

TCK Relationships and Grief



by Ruth Van Reken

Presented by TCK Academy

<http://tckacademy.com/class>

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PART 1 - "Dear Ruth, I'm still searching for my "home"..."

By Ruth Van Reken

Hi, Ruth,

I am a 29 year old TCK and am still searching for my 'home', mostly by traveling as far away from everyone I know whenever I get the chance. I feel very isolated in most places simply because I don't end up in areas where there are TCKs to relate to. Although my parents are becoming more aware of TCK issues, they still do not understand the grief that was involved in our lifestyle for myself or my brother and this has led to many issues that we still cannot resolve in our lives. For my brother it is breaking off communication in a form of rejection that is not intentional but subconscious to pay back my parents for a time he felt they abandoned him. For me it is moving as often as possible to the next place that will finally make me feel whole, but it never does and I am finding it harder and harder to make meaningful connections in my life.

These are my questions:

1. What is the best way for TCKs to go about trying to make deeper connections with the people around them when they find themselves in situations where they are the only TCK?
2. How can a TCK come to terms with grief that has not been resolved after many years when they don't have a support system around to help them deal with that grief in a safe way?

Signed: Wondering

Dear Wondering:

Thanks for the questions. They reflect so many of our stories.

To begin, let me say that it's great you realize the behavior patterns you see in yourself and your brother are reflections of deeper realities in your life. This is a huge and positive head-start – to not blame the circumstances you're in per say for

your reactions. Once we recognize, as you have, that although our circumstances may change but our responses do not, we can begin to look for the choices we can make within our circumstances to bring about the changes we long for. That's why I love your questions because what I really believe you are asking is, "When I am not feeling my needs for relationship are met and I don't know what to do with my grief, what other choices besides running away do I have to try to meet these needs?" What a perfect place to begin.

Although it may seem to some that you are asking about two separate things – a lack of connection and unresolved grief – my sense is you already know they are connected. For many TCKs, the pain of losing so many relationships in their lives results in a certain guarding in future relationships. Consciously we long for the very intimacy we unconsciously run away from for fear of one more loss. It's a rather amazing paradox, isn't it?

PART 2 - "How do I find relationships that are meaningful?"

By Ruth Van Reken

First, let's validate the fact that the desire for close relationships is real for at our very core, we are made to be relational beings. All of us have a deep need to know others and to be known by them in a way that transcends discussions the facts about our lives alone. It includes a knowing of how each other feels, thinks, and operates. This includes non-TCKs as well as TCKs. It is part of being human.

But getting to know others beyond the surface takes time. That's why high mobility in our lives matters. When we, or others around us, keep moving from one place to another – whether because of our parent's career when we were children, or now by choice as adults – we don't have the time needed to establish those types of relationships.

The inability to feel connected at some point, however, transcends

physical mobility alone. Many of us have put up barriers inside where we have consciously or unconsciously made a decision to protect against future hurt by “not caring” or simply not engaging. One twelve year old TCK told me so in plain words. After I had talked about one of the possible challenges of mobility being the pain of losing, this TCK came up to me and said, “I used to mind when people came to our area for a short time and then left again. Then I decided not to care and I’ve been fine since then.” And I thought, “Come see me in twenty years when you won’t know how to let yourself care enough to let anyone in to those inner spaces.”

In my own story, I couldn’t understand when I got married, why every time I felt especially close to my husband, I seemed to start a fuss about something small...like who was going to take out the garbage. Eventually I saw that I was so terrified of losing this person I loved, it seemed safer to keep that last bit of distance between us so it wouldn’t hurt so much if he was killed in an accident or left for any other reason. Thankfully, we’ve been married almost 41 years so far, but it took a long time to let that barrier down.

So this is where I see the problem with finding connections with others often beginning to also tie in with the grief issues. For you, it has seemed easier to “try again” in a new place and keep hoping for the magical cure for this inner restlessness and longing rather than to risk getting close enough to someone who may leave once more. Ironically, we can sometimes unconsciously have self-fulfilling prophecies, e.g. “I know I’ll never get to close to anyone so I’ll leave first.” Your brother may get angry to keep others, or your parents, at bay, even while wanting to be closer to them. We are all such strange creatures, aren’t we?

While all of these protective mechanisms serve a useful purpose to get us through extremely hard times emotionally, when we get trapped in them they become our prison. I liken it to physical shock. When the body is severely wounded, it will go into shock mode, where the blood vessels in our extremities constrict so all the blood is sent to keep the vital organs working. It is called survival mode. But if a body stays in that mode forever, the person will still die as ultimately our extremities also need a blood supply.

