
THE ART OF CROSSING CULTURES

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To my Teachers,
Mother Sayama
and Saya U Chit Tin,
with deepest respect
and gratitude

Craig Storti, a former Peace Corps volunteer and trainer, has his own intercultural consulting business—Crossing Cultures—and is a partner in The Business Communications Group of Washington, DC. He is the author of *Incident At Bitter Creek* and has had articles published in numerous magazines and newspapers, including *Yankee*, *Signature*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Foreword

Once every decade in every discipline of study, a book comes along which does more than inform and entertain. It enlightens. I have a hunch that *The Art of Crossing Cultures* will be such a book for the intercultural field.

The interesting thing about *The Art of Crossing Cultures* is that it will be as enlightening to the university student in a formal intercultural communication course as it will be to the practical-minded businessperson bound for a first overseas assignment and as it will be for the seasoned intercultural specialist who is forever looking for theoretical material to explain the process we have all experienced but have such difficulty putting into words.

The selected quotations from literary sources are themselves worth the price of the book. They are truly delightful, making their points with clarity and charm, and adding their own additional insights to those of Craig Storti.

It is a pleasure to discover such a literate new writer contributing to our field and to share, even for a moment, this paper podium with him.

L. ROBERT KOHLS
San Francisco
February 1989

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for this opportunity to acknowledge a number of people who have helped *The Art of Crossing Cultures* see the light of day.

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Finally, as always, my debt to my wife Charlotte—in ways too numerous to mention—is deep and lasting.

CRAIG STORTI
Washington, DC
January, 1989



Introduction

Now it is not good for the Christian's health
to hustle the Aryan brown
For the Christian riles and the Aryan smiles and
he weareth the Christian down.
And the end of the fight is a tombstone white
with the name of the late deceased,
And the epitaph drear: "A fool lies here who
tried to hustle the East."

—RUDYARD KIPLING

I really don't know what happens next—one so
seldom does.

—E. M. FORSTER
The Hill of Devi

Many, perhaps most, people who go abroad to live and work genuinely want to adapt to the local culture. And most of them do not. It's not that they don't appreciate the reasons for adapting to the culture or know that it is all but essential to being successful in their work and at ease in the society, but rather that true cultural adjustment and effective cross-cultural interaction are more elusive than we might imagine. In this book we will explain why—and what to do about it.

The failure to adjust overseas and its attendant human, economic and political costs are well documented. According to a 1984 article in the *International Herald Tribune*, "More than one-third of all Americans who take up residence in foreign

countries return prematurely because they are unable to adapt to day-to-day life."¹ The early return rate for Peace Corps volunteers has hovered for years between 10–20 percent. In Saudi Arabia an average of 68 percent of those Americans who have no cultural training fail to complete their contracts. In Western Europe, 37 percent of the Americans working on an F-16 project for General Dynamics resigned early and went home. Even in England, seemingly one of the easier countries for an American to live in, 18 percent of untrained American expatriates regularly return home prematurely. At one time an organization that recruited and placed hospital administrators in a Middle Eastern country reported an attrition rate of virtually 100 percent.

Nor should we assume that all those sojourners who do manage to stay abroad and complete their tour of duty have necessarily adapted to the culture. Indeed, as an extended visit in any foreign capital will prove, the percentage of expatriates who have not adjusted to the culture but remained in their assignments is, if anything, greater than the percentage of those who have gone home. Early return or failure rates, in short, are but one measure of the problem. It can be argued, in fact, that expatriates who "stick it out" are an even more serious problem (and potential expense to their employers) than those who leave. "The success rate of overseas adjustment among Americans is not nearly as high as it might be," Robert Kohls has observed in *Survival Kit for Overseas Living*. "If left to luck, your chances of having a satisfying experience living abroad would be about one in seven."²

The costs of unsuccessful adjustment are reckoned in myriad ways, but one of the easiest to quantify is the financial expense incurred by affected companies, institutions and governments. "The premature return of an overseas employee, a spouse, and two children can cost a company more than \$210,000," estimates Lewis Griggs, co-producer of the "Going International" film series.³ Every time one of its volunteers comes home early, the Peace Corps loses 50–75 percent of the estimated \$7000 it costs the agency to recruit and train one worker.

