you can, set up a regular time to meet with at least one, if not a group of other students who have returned from studying in the States. You can serve as a great support network for each other.

International Churches networks

In order to continue to nurture your faith, you will need to find a church where you can join with other believers in pursuing your faith, ministry and mission. ISI's growing network of contacts includes a local evangelical church referral network and a new on-line listing of international churches currently under development at www.internationalchurches.net to help you locate churches and/or mentors in your home country. For more information, contact the Global Ministry office (listed in the *Contacts* section following this chapter).

Media

ISI offers a variety of books, DVDs, audios and bible studies to help you continue to feed your mind and deepen your understanding of yourself, God and the world around you. To order any of the products described below, contact the ISI National Office (listed in the *Contacts* section following this chapter).

1. ***Discovering God Studies***: A four-book study to help students get to know God
 - a. *Discovering God (Book One)*
 - b. *Walking with God (Book Two)*
 - c. *Putting God First (Book Three)*
 - d. *Sharing God with Others (Book Four)*

2. ***I AM***: A versatile series that focuses on seven statements Jesus made about Himself and the evidence for His claims.
 - a. Student's Version
 - b. Leader's Guide (answers many of the questions in the student's version and provides supplementary bible verses and suggestions for leading

discussion)

3. ***Jesus the Liberator:*** An evangelistic bible study that examines the freedoms Jesus promises in the Gospels
 - a. Student's Version
 - b. Leader's Guide (suggested answers and additional guidance)
4. ***How Will They Hear?:*** A six-lesson bible study to help you learn to share the Good News
5. ***The Challenge Victory:*** A survival manual to help Christian international students prepare for the persecution they may face upon returning home
6. ***The Way to Life:*** 10 inductive bible studies that present basic teachings about God, human nature and everlasting life
 - a. English version
 - b. Traditional Script Chinese version
 - c. Simplified Script Chinese version
7. ***Living with God Studies*** provide good discipleship and mentoring materials for international students.
 - a. *Meeting God (Book One)*
 - i. Student's Version
 - ii. Leader's Guide
 - b. *Growing Strong to Serve (Book Two)*
 - i. Student's Version
 - ii. Leader's Guide
8. ***New Beginnings:*** A seven-lesson Bible study course on video for the new Christian covering salvation, assurance, lordship, the Bible, prayer, the Holy Spirit and witnessing.
9. ***Following Jesus:*** A discipleship training program for following Jesus without compromise
10. ***Sharing Jesus:*** A six-week reproducible manual to train and motivate people to answer difficult questions and lead others to Christ
11. ***Knowing God Personally:*** Two audio Tapes with 12 short messages that provide basic teaching on key issues for the new Christian
12. ***Who is This Jesus?:*** A companion study guide for the *Jesus* video
 - a. Student's Version
 - b. Leader's Guide
13. ***The Christ Factor:*** A three-book series shares three international student testimonies to inspire you

- a. *The Christ Factor (Book One)*
 - b. *Seeds Take Root (Book Two)*
 - c. *A Real Love (Book Three)*
 - i. Video
 - ii. Discussion Guide
-
- 14. ***Jesus: Fact or Fiction:*** An interactive DVD journey exploring the evidence and offering compelling answers to tough questions. Includes the award-winning feature film *Jesus*
 - 15. ***Seven Universal Truths:*** A book to help individuals find personal freedom in seven sequential steps
 - 16. ***Life's Deepest Question:*** A 52-step guide to getting wisdom by analyzing, approaching and accessing profound questions
 - 17. ***The Compact Guide to World Religions:*** A complete, easy-to-use handbook of the origins, basic beliefs and evangelistic challenges/opportunities of the world's major religions presented in clear chapters and charts

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