

Family Matters: A Nomad With No Regrets

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Third-Culture Kids, global nomads, expat brats (or whatever term you prefer for expatriate children) don't get a good press. Mention that you grew up as a TCK and people start talking about Michael Faye, the American teen-ager caned in Singapore for vandalizing cars. The next sentence out of their mouths, by this stage pursed into a tight bud of disapproval, is how they know children who go to the international school and they're all semi-feral adolescents puffed up with an undue sense of entitlement and loaded with too much cash from indulgent, absentee parents.

It sounds like my teenage fantasy of what life should have been like but sadly wasn't. I grew up in about a dozen countries mostly in Asia and Europe -- I'm a little hazy about some of the earlier years -- and I've lived in another five in the 12 years since I graduated from college. I have passports from two countries that I've never felt were home (Britain and New Zealand), my parents now have a different nationality (Australian) and until recently my immediate family of five lived in four countries (Hong Kong, Vietnam, Britain and Australia).

To people in America, where I'm living temporarily, I sound like something out of Masterpiece Theatre, the public television show so pompously Anglophile it misspells its own name. On the other hand, British friends are inclined to mock my creeping Americanisms and savagely deride what they think is a mid-Atlantic accent.

FULL TEXT

Third-Culture Kids, global nomads, expat brats (or whatever term you prefer for expatriate children) don't get a good press. Mention that you grew up as a TCK and people start talking about Michael Faye, the American teen-ager caned in Singapore for vandalizing cars. The next sentence out of their mouths, by this stage pursed into a tight bud of disapproval, is how they know children who go to the international school and they're all semi-feral adolescents puffed up with an undue sense of entitlement and loaded with too much cash from indulgent, absentee parents.

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This sort of upbringing sounds like a recipe for dire cultural confusion, but for me it has always felt like liberation. You are freed from the burdens of nationality. Parents are expatriates, but their children are often ex-patriots. You are not bound to the more tiresome side of nationalism and identity. You don't have to join in the mindless cheerleading and the narrow vision that can go with the idea that one country is better than another. You see your home in a clearer, more irreverent light.

Nothing makes me cringe like British boosterism with its musty nostalgia for empire. Tony Blair may talk about Cool Britannia as a global leader of style and energy but the pages of the Daily Telegraph are a window on a world still fearful of anything foreign outside of Tuscany. People banging on about what a great nation Britain is might pause to remember that yes, the sun never set and half the globe was colored pink, but this is a country that produced Benny Hill and hasn't yet mastered plumbing.

Growing up outside this leaves you to pick and choose what parts of identity you subscribe to. Indeed, we all do this, but growing up with a wider experience gives you more choice and makes you more willing to learn from cultures outside your own.

But to many people, the freedoms that go with flexible nationality are something of a threat. Your loyalties are uncertain and therefore suspect. Being cosmopolitan was an insult often leveled against Jews and overseas Chinese. Even today, governments discriminate in a whole manner of ways against their citizens who live abroad, denying their children or spouses citizenship and penalizing them in terms of taxes and pensions. After finishing college in the U.S., a friend of mine wanted to move to Switzerland, where his parents and siblings were living at the time, but because he had been away at college, he didn't have the right of residency there.

Nowadays, you are regarded as the rootless progeny of globalization who can't grasp the concerns of countries that feel threatened by this. This is true in some ways. I don't have a deep feeling that globalization is wrong, and I feel most cultures will weather this as they have weathered previous changes.

It isn't always a popular view. I can mark the end of my career with a French company as the moment when I wondered aloud why the French were so obsessed with promoting their language overseas when Italians, Swedes or Japanese didn't seem to care. A senior manager, ripe with Gallic self-delusion, angrily snapped back, "I suppose you think the French should limit themselves to being good at making cheese and making love."

The damage done, I politely demurred, although now I kick myself for not saying something along the lines of, "Well, I suppose the French aren't bad at making cheese."

A whole industry has grown up researching TCKs, yet this is hardly a new phenomenon. From the earliest days, people have been moving around the globe, children in tow. Now, like every subgroup, we have our own identity and our own grievances. According to the self-proclaimed experts in this field, we're in mourning for lost friendships and places, and we're not given space to grieve.

Writers like Pico Iyer have made a good living going on endlessly about rootlessness and its pains, forgetting that he grew up in a world of enormous, sumptuous privilege (Eton and Oxford) that makes his whining unseemly.

This year I celebrated Thanksgiving with a small group of friends -- a Nigerian born in England and raised in the United States; two siblings who are half-German, half-American but who were raised in Asia and Europe; and a half-French, half-Swiss woman raised in the United States. We're linked in part by the fact that we are all TCKs but none of us is defined by it or troubled by it.

Indeed, many of my friends share a similar background and I can't think of any who regret growing up the way they did.

(See related article: "Personal Journal --- Kids Without Borders" -- AWSJ Feb. 11, 2000)

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