

Children in International Mission

by Ana Gobledale, currently serving the Churches of Christ in Australia through Global Ministries, along with her husband, Tod, her son, Mandla (and her daughter, Thandiwe, who comes home for holidays.)

“As a missionary kid you have something so special – an understanding of the rest of the world that not most U.S. citizens have. You are a global citizen, and that is something that needs to be embraced..” –Jenny Dale, 21

“I’m more aware of all the things around me. I have multi-cultural aspects to myself and I feel I take a lot less for granted.” –Mandla Gobledale, 18

Ever wonder what it’s like to be a kid of international missionaries?

Tod and I headed to South Africa in 1993 with me a few months pregnant with Number One! Our two children – Thandiwe (now 21), born in South Africa, and Mandla (18), born while living with Tod’s parents on furlough – have never been listed as “missionaries” in any official mission board documents, yet their lives have been a vital part of our life and identity as a missionary family. They both have been a gift to us, to our neighbours in South Africa, Zimbabwe and now Australia, and to the wider church. And they are part of an ever growing group of Missionary Kids (MKs), who have not grown up on mission stations on which the “home” culture is preserved and cranberry sauce is opened on Thanksgiving, but rather have been integrated into the local life of the host country where cranberry sauce may be unheard of and the fourth Thursday in November may be merely another warmer day as summer approaches.



The term “Third Culture Kids” (TCK), coined in the 1950’s by two social scientists, Drs John and Ruth Useem, fits these missionary kids well. Because TCKs do not grow up in the culture of their parents, except within the walls of their own home, perhaps, and they are a “visitor,” not immigrant, to the familiar culture of their friends, these children exist fully in neither one culture nor the other, but betwixt and between – in a third culture.

They bounce back and forth between the USA (usually visiting every 3–4 years) and their home country, sometimes two or three home countries, as our children did.

While this obviously presents a challenge for parenting, the benefits I witness in the young adults who have straddled multiple cultures seem priceless. “Those life experiences of living abroad make you into a richer and more conscientious person. I see myself as a global citizen.” (Jenny Dale). What follows are pieces from interviews with three of these magnificent young people, all Third Culture Kids. Jenny Dale, now a senior at Grinnell College, lived in El Salvador as a child, during a time of war and uncertainty for the people there. Katie Campbell-Nelson, a recent graduate of Earlham College, grew up in Indonesia where her parents still live. And my son, Mandla, has grown up in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and now in Australia where he’s finishing high school.

Ana

Being a Missionary Kid inevitably means spending lots of time at church! This can be either a joy or a pain in the life of a child...

Katie: I didn't like going to church. I didn't like having to sit in the front row of events and try to maintain the best of manners.

Jenny: I don't know if it's being the child of a missionary exactly, but the church was huge in El Salvador. Although I didn't understand it at the time, because I was so young, I knew that the church community was important to my parents and to me. It has mostly been a recognition after the fact that my parents took my sister and me to a war zone to work in solidarity with the Lutheran Church because they were trying to help the people of El Salvador. This social justice aspect of the church was a key value instilled in me as a missionary kid.

Another imposition in the life of Missionary Kids is the compulsory furlough in the USA every 3-4 years. The USA stay, often called "home stay" by folks in the USA, means the missionary kid is uprooted from their home for a significant amount of time, usually at least 6 months. They meet relatives from photos and lots of church folk, who are happy to see them, but who often expect them to know the cultural and social "rules" of the USA. And then there's school and church that are often so different. These TCK's know that, upon entering the USA, they are entering new territory, a new culture into which they don't always slide in easily. "I think coming back to the U.S. is the hardest thing," writes Jenny.

Behaviors and attitudes with which they are familiar, are suddenly "foreign" and even unacceptable. Katie writes, "I like to squat instead of sit in a chair. I don't like to wear tight clothing or anything that shows too much skin because no one I grew up with did. I was told once that I have bad eye-contact when speaking to elders."

Yet with all the challenges of being a Third Cul-

ture Kid, in this world of shrinking boundaries and globalization these Third Culture Kids often exist as living bridges between cultures, races and even religions. And, as adults, they often continue to bridge the divergent parts of their reality.

"In my work and interactions with the Latino community inside the U.S. and outside, my fluency in Spanish is a huge way to break the ice and get to know each other. The food, the music, the movies have all played a huge role in who I am. It definitely makes people pause to see a gringa rocking out to Maná. Or the fact I know what a pupusa or an empanada is." —Jenny

TCK's experiences can defy many of our North American assumptions about racism. Identity can be stronger with a racial group other than one's own, and because of this, the North American "rules" of "race" and colour often don't hold true for the TCK. "The race relations in the United States are not recognized by TCK when they return, and thus they have to learn them at a different stage in their lives. They have not been socialized with the racism and definitions of race like most Americans have."¹

"Sometimes (being white and American) I, in fact, can experience being a minority and know what it means," writes Mandla whose first three years were lived at Mfanefile, Zululand, South Africa, where he was the only white child in the community other than his sister. Later, in Plumtree, Zimbabwe, he was the only white child in his school after Thandiwe left for secondary school. His experiences, Mandla explains, have defined his personality, especially "my non-tolerance of ignorance that I feel so many people possess about other cultures



Jenny



Mandla and Thandiwe

and lifestyles. I am not racist or judgmental towards people who are 'different' from me."