So it is for emotional “shock.” The methods you and your brother picked up to survive kept you basically internally intact to this point. That’s good. But it’s not where you want to stay for by now these same coping mechanisms are starting to keep you from living the very lives you are meant to be living.

The question for us all, of course, is that we can recognize these things, but then what do we do about it?

PART 3 - “Why unresolved grief affect your relationships... and what to do about it”

By Ruth Van Reken

For me, it was important to be willing to actually look at my grief and name the actual losses. Truthfully, I didn’t even know that’s what it was when I started the journaling that became my first book, Letters Never Sent. I only knew something was driving my behavior and responses that didn’t make sense to me. In doing the journaling, I made a commitment that I wouldn’t stop the tears if they came while I was writing. And as I wrote, I re-experienced the feelings of that first night in boarding school at age six, the moment when the plane carried me away from my beloved Nigeria at age 13, and so on. As the tears fell, I let myself stay in the moment and wrote furiously to try to get the right words to name the feelings I was having. I knew they were what I felt so many years before, but at that point I had to survive them, not define them. It’s interesting how those past moments are as real as if they were happening once more and that’s why it’s so hard to let ourselves go back. Who wants pain? And we’ve become masters at avoiding it.

I don’t know what others do when they have named the reason for their tears and the ache in their hearts in such moments. For me, when I have the language then I pray for the comfort that I would need if, in fact, this was happening in “real time.” Others may find other ways to express or release the pain through art, talking

with others, and so on. Often this is where a professional counselor can also be of help to give a safe space where the grief can come out. Counselors may not all understand your life experience, but if you can name the losses, especially the hidden ones, they will be able to help you process it, if needed. For me, none were available so it wasn't even an option but the journaling, prayer, and friends who would listen were enough for me to release the pain for that while. By the way, it was important for me to also realize that I wasn't disowning my parents or my faith to look at these losses. The reality is we don't grieve for something we don't love and I had, in fact, loved my life as a TCK, I had loved my family, and the grief was an affirmation of the very goodness of these things or I wouldn't have minded losing them. Even for your brother, his sense of being abandoned is, in reality, an affirmation of how much he wanted your parents because there was the potential for deep relationship there that it seems didn't happen for whatever reason. In other words, we can even grieve for the potential good that was missed in our lives.

When we have named our losses and allowed the grief to be expressed at long last, and found a place and way to be comforted in that discovery process (yes, comfort from somewhere or someone is essential for healing of grief), then we will realize we can actually make new choices. One friend with a story similar to yours of always moving in hopes of finding the magical and elusive "it" began to name the high amount of mobility and thus the ongoing losses in her life. In the end, she felt those "itchy feet" again and started to talk of moving when it occurred to her for the first time, "I like it here! I have a good job, good place to live, have just begun to make some friends. Why is it I'm wanting to move except from habit?" For the first time she realized she could make a choice to stay!

For me, as I began to recognize the patterns of withdrawal I threw into my marriage, in particular the days before one of us was going on a trip, I could make a choice in a new way. I could see the behavior for what it was...a protection...and make a choice on whether I wanted to withdraw and lose this time as well as when my husband or I would actually be gone, or if I would choose to stay engaged and kind during the time we did have, and not fear crying like mad when we were finally apart. Ironically, instead of making the leaving worse, it made it better as I didn't have all the regrets

of how badly I had been behaving to go through.

PART 4 - “The #1 Most Common Myth about TCK and Relationships”

By Ruth Van Reken

I want to look at one more issue you raise – the idea that you can't really relate to someone who is not a TCK. That seems to be a growing myth among TCKs and likely from the line in our definition that says a TCKs sense of belonging is to others of like experience. This doesn't mean TCKs can ONLY find a sense of belonging with other TCKs but it was more to broaden the way we can find our “tribe” by shared experiences in today's world rather than only the more traditional ways of defining ethnicity by nationality or race alone.

While it is true we can have a more instant connection to fellow TCKs because there are huge chunks of ourselves that we quickly understand when the other refers to something like reentry or the adventure of discovering new places with each move, that doesn't mean we can't also be friends with others. While our feelings and experiences have occurred within a particular context, many others have similar feelings that have come to them in other contexts. One reason it is so important for us to do our own internal work to understand our deeper story is so we can transfer those lessons learned and understand others as well.

It may take a bit longer to get to know the other person since you won't have some of these “automatic” connections you might with another TCK, but it can be done.

These are some concrete suggestions I would offer:

1. Realize every person you meet is “the same” as you – TCK or not.

Sometimes we don't want to look at that as we feel as will lose something of our “identity” if we don't maintain a distinct differentiation between us and others so let me explain.

