

CHALLENGES OF LIVING AUTHENTICALLY AS A TCK

By Kathleen Rubin

The greatest challenge to Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) is to live life authentically. If we meet this challenge we are more likely to take our place in the world as transformational leaders.

Presenting ourselves as integrated and congruent, no matter where we live now, can be a real dilemma. We absorb and store norms for authenticity from each culture we experience. It is a very complex task to figure out our individual approach to managing all of this sometimes conflicting information while being true to our core. There are no explicit or implicit guidelines or agreed upon models for ATCKs to follow in this quest. It can be even harder for those who don't continue a global lifestyle and maintain their TCKness in other ways. They are less likely to have frequent interaction with people who understand and support them. Looking for ways to express cherished parts of our childhoods can help us live more authentically.

Personal and Social Challenges

Uncovering the selves we acquire is a slow, sometimes painful process. I had no siblings with whom to share the TCK experience. For many years I knew no one who knew anymore about being someone like me than I did. Efforts to belong were paramount. There was no time for reflection. I learned how to 'pass' by becoming socialized into USian culture in high school.

From early adolescence I'd felt so different from my peers that I was relieved yet somewhat taken aback when a university student health psychiatrist told me I was *normal*. I sure didn't feel 'normal'. It was reassuring to know that I was normal psychologically speaking, but still, I had such a different life experience that I didn't fit in by just *being myself (or selves)*. The one or two people I met that had a somewhat similar upbringing, worked hard to forget their childhood. They were desperately trying to move into mainstream U.S. culture. I couldn't forget. I knew if I did, I would be losing part of myself.

So I 'made do' socially by engaging with bicultural people or those interested in other cultures. Most of my college friends were Russian and Latino émigrés or children of immigrants. It was

better than nothing, better than trying to live totally separated from dualities as I had most of my high school years. I married the only Anglo I met who valued diversity, travel and speaking a language other than English.

RESIGNATION

Practicing various cultural identities and working on all the usual young adult challenges led me to a short marriage, graduate school and as much travel as my budget and time would allow. That early adult time was full of trial and error, personally and socially. Finding my way included continued work on developing a conceptual understanding of my inner self coupled with my various cultural *underlays* and overlays.

There were times of depression, of feeling alone, alienated and misunderstood – with no place of belonging. It took a lot of energy to manage both the inner knowing of the importance of my several cultural identities and the fear of being rejected, isolated and disconnected. I had to be careful about when and where I expressed them. Little by little I became resigned to being irrevocably divided and losing a dream of completeness.

Through first jobs, continued travel, a second marriage to a bicultural husband, starting a consulting firm and a family, I kept on, almost surreptitiously, enjoying the added value of my childhood experience: two cultures, two languages, an ability to ‘pass’, and more than one way to see and feel the world. Rarely was there a venue where I could luxuriate in my diversities out loud and simultaneously. Without being aware of it, I carefully lived one culture at a time. I sensed that if I were open about my various identities, if I straddled their borders, one or the other culture would reject me. I worried that if I brought up contradictory values, I would be ostracized.

As part of the Jewish community where my children were being brought up, I didn’t object if other racial or ethnic groups were disparaged. If Mexican friends said negative things about other groups I kept silent rather than risk breaking my bond with them. With rural Michigan high

school friends I didn't share my affinity with any of the other groups for fear of losing relationship with them.

I externally practiced *going native* enough in each situation without being discovered or called out. *Passing* or being a *hidden immigrant*, was satisfying on the surface, but deep down I worried that I was a fraud. That I was being inauthentic. It was not others I was concerned about but my own value of being true to myself. And the question kept coming up, which self? A persistent signal from my inner core kept me searching for ways to successfully meet the challenge of feeling integrated.

DISCOVERY

Now and then as an adult, I was shocked that a prejudice about class, race and ethnicity would slip out unexpectedly. It was perplexing because I knew it didn't fit at all with my adult core beliefs. I also found that my attempts at humor were unsuccessful in English but worked well in Spanish. As a child, I must have absorbed the trappings of popular cultures unaware of the underlying societal values – including their prejudices. Acknowledging these conflicts and filtering them through my core began to reduce the fear of them showing up and embarrassing me.

I continued to struggle with when and how to show my authentic self. The imbalance of not allowing myself to live fully led me to what much later I learned to call a *personal practice* – keeping a journal. To this day I continue a special kind of diary that helps me sort and clarify aspects of my life. During a journal writing workshop I realized much of the cultural information that I had saved during childhood and adolescence had not been examined in the light of my adult experience.

As I wrote, I discovered I had been keeping my various cultural identities in hiding. I had deemed them undocumented aliens and only allowed them to come out when I felt it was safe. At that point I came upon a notion that made me feel whole - an identity concept that gave me a complete sense of integrity. I wrote myself into the picture and claimed. *I am a border person.*

Now I could help myself and others understand that I cross boundaries – all kinds of borders – easily. I could finally explain what it’s like to live as the bridge, to have simultaneous worldviews, to be comfortable with ambiguity, to have a desire for synthesis. Now I could explain how I bridge diversity by understanding a person as a member of their cultural group while attending to them as a unique individual and why walking in the shoes of another as an individual *and* as a member of their cultural group makes a difference. Calling myself a border person also helped explain my ability to build, maintain and use networks. Being a *border person* is why I place a great deal of emphasis on the process of speaking, listening, and giving feedback in order to avoid the almost irreversible effects of miscommunication. The energy and excitement released by this clarity continues to enhance my personal and professional life.

Sometime later I discovered Norma McCaig and “global nomads” on the Internet and began the backward kinship — trek to meet a global family I didn’t know existed. I’d like to call it a genealogical journey as I feel as related to TCKs, if not more so, than to blood relatives. Thanks to Ruth Van Reken and her writings I began to acknowledge the myriad losses I’d experienced. That process resulted in fewer bouts of self-doubt and dejection. Reading the writings of Barbara Schaetti and Janet Bennett gave me the intellectual understanding and outside confirmation of the progress I was sensing. My continuing ability to live a more integrated and authentic life is supported by each of these new connections. Many journal pages later I continue to expand my understanding of just how alive, deep and wide my TCK lifeworld really is – and that it no longer needs to stay hidden – from me or anyone else. My border person identity is now finding its way under the larger umbrella of crosscultural people.

Conclusion

Living life authentically is a challenge for any human being. It means sorting out who we really are – distinguishing our core – that part of us we feel truly defines us; and, then, deftly weaving in to that warp our TCKness, to bring out the special designs and colors of our molaa or tapestry.

The more integrated I become, the more able I am to take my rightful place in the world, without leaving parts of me in the shadows. Accepting the challenge to integrate my core with global nomad-ness has been very rewarding. It has released energy and pointed me to new pathways that add immeasurable satisfactions to my life.

Summary

Our greatest challenge is to live authentically. Becoming integrated adults means surmounting intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers. It requires introspection and adult real world experience. For us, it means weighing the costs of alienation, of being less than we are until we find enough comfort from caring relationships to face our fears and allow ourselves full expression of who we really are. Finally, with the support from others who have been on the journey, we can succeed in the struggle to find our individual paths to authenticity.
