

# Growing Up On The Move

by Mabel Low

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In the first 27 years of my life, I have lived in seven U.S. states, five countries, and have visited a dozen others. I have been drawn towards mobility as other people are drawn towards home. I have a gratefulness for the international experiences that have made me who I am today. One of the benefits is being able to walk into a Russian restaurant and order food in Russian. Another is to turn on the television and say, "Hey, I've been there!" It's funny, but true, that my ears are tuned in to any conversation around me that has anything to do with Russia. I have met people at social gatherings and we felt an instant rapport because of similar language or cultural experiences. One of the funniest connections I have with people from Southeast Asia is durian. Those who dare to taste the fruit inside the spiky green shell often find that the taste, as well as the smell, improves each time they try it. That's how I learned to love durian. For a while, eat.durian was my email address!

After spending a year in Russia, I began working as an interpreter for hospitals in the Seattle area. I was interpreting for Russian, Cantonese and Mandarin speaking patients, helping them to communicate with their doctors and nurses. All my past struggles with language learning turned into moments of deep satisfaction as I helped these people. One day, I walked into the clinic to speak to the receptionist. I told her I was there to interpret for “Ivan Ivanovich.” She said, “Wait a minute. Weren't you here yesterday interpreting Chinese?” I said, “Yes, I sure was,” and grinned.

I have friends from India whom I have known since college. Because I used to live in Singapore where there are many Tamil Indians, I could find many things in common to talk about with my Indian friends in college. I studied books about Indian history and even went on a date with an Indian guy.

When I was living in Singapore, my parents directed a cross-cultural training program in which most of the students were Koreans. I was impressed by their dedication to God, intensity of character and committed prayer life. At one time I even wanted to have a Korean boyfriend and to marry at Korean. In college, my friends also included Filipinos and Africans. I joked with friends that I would only date someone who spoke English with an accent.

### **Growing Up On The Move**

I was born in New York City, but whenever I was homesick, it was for Singapore, and later Hong Kong, after my parents moved there. Then after I lived in Russia, there was a homesickness for Russia as well. My Singaporean friend once said, “You must be confused about your identity.” I have to admit that he was correct. During all these years, I sought to immerse myself deeply into cultures other than my own American culture.

Growing up on the move, I continually left people behind in every place. As an adult, I wanted to recover some of the loss by giving myself the option of returning to those places and revisiting memories and relationships. Being continually uprooted led to many transient relationships with friends which caused isolation. I could not allow others to trust me, nor could I trust others over a long period of time. Change was always around the corner, so it seemed futile to care deeply about people. In Singapore I did not bond deeply with my peers, and experienced pain as I watched my Singaporean classmates share laughs or tears. I was an observer. The emotional wall around me was observed by my teachers, close friends, and acquaintances, but they thought I was just shy or quiet. I look back and understand that I did this in order to cope.

Maybe I tried to escape from the Singapore school system in which I felt stifled and controlled. It was a girls' school that was very strict. With my parents' permission, I went back to Taiwan to board at Morrison Academy, where my other MK friends from childhood were. Six months into boarding life, I was still crying from homesickness, but I wanted to be responsible for my own decision to leave home. I wanted to face the consequences head on. Boarding school turned out to be some of the most carefree days I have ever known as I relished freedom away from home. I eventually made many friends there. Yet, I still felt the pain of isolation as I held back from being completely vulnerable. I had bonded with friends but not enough to cry at graduation. Months after graduation, I finally wept, as the impact of the relationships I had lost finally hit me. My heart ached to go back in time and bond more deeply with these friends as they had bonded with each other.

Somehow, at 17, I landed back in America. It was time for me to use my childhood memory of this country to negotiate the culture as an adult. I was as good as a foreign student -- Nah, maybe a little better than that. For the ten years, I felt uneasy at the thought of settling down and would be frequently drawn to any adventure or cause that would take me back on the road. The most deceptive part of my identity crisis was my American accent. No one could tell that I was more foreign than Asian-Americans who spent most of their lives in the States. My words sounded more “American” than who I really was. There were gaps in my knowledge. I had almost zero knowledge of popular music from the 70s and early 80s. I

opened my first bank account in college and was completely unaware of the financial system in the U.S. Many of these difficulties were silent and unknown to the people around me. As if my oddness was not accentuated enough, I attended an Asian American church where college kids my age were fairly wealthy and drove new cars. I did not. I didn't care for symbols of middle class American wealth, whether it was suburbia, economic status, materialism, or new cars. I became more and more drawn toward people and groups who were outsiders in America: international students, economically underprivileged, ethnic minorities, the down and out.

