

## **Transcript of invited talk: Crossroads International Church coffee morning**

**20-04-2023**

“I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

— Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

In 2016, I was 4 weeks pregnant with my second son, and presenting a final paper from my PhD research at an academic conference in Paris. I ended my presentation with this quote and broke down in tears as the realization struck me, that the end of my PhD journey, also marked the end of the first leg of my own adjustment journey here in the Netherlands. A journey where I have learnt that Cultural Intelligence is a critical enabler for women’s adjustment abroad.

### **Cultural Intelligence**

Cultural Intelligence is about your Head, Heart and Hands. How you manage to move with chameleon-like properties between unfamiliar cultures, observing, sensing, and engaging with others by blending in whilst also staying true to yourself. Today, I would like to share with you my own journey of adjustment and what I’ve learnt from science, research, and personal experience to hopefully inspire you to take a next step in your personal journey of thriving instead of just surviving here in the Netherlands.

On a wintery January morning, I walked to XRDS international church with a couple of other Africans, Pakistanis and Indians who had a similar, more relaxed time orientation to myself...meaning I was fashionably late for my first encounter at this new church. I came to the Netherlands for five months on a teaching exchange at the Vrije Universiteit. After the service, we needed to find a spot to sit down and have a coffee, a lot like the setup you have here right now...

All the tables were full, but there were some spots open at a table with a Dutch guy who was flirting with two girls. I walked up to him, introduced myself and asked if we could sit with him at his table. After half an hour, I found out that he was an international manager,

which is exactly the type of people I was looking for to complete my research survey. After an hour or so of chatting, I left church with a lunch invitation and a pick-up for the next week... three weeks later he was sitting on the couch in my student house chatting right through the night...he never really left after that night, I guess. Five months later he was sitting next to me in a plane to South Africa to see where I was living and working. Just a bit less than two years later, we got married...twice...and on 31 December 2008 I found myself biting away the tears as I handed over my passport and newly acquired Dutch long-stay visa to the customs official at Johannesburg International airport. After all the excitement and amazement of a long-distance relationship, endless phone calls and many tears of missing the man of my life, I was now about to board a plane with said man, to start the rest of my life. The one thing I had been looking forward to, preparing for, planning for and dreaming of, was finally happening. But instead of being overjoyed, I was feeling shattered inside. Absolutely nothing prepared me for the sense of loss and grief that broke my heart when I had to say good-bye to my parents, my siblings, my friends, my job, my dreams and ambitions, my country of heritage, all that was familiar and normal. I think I cried the whole way to Amsterdam.

We left Johannesburg on New Year's Eve, amidst a spectacular thunderstorm, right before midnight. God sent us a light show that no fireworks could compare with, to start our new life together. A thunderstorm that could probably also be a metaphor for the joys and woes of a multicultural marriage? We arrived in the Netherlands on New Year's Day....in a wintry wonderland with a temperature of -20 degrees Celsius. This was an almost 200% decrease in temperature and I didn't even know how to fathom HOW cold this is?

### **Culture Shock - Honeymoon**

The winter was in full swing in the Netherlands. Me, little African, was amazed and enchanted by the frost. But the winter slowly took hold of my soul. Living in a new country with a husband who was traveling an awful lot, with no friends, no work, amidst an economic crisis, MARRIED at 25 in a secular country where they think you are nuts when you do so, hurled me straight into a desolate place. I returned to SA a month later to write my final board exam to register as an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist at the Health Professions Council. The main goal I was working towards as a student was soon to materialize, but I would never even have the pleasure of using my title or sharing the joy of

passing that difficult board exam with my friends who were part of the journey with me. I didn't even want to return to the Netherlands anymore after that, I was feeling so lost. The sadness and sense of uprootedness was indescribable. My friends back home were carrying on with their lives, business as usual, and here I was, with everything put on hold and nobody who understood what I was going through. I literally had nobody to talk to, my student friends from Amsterdam had all left for their own countries again and on some days, I would go to the grocery store just to be able to talk to the cashier and have SOMEONE to talk to.

Loneliness, the frustration of not finding a job due to the economic crisis and language barriers, meeting new people with whom I had no history or memories...the dark hole I was slipping into was getting deeper and deeper and I could not see the way out. June came and XRDS had a women's retreat. I signed up. On Friday evening Marco would take me to Amerongen. I was showering and crying deep sobs. The razor blade meant for shaving my legs suddenly seemed like a viable option to end all this pain. There I was, curled in a fetal position on the shower floor with a razor blade in hand. That's where Marco found me. That's where he picked me up, dried me, dressed me, comforted me and drove me to this retreat. I was an absolute mess. And it is in that absolute mess of a me, that I realized I am not alone in all of this and that this process is hard. Incredibly hard...and nobody talks about it. Everyone pretends to be ok. Put on a brave face and pretend to be fine...while inside, something is broken, a little plant has been replanted and needs nourishing so that it doesn't wilt and die. And most importantly, I realized that this is normal. I realized that this is a good thing to stand still and mourn the life I had, to take time out to heal, but also to take small steps towards putting myself out there and reconstructing myself.