Katie writes, "I didn't like being one of two rich white kids in the neighborhood."

Jenny reflects, "It has been a challenge having this dual identity of having aspects of this U.S. "culture" and El Salvador culture. Not knowing where exactly I belong because I see things differently. To not really fit with the other "white" kids, but because I'm not Latina, not with the Latina kids even though I share so much of the cultural aspects. So this lack of a place is something that is a treasure, but also challenging in developing your identity.

Missionary Kids are forced to decide, upon entry into the USA, how much to adapt to this new culture and how much to keep intact of their "home" culture from which they have come. This will differ from family to family, from kid to kid. My children, knowing they are different and that their names alone will make them stand out, look for ways to easily blend in.

Jenny, whose family moved permanently back to the USA, shares her perspective on re-entry (or first entry) into the US culture: "[Upon leaving ones overseas home and entering the US culture] the most important thing is to keep ties to the country and the people where you lived as a missionary. Try to keep the language and the cultural aspects, because I know for me they are so important to me and if once I moved back to the states I simply blended in with the dominant culture, I would not be the same person I am today." Jenny's parents have enabled the family to stay connected to El Salvador friends and culture by enrolling their daughters in a Spanish speaking school in Chicago, and returning to El Salvador annually. "My ties to Latin America are forever. The people, the culture, the language, everything is in some way or another part

of who I have become," writes Jenny.

As for long-term effects of this multi-cultural upbringing...

Katie: "I like traveling. I like having grown up with an independence and adaptability in most situations of my life."

Jenny: "I want to live the rest of my life working for the well-being of all of the world's citizens. This passion for social change is something that came from my experience in El Salvador. Seeing the church as a instrument of social change and working in the name of the poor shaped my ideas of what the church should be doing in every part of the world.

Mandla (who spent his years in southern Africa without a TV): I am not a slave of TV.


When asked for words of wisdom for missionary parents, Katie provides encouragement and assurance, "Don't worry about having moved around so much with your kids; it builds character." And Mandla adds, "I think that the whole missionary kid situation can be heaven or hell. As long as the kids are moved overseas at an early age, you'll be OK. I think it is harder as kids grow older."

Jenny offers advice for older Missionary Kids moving abroad,

"When you are in the country, become a part



Katie and family



of it, immerse yourself in it as best you can. Find a support community because it's hard being in a new and strange place."

In the end, whether one lives in the country of one's parents' culture or in another or move between the two, it's all about friends and community, loving and being loved.

Jenny: I love to remember just playing with friends at the end of our dead-end street. The people are the things that stick out in my mind. Their love and care for me as part of their family. These friendships that I have kept and maintained into adulthood are the most special and favorite part of when I lived abroad.

Katie: I liked growing up in a neighborhood full of kids. I liked having an extended family to look up to, and not feel responsible to only my "blood relatives" of whom there were only three.

Mandla: What did I like best about living abroad? Being with my neighbors in Zimbabwe and just hanging out, always able to find something to do or a game to play.

"God made from one blood all the families of earth, the circles of nurture that raise us from birth, companions who join us to work through each stage of childhood and youth and adulthood and age." ("God Made from One Blood," #427, *The New Century Hymnal*, Pilgrim Press)

I will close with a reflection from Katie in which she shares a vivid favourite memory from Indonesia:

"When I was about 7 years old, my brother Sam and our friend Oscar and I were playing in the rice fields across the road from our house. We were quite a distance from the house when we saw the first storm of the season rolling in. We thought it would be fun to race the storm home to see if we could make it without getting wet. As we ran the storm followed us, and as we

Questions for Reflection

1. Jenny's favourite Bible verse is Micah 6:8, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." How is your congregation offering "kids" opportunities to experience "doing justice"?
2. How is your congregation connected to children in international missionary families? Consider how you, as part of their wider family in faith, might learn more about these Missionary Kids, or others, and support and encourage them.
3. Mandla speaks of his "non-tolerance of ignorance that I feel so many people possess about other cultures and lifestyles." How might/ does your congregation enable young members to have opportunities to grow in tolerance, such as cross-cultural experiences?

Prayer Opportunities

- for children of Global Ministries missionaries serving around the world.
- for parents helping children straddle two or more cultures
- For church families around the world who welcome children of all shapes, colours, nationalities, sizes and identities.

stepped under the roof of our porch, the rain hit the zinc with a roar, deafening our excitement at having beat the rain. The beginning of rainy season was always my favorite time of year. hot and humid around the end of November. I was not so excited by it in March though, when everything in my closet went moldy and we all smelled of mildew."

Let us celebrate the lives of Jenny, Katie and Mandla and of all the Missionary Kids – past, present and future – who add such a vibrant dimension to the international work of our church!