One teacher who influenced me was a deconstructionist. He taught me to ideologically tear apart everything that was hierarchical and power controlled. I began to mentally deconstruct everything in my life and became very disillusioned in the process with anything that was established and organized. Incidentally, that professor was black-listed by my conservative Christian university.

After university, I worked at the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong for a little while until my visa could not be extended there. Upon returning to Los Angeles, I began working at the Los Angeles Times. All the while, I was itching to go overseas. So in 1997, I spent a year in Russia tutoring two MKs. Traveling and crossing cultures was my constant. Russia would be the ultimate in the foreign and exotic. My year in Russia was not easy. I sacrificed a lot to be there. I was tremendously lonely and isolated. It was there that I became more aware of my pain. Eventually, I roughed it out long enough in Russia to realize that life was probably better back in the States. On the night before I left Russia, I wept as I realized that much of my childhood hurt had been brought back to the surface by ministering to these MKs. Processing the pain as an adult was necessary and cathartic.

### **Overcoming the Fear of Settling Down**

Some people have a fear of change and moving. I had a fear of settling down. When Andrew and I were engaged in 1999, there were months of deep soul searching to decide if I was ready for the prospect of spending most of the rest of my life in the U.S. I spent hours and hours grieving my loss of permanent wandering, knowing that part of me would be left behind in various countries. My identity had been so tied in with being international and moving around, and my parents were still serving in Asia. The pending marriage was the beginning of a farewell to many things that had defined and comforted me, such as moving and the ability to move. Yet, I knew I was marrying someone who has a deep love and respect for my strong cross-cultural opinions.

Andrew is a handsome Chinese all-American softball and basketball player. I find him to be that rare individual who would be observant enough to see through my layers of pretenses and toughness and be bold enough to tell me. I was impressed by his intelligence and loving persistence. Oh yes, he taught me how to balance my check book. Significantly, Andrew represents many of the values that I had resisted in college: he is an all-American Asian. I confessed to him my bitterness toward Asian Americans because I felt like such an outsider among them. Andrew remained steadfast and loyal to me. I was astounded by his unconditional love for me. I knew that through him, good things were going to come to my life.

### **Home in Kirkland**

We settled in the great American Pacific Northwest. I began as a reluctant home owner and gradually grew to love my local Kirkland. Instead of wondering which country I'm in when I wake up in the morning, I cherish the sanctuary and peace of coming back to a quiet and familiar home every single day. Kirkland knows me: I unexpectedly run into friends at the supermarket, mall, park, etc. Now I have a history with this place and its people: I have continuity, routine and structure.

Our daughters are age seven and three. Raising children also forces me to get to know our local community. Together with Andrew we have formed friendships and bonded with people. I get to know my daughter's nursery teachers at church and at preschool; every week I drive her to AWANA or to ice skating class. Without immediate family in town, Andrew and I take the initiative to pick up the phone

and ask people to babysit for us occasionally. I worked at a local church preschool for two and a half years.

Now I am engaging myself with this culture and people, and absorbing various aspects of Americana. I identify myself with America, for better or for worse. My hobbies include travel (of course), following national politics on CNN and MSNBC, teaching Mandarin to my daughters, and contributing articles to publications from time to time.

### **My Word to Youths Whose Lives are Transient**

Teenagers normally experience awkwardness and transition in exploring their identities. However, being a teenager in many different cultures is even harder. I had different identities in different situations. I could not explain my American self to Singaporean friends, my Singaporean self to American friends, or my Taiwan self to anyone. Even my parents could not fully understand me. I hope this comes close to hearts of the children of refugees, missionaries, military and diplomatic personnel, business people, and immigrants. As children and youths, you are vulnerable and too young to know how to do anything but cope. As you become adults, you will wake up to the reality of how your experiences have influenced you. In a nutshell often due to immaturity and innocence, walls are built to protect injured emotions. No one fully knew, no one could really be blamed. It was allowed by God although I don't believe He desired the pain.

I wish I could prescribe a formula. All I can say is each person needs to process things at his pace and in God's way. Submit your experiences to the Word of God, such as Ephesians 4 and Philippians 2. Choose scriptures that encourage you, and read them over and over again. I have favorite passages that comfort and motivate me. What you can do is look around at your workplace, your church, your family and friends and give thanks to God for them. These are gifts from God.

I have been blessed to be part of two of the very best churches in Kirkland. My women's Bible study is solid and packed with women who fear God and put the Word of God before how they feel on any given day. "Feelings follow faith." We are women of faith who do not depend on how we feel to tell us what our day is going to be like today. I learned from older women in the church about how to successfully go through the seasons of life. My husband is also very stable and persevering. By the way, he hates moving. What a balance for me! And as good spouses do, he gives me feedback and a secure environment for character growth.