

Unpacking the Suitcase of Shame

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We end up back in our “home” countries for different reasons...

...maybe our time or term has ended.

...maybe we're longing for freedom from our life overseas.

...maybe this was the best of the bad options.

...maybe we didn't have much choice in the matter.

...maybe it's what was best for a family member.

...maybe something traumatic recently rocked our world.

...maybe we're retiring.

...maybe we're not quite sure why we're here.

No matter what the reasons, **the steps that brought us here are rarely simple**. A murky pile of circumstances, decisions, and reasons has led us to this point.

Often in the mix are things we aren't proud of, things we wish had gone different, things that we're not sure we like about who we were overseas, things that make us feel like we don't measure up. In short, **we feel a little embarrassed or ashamed**.

It's as if after our flights through time zones and terminals we pick up an extra suitcase full of shame at baggage claim. *This isn't true for everyone.* Some of us escape the airport without this extra luggage, but it's been my experience that many find ourselves unpacking not only a mountain of stuff from our last home {wondering why we thought it would be a good idea to bring it back} but also feelings of embarrassment and unworthiness attached to our life overseas or our new life in the USA.

It looks different for everyone {and many times we don't use the word shame to describe it until we're looking back}, but here's some of what was in my suitcase when I got off the plane eight years ago. Maybe you can relate to some of these:

...ashamed that I was back living with my parents without a full-time job after I'd been able to successfully navigate living in a foreign country.

....ashamed that I hadn't lived up to my career goal of working in ministry overseas my whole life.

....ashamed of not being able to do missions well {yeah...that's a funny one...what does it even mean to do missions well?}

...ashamed of disappointing my supporters.

....ashamed that I wasn't still best friends with my coworkers from the field...wondering if I had been the reason for that.

....ashamed to be a part of phasing out a ministry I had poured my life into building even though I felt that was the best thing for that season of the ministry.

...ashamed that I was struggling with burnout...I thought I was stronger than that.

...ashamed of habits I'd developed for handling stress that were not who I wanted to be.

....ashamed to be a missionary if I wasn't sure some days if I still believed in God {or at least I was very unsure if He was trustworthy}.

....ashamed I couldn't go to church now in the US without wanting to run for the nearest exit.

....ashamed because I felt like one of those expats who can't handle the pressure and doesn't make it past their first term.

...ashamed I didn't know what I was going to do now.

I could go on...but you see the point. **I had a whole suitcase of emotional baggage that I wasn't sure what to do with.** Of course...it wasn't all true. Much of it was false guilt, but it felt real to me. An emotional weight that left me gasping for air some days.

So...what do you do with the suitcase of shame?

I wish I could tell you I woke up one day and chucked it out the window. But it didn't work that way. For me, it has been a LONG, SLOW process.

I hid behind my suitcase for a while. I was scared to go to Walmart not just because of the reverse culture shock, but because I might run into someone I knew. I struggled to go to church because I was sure everyone around me thought of me as a failure in ministry {I'm pretty sure no one around me gave much thought to who I was, but at the time it felt as if everyone was looking at me}. I dreaded talking with former supporters and churches because they would ask questions like, "What are you going to do now?" and my lack of answer made me feel even more like a person adrift.

Father Gillick [{who has this great talk on shame here}](#) says, "When I am ashamed of myself I am not communal." It's true. The **shame can be so overpowering it keeps us from interacting with those around us.** I remember a party I was invited to a month after touching down in the US. This party was NOT a big deal. Just a small gathering of friends, but {still trying to remember what language to speak} I was petrified to go.

That was the night I began to unpack my suitcase of shame. I stayed glued to one seat on the couch the whole evening and someone I'd never met sat down next to me. Turns out she's a TCK...and a good listener...and she was genuinely interested in me. A seed was planted that night that there might be a few people in the world who didn't see me through the lens of shame I was hiding behind.

And it began a process...of unpacking...and finding healing for the shame in my suitcase.

How do you unpack the suitcase of shame?

I am not a medical expert. I am not a psychologist. All I can tell you is my story...this is what was helpful to me:

- 1) Identify what's in your suitcase.** It's hard to know what to unpack if you don't know what's in there. I did a lot of journaling. Asking questions like: What am I scared to tell people about? What don't I like about who I was overseas or who I am now? What do I think others think about me? Is that true? This happened over time. Sometimes we don't have the emotional capacity to handle it all at once, but little by little we unpack things.
- 2) Find safe community.** The most helpful thing has been people. Those who listened to my stories {the exciting ones and the ones I wasn't so proud of}, had courage to tell me they liked spending time with me, affirmed that I had value outside of my "M. status", were patient with my process of unpacking, spoke truth into my misconceptions of myself, gave me grace to be human, and gently asked me to tell my story over a period of several years {and didn't freak out at the parts I thought they might freak out at}.

I know what you are thinking: *I just moved back to the US, and I have no friends.* At least not close friends who live close or really get me. How am I going to find community? Yeah...that was my reality too. It is hard. This is one reason it takes time...because you are forming new friendships {or trying to figure out the old ones}, and it takes time to trust people to the point that you feel comfortable sharing your story.

But...if you have a bit of courage...and you slowly begin to connect with people...eventually {it may be a couple years eventually} you may be surprised by the community God provides. I know that sounds trite...but for me it eventually came. Some by accident {the roommate who I decided to move in with after knowing her for 15 minutes} and some through the courage and hard work of investing, risking, spending time, and being vulnerable.

