

## The Path of Footprints

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*I trailed behind my mum as she went about the house packing our belongings. We were preparing to return to the mission field at the end of a one-year home assignment. Following her into my parents' bedroom, I stopped beside their bed and planted my two little fists onto my hips. Knitting my brows, I asked her, "Why do we have to go back to Thailand? I don't want to go."*

*Our family had returned to Hong Kong a year ago for our first home assignment after a four-year term in Thailand. Over those four years, we had moved five times. At this point, I was on the brink of completing a full year at a Cantonese kindergarten. I had made friends at school and at church. I had routine. I had gotten used to life here, and now we had to leave. Again.*

*Turning to me, my mum gently explained, "Sophia, we have to tell the Thai people about Jesus' love for them."*

*Scowling, I shot back, "Who cares! Just let them be!"*

As young children of missionaries, it was not a personal choice that first brought us to the mission field. As adults, a notable proportion of missionary kids (MKs) choose to serve overseas because their cross-cultural upbringing cultivated a love for the global community. For those who go with a missional purpose, the conviction that God purposely wove the threads of our story in such a way is inextricable from the conviction that God is still calling the Church to make disciples in every nation. But it would be a mistaken conclusion to assume that because MKs grew up on the mission field, they have "been there done that" in terms of engaging in missions work themselves. Watching the world of missions through the eyes and mind of a child is a different narrative altogether from engaging in missions work as an adult.

Having grown up in the tangle of the joys and pains of cross-cultural ministry makes going overseas again simultaneously easier and more challenging for adult MKs. Each missionary kid has traversed through deeply personal and unique experiences that cannot be generalised, but the same question arises at some point (or often many points): how do we come to terms with all that we have seen, heard, and felt? As an adult, knowing what I know about life on the mission field, why would I choose to "return" to serve overseas?

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As with all of life, the response to the question, *Why go (back)?*, is multidimensional. There is at least a pragmatic dimension, a very emotional one, and, incontestably, a spiritual one.

### **A Pragmatic Starting Point**

Pragmatically speaking, MKs are often well-suited for such a lifestyle. Please don't get me wrong: MKs did *not* receive an extra dose of adaptability in our DNA. Not all MKs have a naturally adventurous personality. Not all MKs share a love of foreign languages. Adapting was a survival mechanism children had to consciously and subconsciously learn in the face of exposure. Having lived amongst multiple cultures, it became a basic understanding that there are many viable ways to cope with life in different circumstances.

My mum still keeps a couple cookbooks she was given at field conferences. The recipes were compiled by ladies in our mission organisation and include tips on how to substitute ingredients one may not find on the field with local ingredients, or how to make it yourself from scratch (things like mayonnaise). Most people are used to running to the store to buy a basic product in their home country, and feel unsettled when they cannot do so in the host country. MKs have had a life-time to get used to the idea that many things will not be available to us. We have learnt to adapt quickly to other options and thrive when we recognise the ways of local resourcefulness. The tasks do not become easier, but accepting the differences does. The mental block of "otherness" is not as impermeable a barrier for those who grew up multiculturally.

In terms of the pragmatics of missions work, MKs have had exclusive backstage passes to the programme. Perhaps it is true that, because we grew up on the mission field, MKs are less likely to carry an unrealistically idealised picture of both the rewards and the costs of working on the mission field. As aforementioned, having a close-up view is not the same as being responsible for the work yourself. Nevertheless, children are keen observers. While our parents each have different areas of expertise and styles of interpersonal connection, a uniform ideal that people expect from missionaries is "fruitfulness". I am talking about the expectation that the fruit of their labour be presented in numbers and events or projects. If I have learnt anything about ministry, it is that "fruit" cannot be conjured according to a schedule. Simply put, transformation is not the work of human hands. Neither can it be measured by human statistics.

Many of us have watched our parents spend years establishing relationships with people in a community. We have tagged along with them visiting church members in factory dormitories and wooden shacks, or waited at home as they made prison visits. My sister and I have seen our dad leave the house and get escorted into the pickup of an angry gang of men (they had a

dispute with a church member) and not know whether Dad would come home alive. We have been sent upstairs to our bedrooms countless times as church members show up at our house unannounced seeking counsel. We have passed long hours at church as our parents spent time with people studying the Bible, in discipleship, and planning outreach. We have been involuntarily recruited to sing, dance and decorate for the Christmas evangelistic outreaches. We have prayed together over the dining table for God to come through and break unbroken ground.

Because we were there, we witnessed that the returns of our parents' investments were not always tangible. We saw that things often do not turn out the way we expect them to, and especially not *when* we expect them to. But because we were there, we know that the work does not begin nor end with us. Yes, I mean that God brought change and provision where we thought impossible. I also mean that the Church's commission is not complete. We have not fulfilled our responsibility to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We saw that clearly as we followed our parents overseas and back. After all these years, the harvest is still waiting for more workers.