When I read that women construct their identities based on their social networks, the penny dropped for me. Of course! Who am I when all my friends or colleagues or other significant influencers fall away? Who I am when I am completely disconnected?

This process of going through phases of adjustment is also called acculturative stress or culture shock. Culture shock is not a sudden thing where you wake up and feel shocked. Culture shock is a kind of cultural burnout that creeps up on you. During the first few months of preparing to move or after arriving, you go through a honeymoon phase, just like with a wedding. Everything is new and exciting and wonderful. But as you gradually start

interacting with the local culture, you may start realizing that everything is not as wonderful as it seems on the surface. You start missing your friends, your familiar foods, or music. You feel like a child in the supermarket, and you can't even hold a normal conversation in the language of your new country. Systems are different to what you are used to and the stress and fatigue of hearing a strange language, eating a strange diet, dealing with a strange culture begins taking its toll.

### **Recognizing Culture Shock**

You become tired and irritable, sad, and depressed and in some cases, you may even face physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, weight gain or loss. Minor irritations become big issues because they keep on gnawing away at your ability to keep a straight face...and then one day, you may find yourself alone, in a strange country, with no job, no friends, no support and missing home desperately. Even the coffee tastes different in NL and you need to find your way out. It is in this phase, where many people are tempted to give it all up and go home. Or, if you can't go home, you surround yourself with likeminded people who are just as unhappy as you are and you keep pulling each other down, or your 8 O'clock glass of wine becomes two, then three then four glasses until you find yourself needing to drink at breakfast. Or you self-medicate with endless series on Netflix while your house falls apart and you couldn't be bothered to shop, shower, vacuum or cook for your family. This phase is the hardest part of adjusting to a new culture and you really must surround yourself with people who can support you to get through it.

### **Handling Culture Shock**

The first step is to realize that it is normal to feel this way and that you are not the first or the last person who will go through this! You have come a long way to be here, you have worked hard at moving yourself and your family and helping everyone integrate and in a sense, you are physically and emotionally exhausted. This is the time for rest and restoration. Taking time for recovery, both physically and mentally. Taking time to reflect on who you were, who you are now and who you really want to be. It is important to take this time. It may feel like a dead time, a time of no growth. A time of stagnation and hopelessness. A wintry desert time where the only rain that falls is the tears you cry into your pillow at night. I think we can learn a lot from the Finnish people about winter: In

Finland, people love winter. They go outside to sleigh, skate, ski, or snowboard, they sit in the sauna to warm up, which is a social (and for the conservatives among us a highly awkward, naked) happening, and then they jump into the icy lakes for a swim. They take care of themselves and others. Both physically and emotionally.

You see, this journey of adjustment is a journey of choice. This wintertime is a time to choose the path forward to get out of this dark place. Think of a tulip bulb. We plant our tulips in October, the beginning of autumn. Then, winter comes, everything in the garden is stagnant, dead and dry. The tulip bulbs are nowhere to be seen. In a way, they are just sleeping in the dark, cold, soil, waiting for the frost. Tulip bulbs need frost to make beautiful tulips. The same goes for our souls. We need the frost and freeze, the hardship and darkness to sprout and grow and flower. Winter luckily does not last forever, but the question is, how will you deal with this winter?

Will you cry yourself to sleep every night and keep surrounding yourself with even more negativity? Will you slide deeper down this slope of insecurity and engage in increasingly worse habits or destructive behaviors? Or will you pick up your head and seek support? Will you take a step outside, if you need a counsellor, speak to one. If you need a friend, join an international women's group. If you had a favorite hobby back home, find ways of engaging in that hobby where you are now. Find places of rest and comfort, where you feel safe emotionally and can have a break from the dealings with the local culture and language so that you can recharge your batteries. Self-care is important in this phase. This means taking time out for the things that make you feel good – a massage, a coffee with a friend, a good book, or even just waking up, getting dressed and putting on make-up and walking around the block to move your muscles? You see, it is from micro seeds that big trees grow. You are now in a planting place.

For me, a tipping point was the women's retreat I mentioned earlier. During one of the sessions, a video recording of a song by Casting Crowns, "Who am I", was played. I was so deeply touched. This song gave words to how I was feeling: A fading flower, a wave tossed in the ocean, a vapor in the wind. Slowly fading away into nothingness, not knowing who I am anymore. And then, it was as if the Maker of all Creation was gently bending down to me and whispering in my ear: You are Mine. Not because of who you are, but because of what I've done for you on the Cross. You are Mine. And that is enough. I made you; I knew

you before you were shaped in your mother's womb. I, who count the hair on your head, who catch your tears and save them, I am not too big to hear you. I see you; I am holding you. I will comfort you. I will be with you through this desert. You see, Jesus also went through the desert, and then he went to hell and back for us. For me, for you. He too was a foreigner and refugee – when He was born, His parents had to flee to Egypt because Herod wanted to have him killed as a baby. Proclaiming to be the son of God, he was also treated as a foreigner among His own people. If there is anyone who understands identity crisis, who understands the feeling of desolation and isolation that comes with feeling uprooted, it has got to be Him!