I needed friends who were real. Friends who could live with life's complexity and didn't have it all figured out. Friends who weren't afraid of my confused emotions. Friends who loved international

things. Friends who would take me to do trivial stuff so I could remember life could be fun sometimes. Friends who asked good and hard questions. Friends who knew me from before. Friends who didn't know me as an someone who worked in full time ministry. Friends who had the courage to tell me who I was {in a good way} when I wasn't sure who I was....

3) Tell your story...to safe people. When we feel ashamed, it is often because we think if someone knew the real story they wouldn't like me anymore. Over time as I began to tell parts of my story, I found that people still liked me. That some things weren't as big of a deal as I thought.

Since in the beginning, we often don't have a lot of people to talk to, sometimes a counselor is helpful. In the beginning I was angry and embarrassed to "need" a counselor, but I've learned since that a lot of people transitions off the field find counseling helpful. If you can, I think it helps to find a counselor who has experience working with expats and reentry....

Maybe for you it's not a counselor. It can be a friend, a mentor. But...we must over time {when we are ready...not all stories are meant to be shared at once} share our stories. Sharing with safe people is where the healing will happen!

A word of caution here: telling too much in the wrong context won't always help. My friend, Peg Forrest, shared wisdom I found helpful: when we over share our story {spill our guts publicly too soon} it can lead to people trying to fix us {which causes us to feel shame} or people not saying anything {which can cause us to feel rejection}. This is one of the reasons a professional counselor can help. Sometimes in the beginning there aren't many safe people you know in your new home {especially as it relates to sharing about some of the realities of life overseas}.

However it works for you...find a few safe people and invest in those friendships!

4) Embrace your humanity. I don't know when I picked up the idea I was supposed to be a super human {I could guess but we'll leave that for another blog post}, but re-entry quickly showed me that wasn't possible. I am limited by my humanity. There are limits to the amount of stress my body can handle. Grief and reverse culture shock have real physical ramifications. Sometimes we are ashamed

of our limitations. My journey of healing was a journey of learning to accept my humanity...and love myself with my limitations. It was a journey of having friends tell me: "you weren't meant to be a super hero."

- 5) **Be honest with God.** I yelled at God a lot.... And when I stopped yelling, He started telling me in lots of ways {sometimes random and not at all churchy kind of ways}...that He loved me...deeply. And that He was not ashamed of who I was {even if I didn't like Him}. I began to listen to His expectations for me, and I realized that they weren't the same as the ones I was putting on myself. I also found silence and silent retreats helpful. It was in those contexts that I heard Him whisper love into my shame.
- 6) **Recognize Re-entry is a complicated bag.** There are LOTS of things going on at once. A loss of an identity, reverse culture shock, grief, spiritual journey, etc. You can't always pin down the emotions to a certain category. So while this post talks about shame, I was processing a lot of things...and along the way the shame was worked through. That's in the passive voice on purpose because this was not specific journey of processing shame. It was a journey of trying to build a new life that resulted in me also working through these issues of shame.
- 7) **A church that told me it was OK not to have it all together.** Church is such a complicated thing in reentry that I almost didn't include this one. For me, finding a church that felt like a safe place to be myself has helped. For me, that wasn't my sending church, and it wasn't even the church I went too for a while after returning to the US. But three churches later, I'm now connected to a place where I feel like I don't have to have it all together. I'm not sure what type of church you need in this season of your life, but I encourage you to think about that question.
- 8) **Books...reading helped.** There were lots of different books. Everything from Susan May Warren novels {she lived in Russia for a while} to A Dark Knight of the Soul by St John of the Cross. In reading I found new ways of thinking about life and companions on my journey. Someday I'll make a list of books...
- 9) **Time....it took a very, very long time.** I say this because I think it's important. We want to rush the process. We think if we dump everything out of the suitcase on the floor right now...that we might

be able to move on...but some things can't be rushed. There have been things I've pulled out even in this past year that I finally feel like I have the energy to deal with and put to rest. I could not have dealt with them in year 1 or year 3 or year 5. I was not ready...and God understands that. And I wasn't a bad person or not doing reentry well because of that. We just have to wait for the process to play itself out. **If you are pursuing growth and pursuing being real in community then eventually you'll be able to unpack your suitcase.**

The suitcase of shame is under my bed now. It doesn't come out very often these days. And when it tries, I'm normally able to recognize it and shove it deeper under the bed. I don't know why I don't just walk it out to the dumpster of my apartment complex, but I'm still human so I'm not sure that's possible.

Here is how the stuff in my suitcase has been re-framed today:

...accepting that it's OK to grieve the goal of being a career expat...and trusting that my life is not over. Maybe it will look different than I thought, but different is not always bad.

...accepting that missionaries are humans, and we will never know how to do it well. Living in humble appreciation of the good things that are done through ordinary people.

...accepting that my supporters never thought I would be perfect.

...accepting that there are seasons to every ministry and that God is bigger than the picture I can see.

...accepting that sometimes burnout happens because life is just more than we were meant to handle.

...accepting I am human. I am not superwoman, and everyone has seasons of their life where they struggle.

...accepting that working in full time ministry is not a higher spiritual calling.

...accepting that God does not love me more if I live overseas or work in full time ministry.

...accepting the gift of community that has come out of this season.

...accepting the redemption of my story in ways I have yet to understand.

...thanking God for the gift of belief and the grace to trust today.