But recruitment, training, and transportation expenses are only one measure of the cost. "Cross-cultural mistakes," Griggs observes, "can result in ruined careers, lost contracts, and re-

duced productivity."⁴ In a review of a biography of Saudi millionaire Adnan Khashoggi, Peter Collier notes that "Khashoggi's genius was to know how to play each side [U.S. arms merchants and the Saudi royal family and military] off against each other and how to take advantage of the misunderstandings and faux pas in cross-cultural negotiations."⁵ General Motors lost untold sales when it made a classic cultural blunder by omitting to change the name of its Nova model when introducing the car into the company's South American market; "No va" means "it doesn't go" in Spanish. As the *Washington Post* has noted:

The same bull-in-a-china-shop attitude toward foreign cultures and languages that has always cost American travelers respect overseas is now costing American business billions of dollars a year, according to experts.⁶

The U.S. Southern Governors' Association recently released a report decrying the "international illiteracy" that puts the United States "at a disadvantage with other countries in business and political affairs." The association commissioned the 1986 study because of the region's changing economy and dependence on foreign business. The South exported about \$35 billion in manufactured products in 1984, making up about 30 percent of the country's manufacturing exports.⁷ "Never before," said Virginia Governor Gerald Baliles, head of the Association's panel on international education, "has there been the economic motivation that exists now for Americans to understand and be knowledgeable about foreign customs and business procedures."⁸

Cultural blindness is not unique to Americans. The British were famous for it in their colonial empire and now the spotlight is increasingly on the Japanese. According to the *Spectator*, British employees in Japanese firms in London resent Japanese attitudes. One former employee of a Japanese banking house in London observed: "I felt as if all my knowledge was being squeezed out of me, like an orange. And they really do believe they are racially superior, and that we are no better than cats or dogs." In New York, the *Spectator* continues, one Japanese company's "habit of holding regular meetings which excluded American employees was one factor behind the recent walk-out of about thirty of the local staff."⁹

The failure of expatriates to understand and adjust to other cultures can have serious diplomatic, military and political consequences as well. The former deputy director of the CIA, Bobby Inman, blames agency operatives' "lack of deep understanding" of foreign societies for numerous "surprises" in international affairs. Neil Koch, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense, makes the same point in an article about North Korea. "The problem with American intelligence estimates," he writes,

is that they are prepared by Americans. Our track record for piercing historical and cultural differences to arrive at accurate assessments of what an adversary might do is not enviable.¹⁰

In his review of *The Ayatollah in the Cathedral* by former Iran hostage Moorhead Kennedy, Jonathan Yardley notes that "the hostage crisis was a direct result—and had our policy makers been a bit more prescient, an entirely predictable one—of American ignorance of foreign cultures and history."¹¹ In an unsettling passage, Kennedy describes how our Foreign Service officers are neither particularly interested in nor encouraged to pursue cultural sensitivity:

Granted the danger of seeing events entirely from the point of view of one's host country, there is the far more common danger of not understanding the local point of view at all. Far too many of our colleagues did not think such participation was necessary. Seeing only other Americans requires less effort. All they were interested in were "contacts," local people who would give them information. Nor did the Foreign Service rating system put much premium on how well one could enter into and understand a foreign society. By and large America's isolationist traditions, combined with an unfortunate self-centeredness, keep too many of our Foreign Service officers aloof from the foreign environment they work in.¹²

"We're Latins," Fidel Velazquez, the head of Mexico's largest and most powerful labor union, told an American journalist not long ago, "and our mentality is totally different from yours. We are further removed from material things than from those of the

spirit. We are better able to bear poverty than mistreatment. If that were understood in the United States, we could be closer to you."¹³

Perhaps the most damaging of all are the human costs: the sense of failure, disappointment and loss of self-esteem on the part of the early returnee and his family, the stress and trauma of relocation, of finding a new job (in more extreme cases) and starting a new life. For those expatriates who stick it out, there are feelings of bitterness and anger (usually misdirected at the local people), a bunker mentality, and a dangerous shrinking of their capacity for sympathy and compassion—a narrowing of their humanity.

Nor are the costs borne exclusively by expatriates and their sponsoring institutions: they are felt by the local people as well. The villagers who are suddenly deprived of their Peace Corps health worker or the farmers served by the research station that just lost its expatriate crop specialist are just as affected by this change in their lives as the particular development workers involved.