### **Dilemmas**

During that retreat, I met a few wonderful women who became my friends and who made me feel less alien. The journey was not over, in fact I still faced many hardships and troubles in the years to come, but having taken the first steps, gave me the confidence to keep on going forward. I had to plant many seeds over the years, and for some of them, I had to have a lot of patience before they would start fruiting. Marco and I have come a long way as a multicultural couple who lived in a tiny apartment in the city center of Utrecht so many years ago. We've laughed and cried together, we've had to say good-bye to many dear ones near and far, we've been blessed with three beautiful children, a beautiful home in the countryside with a beautiful and very wild garden.

You see, this journey is like any good garden. Sometimes you need to add fertilizer, sometimes you need to pull out weeds and prune away the wild growth, you need to make a planting scheme and learn about the right things to plant at the right time so that you can have flowers year-round. If you don't tend your garden, it can become overgrown and it may be hard to find your way through the weeds and thistles.

Adjustment is not a linear path and although it may feel like a lonely path, you are not alone. Isolation is one of the main causes of maladjustment, mental health disorders and negative coping behaviors. We are all still facing the backlash of the social isolation we experienced during the corona crisis. I cannot stress enough the importance of social interactions, social support and establishing new connections for thriving in this new country. They serve multiple functions, not only informational, but also in terms of having a

shared sense of outsidership, understanding the challenges of missing loved ones at home, or struggles with engaging with the locals. Finding people who have been here for longer and understand the local culture are the magical friends who open the doors for us to see the beauty of this new culture. And beauty there is, although it may not always be easy to see it! Especially not when you are having to deal with that rude waitress who will barely serve you.

Our modern minds like to think in polarities – we face false or real dilemmas between opposites, we create in-groups and out-groups, feel inferior to some and superior to others. I recently came to the realization that there is also another way, a way of love where it doesn't matter where we are from or what we do, for we are all equal and part of the same people. The Christian message in that sense is quite unique for its time and still relevant today: We are part of the same body and are one in Christ.

You see, culture is a survival mechanism based on how we deal with the dilemmas posed by our environments. We develop values around these mechanisms which become sub-conscious, and we don't even know where or why we do the things we do. The beautiful thing is that values are not things, they are malleable and changeable. We can shift our values and perspectives, add new ones to our existing toolbox learn new survival strategies that are conducive to the conditions of our new environments. The secret is to remain true to yourself whilst adapting to the new place you are in.

Investing in constructive gardening routines during culture shock will pay off tremendously when the spring comes. Suddenly your tulip bulbs will begin to sprout and before you know it, your garden will be exploding in a symphony of color. You will start seeing things brighter and smiling more, feeling better about yourself. This doesn't mean that it is never going to rain again, or that you will never feel disappointed when you realize it is September, summer has passed, and you missed it because you have been cold all the time. Adjustment is not a linear path. You will face many difficult dilemmas along the way, and once you've resolved one dilemma, it is quite likely that another one will pop up again. This is a good thing. It is a sign of growth and moving forward and with every cycle of returning to the same dilemma, you will see that you are approaching it with new wisdom and insight. Slowly but surely, you will start settling in and taking root in this new culture. You may

always be an exotic plant amongst the Dutch tulips, but even the parrots in Vondelpark have found their home in this small, cold, quirky, and beautiful country of clogs and tulips.

### **Notes to self**

I have prepared a little activity for you, together with some homework. I have a little book for you, which you can take home. Place this somewhere on your kitchen counter or another spot in the house where you regularly come. The book is divided into two halves. In one half you can keep a gratitude journal. Make a point every day to write down at least three things you are grateful for on that day, for the next month. Remember to add the date to the page so that you can look back on your journey.

In the other half, you can write down all the quirks about the Dutch culture that you find funny, annoying or interesting on that day. Many of the things that trigger a response in you, are triggering you for a reason and provides you with a gift to reflect on who you are and who you want to be. Write them down so that you can look back on your journey and remember one day how much you have learnt and grown.

### **Back to the drawing board**

On each table, we have placed a few sheets of paper – please take as many sheets as you need and then reflect quietly about your life for the next few minutes. Draw a picture of your life BEFORE you moved here, your life AT THE MOMENT and your life IN THE FUTURE – your DREAM LIFE.

Share your initial findings with the person next to you.

Next, grab a glitter pen or glitter stickers and add them to each of your pictures as symbols of joy and gratefulness. How does your picture change when you add joy and gratefulness to the picture?

Now, write down an inspirational/motivational thought, quote or verse on the handout cards. We will redistribute these cards at the end of the session so that everyone will leave with some inspiration.

### **Thank You**



Finally, I would like to thank you for listening and sharing your journeys with me. I am also still on a journey, and looking back, my little plant has become a garden filled with many happy memories, bitter suffering but also beautiful blooms. I can truly say that this is only the beginning of the journey for me, but I am grateful to have been on this journey. I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.