¹ Jenny Dale, "What is a TCK?", paper written for Grinnell College (quote from David C. Pollock & Ruthy E. Van Reken, *The Third Culture Kid Experience: Growing Up Among Worlds*, (Yarmouth, MA: Intercultural Press, 1999)).

Poetry Page



Mandla (Mandlenkosi)
Gobledale

Statement of Intention: My main influence for this piece was my experience living in Southern Africa. I felt writing about leaving a friend would be appropriate as it is something that many people can relate to. Also, the purpose is to raise awareness of racism and its stupidity as well as to express my personal views on some experiences in my life. Enjoy.

I Cry for Apartheid

*Memories, so subtle at first
An incident, a place, a tune, a face
A car parked under an acacia tree
Bags loaded into the back of the Toyota.*

*Hugs and kisses all around
Perhaps we'll never meet again.
Tears of joy for time spent together
Tears for the future of time spent apart*

*I am quiet, taking in my surroundings
for the last time. The last time?
Too young to understand
Too proud to cry*

*Emotions swell up in my stomach,
but I clench my teeth and fight back,
The tears.
I am leaving my first memories behind.
My mother holds me, a face appears.
Dark, with short cropped hair
A boy my age, my friend, my companion
Bo is his name.*

*Memories suddenly fill my mind.
The subtlety is gone. They play back
Like film on a projector
No sound, only image.*

*Bo is my best friend.
We have played together,
Fought together, and forged a bond
That only two small boys of three and a half
Can have.*

*"Mama, angivuna isiphiqo makhaya."
I don't want to leave our home.
I don't want to leave this place.
I don't want to leave Africa.
I don't want to leave Bo.*

*I embrace my friend
Containing my emotions no more.
The taut muscle in my gut gives
And I burst into tears on my friend's shoulder.*

*The scene is touching.
My sun-bleached blonde hair falls
Next to Bo's dark, short curls.
My pale white arms embrace him
And his dark shoulders sag
As tears fall from his black eyes.*

*We are brought together as friends.
We speak the same language.
We use the same currency.
We live in the same village.
We live and play together
And show love and caring towards one another,*

*And yet, and yet, in 1990
The South African Government
Feels that this is illegal
Because Bo is black
And I am white.*

*I break our embrace. I run to the car.
We leave in a cloud of dust.
Bo vanishes in the distance.
I leave a best friend.
I cry because of it.*

*At the age of three, I did not cry for Apartheid.
I cried because I had to leave my home and friends.
Today I cry for Apartheid.
Ripped away from all that was important to me
Because some white people didn't like other white people
living with blacks.*

Today I cry for Apartheid.

*I have conquered memories.
They are no longer mysteries,
difficult to comprehend or understand.
They are now locked into my mind,
For life.*

*Thinking back, this place, here, now
Seems familiar.
A car parked under a mango tree,
Bags loaded into the back of the Mazda.*

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You Call Me

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Throughout our lives, we are interrupted by calls from God. As in "This Little Light of Mine," we are often called to share our light, Christ's light, with others in various ways. And when our life is ending, our faith gives the assurance that we shall be comforted and called by that same God of grace and love. (See also article, "push...plant...pray...offer presence")

You call me
Though I am unworthy;
You love me
And ask me to care.
You call me,
And I venture forth in your name.
You fill me,
And my cup overflows.
You call me,
And I let go of my fears.
You strengthen me,
And I want to do your will.

You call me,
And I answer, Here am I.
You feed me,
And I strive to share your Good News.
You call me,
And I try to act justly and love mercy.
You hold me,
And I know I am loved.
You call me,
And I pray that you found me faithful.

*Ah, yes, moving day. I have done it before.
Three, maybe four times now.
My memory does not fail me.
I can recall each one...but it's been awhile.*

*It has never been easy.
This time feels extra hard.
I have bonded with the land, the people
and the culture. This is my home.*

*Unlike South Africa, in Zimbabwe
I have gone to school
Five and a half years.
I have made friends, no enemies.
I would stay forever.
Memories arise as hugs and kisses all around.
"Perhaps we'll never meet again."
Tears of joy for the time spent together
And sorrow for the future separation.*

*There was a service this time
Church, singing, clapping,
preaching, singing.
All overwhelming*

*"Mandla, Andy Moyo has arrived."
I go out to meet my friend
Under the uxlaguxlagu tree.
Memories of climbing it together
Fill me with happy thoughts.*

*"I have brought you a gift."
"So have I, but for you."
Comics are exchanged.
Tintin, Asterix, Batman, Dr. Strange*

*The African sun is hot,
But we take no notice
As we sit
Together for the last time.*

*"Mandla, it is time to go."
I rise and for the second time
I embrace my African companion,
My best friend.*

*And yet, and yet in the year 2000
The Zimbabwean Government has made it clear
That my family and I are not welcome.
We are a threat, an enemy
Because we are white.*

*Why am I welcome and given a home
Brought into a family to not be alone
And then made to leave by the powers that be
Because we don't come from the same family tree?
Are we that different? I think we're the same
Regardless from where it was that you came
And deep in my heart I pray we can be
An open and loving, non-judgmental, caring
Peaceful, welcoming, beautiful, kind society.*