### **Emotional Ties**

Another push-and-pull force in our consideration of returning to the mission field lies in the emotional dimension. Emotions are present in our every moment, whether we acknowledge them or not. Standing on the seashore looking back out at the ocean of our past, the sea breeze brings us memories of sunshine, and memories of sink-or-swim scenarios. The tide will at times sweep up onto shore treasure chests of beautiful jewels, things that enriched our lives; and at times it will sweep up shipwrecks, things that broke us.

It is a very common response among MKs to say that the most painful part of their experience is all of the goodbyes they have had to say. Perhaps the most hurtful misconception about the MK life is that "it gets easier every time". False. It usually gets harder. In the words of my dear friends, it gets harder to keep your heart tender and open to building new relationships, knowing full well that you are opening yourself up once again to the heartache of parting. We are richer for these friendships, yet the pain is a sorrow we bear.

Saying goodbye is intricately tied to the loss of a sense of belonging. This could encompass saying goodbye to a place, to familiarity, to a way of life, and of course to people. A missionary family therapist, who was an MK herself, said that from the first time you leave a place, you never one hundred percent belong anywhere again. You don't even have to be the one moving

away; when someone who knows you and understands you leaves, they take a part of your sense of belonging away with them.

A sense of rootlessness can taunt our desire for stability. Therefore, no matter how many hurdles stand in the way, it is wholesome to seek a new sense of belonging wherever we are. There is a beauty in becoming connected with another people. For MKs who seek to return overseas, it is likely the case that they love this kind of connection. Though we will never fully identify as being local in a host culture, and at the same time we are losing more and more commonalities with our circles of friends back home, the boundaries of “otherness” is more permeable to us because we are “other” (living in a perpetual third culture). This may be a factor in why some MKs would willingly re-enter a lifestyle that brought them so much pain – because in it we were able to build, paradoxically, a sense of belonging.

### **The Bottom Line**

However, if we choose to return to the mission field for primarily pragmatic and emotional reasons (e.g., because we are deemed capable, for enjoyment, for comfort), you should challenge us. In a conversation on this topic with two of my good friends, who also grew up as MKs, I asked them, "Do you think we're drawn to the field because, in all its alien-ness and otherness, it is actually our comfort zone? Are we simply returning to our comfort zone that just happens to be located within a highly uncomfortable zone?" Without hesitation, they very honestly said, "It's not wrong for us to be drawn back to the mission field because we have a love for the life and people there. The question is, would you be willing to stay [in your home country] if that is what God tells you to do?"

It is not a case of where we go or what we do; if it is, we will constantly be restless. It comes down to obedience to the Lord our God. If He is not our Lord, if we personally do not believe with all our hearts that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, then we will not follow, no matter what the calling is.

We could possess all the know-how and be willing to embrace the lifestyle for better and for worse, but that does not define where we should go and what we should do. Who knows what we will fulfill, what accomplishment we will achieve – this is not the point when we are to count whatever gain we had as loss for the sake of Christ. If we step into service with “achievement” as our objective, we will always be disappointed. Did those early missionaries who set sail for the other side of the world but lost their lives to diseases contracted on the ship not fulfill their calling? Did our parents fail their objective when they did not convert half the neighbourhood

and bring them into the church? No. We are called to fulfill our obedience and love to our Lord in each moment.

We go because we have seen with our own eyes that we still face a task unfinished. We go because God's salvation has not been proclaimed to the ends of the earth, because we have heard that people are still seeking the truth, but have not been told about the hope that is found in Jesus Christ alone. We go because we love and are loved by the One whose Name we bear, the God who commissioned the Church to go.

When it comes down to these things, it does not depend on us being MKs, or whether we go overseas or out into a first-world marketplace. It depends on our obedience to God and our love for the lost.

### **Get Ready, Get Steady**

Now that I myself and a few of my MK peers are preparing to go to the mission field, there is a healthy need to understand how our heritage has shaped and equipped us to be a part of the global Church's efforts to go serve the nations. In the same conversation with my two friends, they insightfully noted that currently, most of the training and orientation for overseas workers are geared towards cross-cultural training for people who have not lived extensively in other cultures. This places cross-culturally bred MKs in a bit of a conundrum, mainly because we do not relate to a dichotomy of "home vs. field".

Instead, we come with many tangled memories and loose ends from our past cross-cultural experiences. We would benefit from support in ironing these out. When we arrive on the mission field, we will still experience culture shock; we are not immune. We will struggle with language learning, with cultural faux pas, with building relationships, with maintaining a strong walk with God.

Aside from the basic need for spiritual covering and fellow warriors in the spiritual battle, perhaps one of our greatest needs is to stay connected with people who understand our complex heritage. Another one of my MK friends asked me recently, "Do you have someone in the place where you will be serving who understands your MK background?" This is not something we can take for granted or depend on, but it would definitely help to have people we can communicate with regularly about how we are coping with past and present challenges. The enemy will attack our vulnerabilities, particularly on the frontlines of the mission effort. We must train diligently for the fight.

In the end, our personal relationship with Jesus makes the difference. We will face joy and we will face suffering. When we understand that we are called to both joy and suffering as followers

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of Jesus, and when we understand that God is our portion, then we will be in the right place wherever we are.