2. Before you were/are a TCK, you are a person. But so is everyone else you will ever meet. In other words, every person in this world is fundamentally made to be a relational being with emotions, creative potential, the right to make choices, the capacity to think, and a place where all the pieces of who I/they am/are come together with some sense of meaning in a cohesive place. We are physical and spiritual beings as well.

Because of these realities, we also have common needs. The need for relationships, as I mentioned, but also a safe way to express our feelings, to create new things, whether in artistic form or some other way, like, for me, with ideas, for others, a new engineering project, etc. We need a place to make choices for without that, we are victims. When we have choice, we are empowered. We are living out the wonder of being human once again. We need physical exercise and a deep sense that our lives have meaning and purpose.

So what does this have to do with anything you asked about?

Lots!! If I look at any person I meet as someone who has some fundamental places of “likeness” with me rather than looking first at the “difference,” then I can also expect that we can relate at these places despite the variation in details of our life story. Being a TCK becomes a way to frame or describe my life experiences but that it does not define my total identity.

So how does that work out practically?

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PART 5 - "How to relate to Non-TCKs"

By Ruth Van Reken

Being a TCK becomes a way to frame or describe my life experiences but that it does not define my total identity.

If I believe this, then I also want to get to know the other person. I don't need to wait for this person to ask me all about myself but I can begin to explore who he or she is as well. As I hear common themes emerge in our life stories, I can connect the dots at these emotional places. Let me give an example of what I mean.

When Paulette Bethel (my friend and also participant in TCKID.com and the Teleclass) share our stories with each other, the details are profoundly different. She grew up in the States as an African American/Creole in New Orleans, Louisiana. I grew up as a white American child in Kano, Nigeria. Her minority status included having to sit at times in designated areas because of her race. My position as a minority was one of economic and educational privilege compared to the vast majority of those around me. Could our stories be more different?

Ironically, however, when Paulette first read *Third Culture Kids*, she contacted me because her sense of emotional identity with the TCK story ran so deep. We have spent much time considering these commonalities and now understand that while my cultural world changed with an airplane ride every few years, hers changed every night as she was bussed to school in another part of her town each day and then had to "reenter" her home culture every evening. I could go on and on with all I have learned from Paulette alone that has helped me put my own experience in wider (and hopefully more usable) context. The point is, we share a common experience of moving between cultural worlds and both of us know the feelings associated with trying to understand and assess the operative rules in each place we are in, even if one happened internationally and the other nationally.

There is a lot of hope. I have seen countless adult TCKs deal successfully with these very types of questions through counseling, through journaling, through friendships, through various other means and find the healing they need so they can move on to use with delight the gifts of our background as well. There is so much to celebrate about your life as well. So after you make a list of your losses, make a list of your gains as well and dare to live in the paradox of both realities.

Simply put, this is my bottom line advice. Look for the choices you can make to move towards where you want to be...choices to stay and work things out rather than running away, choices to seek to learn about others rather than waiting for them to ask you about yourself, choices to dare to find joy in the journey – even if it's something as simple as taking a ride on a roller coaster and reflecting on how this might be a metaphor for your life...wonderful ups, some scary downs, but overall a great ride!

May you seek and find the answers your heart longs for and may you realize the reality of what Garth Brooks sings in his song, “The Dance” ...”I could have missed the pain, but I’d a’ had to miss..the Dance.” Dance with joy, my friend.
Thank you for following this mini-course and I hope you found it helpful.

Looking forward to helping you.

Kind Regards,

Ruth Van Reken

I would also suggest you go to this link:

http://www.expatswomen.com/expat_confessions/adult_tck and read more suggestions to another TCK who felt she couldn't fit in to her home country.. Also, I suggest you read Chapter 11 in Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds on Unresolved Grief and Chapter 18 on “It's Never Too Late,” suggestions for how adult TCKs can deal with the issues they didn't understand they were facing while growing up.



Ruth E. Van Reken, adult TCK, consultant, co-author *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds*. Born and bred in Kano, Nigeria, to an American father born and raised in Iran, Ruth brought up her own three TCKs in Liberia. Her first book, *Letters Never Sent*, was one of the initial books to examine the effects of a global childhood. Ruth works nationally and internationally with globally mobile families, their organizations, international and local schools as they all seek to help children maximize the many gifts of being raised among cultural worlds.

Website: <http://crossculturalkid.org>

Check out information for *Families in Global Transition* conference at www.figt.org
Check out information for *Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds* at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1857882954/84-20/>

Recommended links:

<http://tckacademy.com/class>

Making friends and meeting people.

<http://tckid.com>

<http://meetup.com>

<http://facebook.com>

<http://couchsurfing.com>

Forum Discussions:

<http://www.tckid.com/help.html> 27 things every TCK needs to know – discussions on belonging, relationship, family and more.