The Art of Crossing Cultures is intended for all those going abroad—to live, work, or study—whose circumstances require them to interact effectively with the local people. While the illustrative anecdotes tend to feature Westerners living in non-Western societies, the underlying concepts apply to anyone who leaves a familiar culture to sojourn in a new one. The book will also be useful to those who work or otherwise have close contact with expatriates in their own country.

The words "adapt" and "adjust" are used interchangeably throughout the book and are intended to mean the process of learning the new culture and its behaviors and language in an effort to understand and empathize with the people of the culture, and to live among and interact successfully with them. Those expatriates who choose to become less involved in the local culture will find many useful insights in this book but it is really intended for those who wish to become fully engaged with members of the host culture. Thus it is written from the perspective that adjusting to the local (foreign) culture is valuable, desirable, and greatly enhances one's experience abroad.

In chapter 1 we look briefly at some of the difficulties of adjusting to another *country*. While this is not our theme in these pages—and is not to be confused with adjusting to a new *culture*—adjustment to country and culture go on simultaneously, with success in the former often purchased at the expense of progress in the latter.

In chapter 2 we present the **problem**, defining and giving examples of the two main kinds of adjustments sojourners must make. Chapter 3 chronicles how most expatriates go wrong, explaining how maladjustment occurs and why it is so common. Chapter 4 unearths the **cause**, explaining why it is we find other cultures so difficult to get used to, and chapter 5 offers a **solution**, a technique for adapting successfully.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8, respectively, expand on concepts introduced earlier: we look at certain aspects of adjustment more closely, consider the influence of learning the local language on the experience of living abroad, and describe some of the consequences of reaching our goal. And chapter 9 deals with the question of readjustment to one's own culture after the sojourn is over.

It is impossible to describe in detail how expatriates grapple with the difficulties of crossing cultures without making the overseas experience sound rather grim and tiresome—all work and no reward. It isn't that way, of course. The benefits and delights of a sojourn in a foreign country are numerous and profound, but they generally don't require any getting used to. Our purpose in these pages is not to slight the rewards of living abroad—even if at times we may seem to—but to help the sojourner understand and take control of the experience and thereby render it all the richer.

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THE HOWLING OF TIGERS, THE HISSING OF SERPENTS

Nor did he like . . . the heat and the dirt and the everpresent threat of tapeworms and other even more disagreeable parasites.

—FITZROY MACLEAN

A Person from England and Other Travellers

I should say, looking back calmly upon the matter, that seventy-five percent of West African insects sting, five percent bite, and the rest are either prematurely or temporarily parasitic on the human race. And undoubtedly one of the worst things you can do in West Africa is to take any notice of an insect. If you see a thing that looks like a cross between a flying lobster and a figure of Abraxes on a Gnostic gem, do not pay it the least attention, never mind where it is; just keep quiet and hope it will go away—for that's your best chance; you have none in a stand-up fight with a good, thorough-going African insect.

—MARY KINGSLEY

West African Studies

Kynna kept a cheerful countenance, but felt her spirits flag. The alien speech of the passersby, the

inscrutable monuments, the unknown landscape, the vanishing of all she had pictured in advance, were draining her of certainty. . . . She had known the world was vast, but at home in her native hills it had had no meaning. Now, on the threshold of the illimitable East, she felt like a desolation its indifferent strangeness.

—MARY RENAULT
Funeral Games

It is so very HOT I do not know how to write it large enough.

—EMILY EDEN
Up the Country

Before you can adapt to foreign culture, you first have to survive the move abroad. People who move overseas face a number of adjustments all at once. They must, of course, come to grips with the local culture, with the peculiar behavior of the natives. But they must also get used to a new job, a new community, and a new country. While our focus in this work is on cultural adjustment, these other adjustments deserve attention, for they are very much a part of the overall context in which the process of *cultural* adaptation takes place—or does not. Occurring at the same time as cultural adaptation and competing for the sojourners' attention and energy (neither of which are unlimited) adjusting to job, community and country inevitably affect the pace—and the outcome—of the expatriates' struggle to make sense out of the culture around them. The impact of these challenges is so direct and immediate that if the problems they pose aren't acknowledged and addressed early on, the resulting stress and anxiety can overwhelm and defeat the sojourners before they ever really encounter the culture. In short, while dealing effectively with what we might call these lesser adjustments may not constitute cultural adaptation, it could determine whether such adaptation ever comes to pass.

What, then, does adjusting to a new job entail? It will certainly involve learning and adapting to the various policies and