

Chapter 4

Stuck between Chapters: Being a Transient

You may have brought the previous chapter of your life to a close, but you have still not really started the next chapter. Sometimes writers get “stuck” between chapters; they have trouble getting started on the next one. They sometimes feel frustrated because they want to get on with their book, but they just cannot get going.

An athlete on a trapeze wanting to switch to the next trapeze has to let go of the current one to reach the next one. For a few seconds the athlete is just suspended in air with nothing to hold on to.

When you leave the culture where you have been serving a term and start home, you also find yourself in the same position. You have left one place, and you are not yet in another. You are not where (and who) you were, but you are not yet where (and who) you will be. There is nothing to hold on to, and you may feel confused and disoriented.

You may think that this is happening just because it is your first time to reenter your passport culture, but even experienced missionaries may feel that way. We see the apostle Paul at the end of his third term of service in Acts 20:36-21:1. He describes his goodbyes as including that he:

- Knelt down.
- Prayed.
- Wept.
- Embraced.
- Kissed.
- Grieved.
- Tore himself away.
- Put out to sea.

Although your body may have arrived in your passport country, your “mind” may still be “out to sea,” not mentally unpacked yet. Part of unpacking is leaving behind the things we talked about in the last chapter. Another part is bringing out the old “rules” of your passport culture that you packed away months or years ago. They include everything about how to do things at “home,” including everything from what to wear to how to make a purchase. You expect to experience jet lag when you cross several time zones quickly, and you expect to take about a week before the systems of your body are once more synchronized so that they are functioning in unison. What you may not expect is a psychological “jet lag” during which you may feel confused or disoriented, like you got lost on a detour on the way home and cannot find your bearings.

At the end of his “grieving goodbye,” Paul “put out to sea.” During his trip he had at least two or three weeks to transition, to unpack his mind. He had to sail 400-500 miles followed by a week’s layover in Tyre as well as “a number of days” in Caesarea (Acts 21:1- 15). With today’s airliners we would “hit the ground running” in Jerusalem two or three hours later, having little or no time to unpack our minds. Perhaps you need to just take some time while you are “out to sea” to consider some of the following.

- Changing cultures means that the rules have changed in your “game of life.” How have the rules changed for you? Perhaps while you were gone some of the rules changed in your passport culture, so consider those as well.

- When you do not understand the rules, you may feel like things are out of control (See Appendix). What can you do to learn the rules so that you can stop feeling like you are at the mercy of others?

- Genesis 1:2 notes that the earth was “formless and empty, darkness was over the surface....” If your life seems to be formless, empty, and dark as you are between chapters, remember the rest of the verse is “... and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The Creator may want to create something new in your life out of the chaos you feel. What might He want to create in you now?

- Write those ideas down here. If you do not, you will probably forget them when you again get caught up in the rat race of life and your old defenses return. Write them down now even if they seem to be impossible.

- Try something new. This time of transition is a great time to experiment instead of saying “I can’t do that,” or “I’ve never done it that way before.” What is the best idea you wrote down above? What can you do to actually try it?

- List some passing thoughts you have had during this time of transition. These may be about what you might do, where you might go, changes you might make in your life, etc. Remember that these may be from the Spirit hovering over you in this time when life seems dark, empty, and formless. God sometimes speaks in a “still small voice.”
