



In With the New!

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Daughter Beth has reminded me recently what it is to be a 'Third Culture Kid' (a TCK). Beth is a 6th generation TCK ... that makes me a 5, I guess ... of a long line of forebears born *expatria* ... mostly in India, actually. Is there a genetic thing that kicks in somewhere along the generations? The Scudder line, Puritan colonizers in the New World from the 17th century, has been American a full century before there was an America. One of us, a Colonel Nathaniel Scudder, MD, was the only member of the Continental Congress to have lost his life fighting for independence from Britain. He died in a skirmish near Shrewsbury, New Jersey. That's good grist for the mill!

In our modern world, though, it all gets a bit confused, doesn't it? Irrelevant?

No, not irrelevant. History has a way of sneaking up. The early Puritans were the TCKs of their day. In a sense the whole American experience is a mish-mash of stories told by wave upon wave of TCKs. It *still* is. People have migrated into that experience. Some came of their own accord; others like the blacks were forced; Native Americans, for their part, were simply overwhelmed and alienated into TCKs in their own homeland; some came because there was nowhere else to go; others came chasing a dream; still others came being chased by their devils. The mix of aliens coalesced and accidentally invented the still evolving enigma we call America.

The opening line of Robert Frost's *The Gift Outright*, has long haunted me: "The land was ours before we were the land's," he observed. And he closed with four lines that read like a Third Culture Kid's manifesto: "Such as we were we gave ourselves outright ... / To the land vaguely realizing westward, / But still unsorted, artless, unenhanced, / Such as she was, such as she would become." The 'New World' was not so much new by virtue of its geography as by virtue of its people and their mismatched stories '... unsorted, artless, unenhanced'.

Still and all, America remains what Arabs call '*al-mahjar*', the land of renunciation, of sanctuary ... the land of the alternate identity. Those who went were *mughtaribûn*, and that's an interesting word. Most simply it indicates those who went west (*al-gharb*) but the word has an undertone of estrangement (*ghirbah*). The meanings, mixed together, have allowed Arab immigrants to integrate (better than any other group, perhaps) into base-line American society and culture. The old umbilical is still there, mind you, but it has marvelous elasticity. It can wrap itself around the American experience with all its mythic connotations and do so wholeheartedly. As a group of relatively recent TCKs, Arabs in America are a treasure.

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Barack Obama is a TCK. And he is the first of our kind to achieve the high office into which he is being inducted. Does that make any difference? Perhaps it does. We shall see. After all we live in a global age and the United States (the quintessential TCK nation) is a global player ... the most crucial player of all, some say. If the

American president possesses that global subtext in his identity, then perhaps he will act in accord with that identity. Let's hope. For the sake of expediency, he may reject it, to be sure. He just may. Jingoism has played more subtle tricks. But he will do so only at great cost not only to his own soul, but also to his own people and to the world at large. He has become, to all intents and purposes, the center of America's global identity and polity. And if the center won't hold, then we're in for trouble ... deep trouble ... worldwide. The American identity is highly fissionable material; it can be used to generate peaceful power, or it could be detonated into a world conflagration.

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TCKs have fascinated American social scientists. Some express alarm. They find them rootless, confused, bereft of identity and aimlessly rebellious, angry but without a focus for their anger, or simply wanderers in the earth, a vagabond generation. Others, however, find American TCKs to be unique souls. They struggle for identity and more frequently than not they emerge from that struggle with a stronger sense of self-worth: their horizons are broader; their interests are more wide-ranging; they appreciate difference more intuitively, compassionately, receptively; their sense of purpose is less fraught, less plagued by self-doubt; and, most significantly, they have the ability to think outside the box.

In my own experience, I've been struck over the years that American TCKs aren't alone. We belong to a whole generation of migrant un-boxed people worldwide. My particular affinity has been with the offspring of Indians raised in the Arab Gulf and Arabs who find themselves at home in the United States. We are a growing body of TCKs around the world with a lot in common. We see ourselves as world citizens (subcategory, 'Indian', 'Arab' or what have you ... subcategory 'American').

Is that a bad thing? I don't think so. In a global age, one that is beset by global economic and political angst, what we need are people who can *include* rather than *exclude*. And the world culture of TCKs is helping to rationalize the threatening chaos. Are they less than patriots? Not at all! What they provide are bridges; they make connections and counter the human proclivity to draw in, to indulge fear of the stranger, and short-circuit the human-to-human connection. They provide the quintessential stuff out of which peacemakers are born.

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Malcolm Gladwell — author of *Tipping Point* and a journalist and editorialist for the *New Yorker Magazine* — is another example of a creative American TCK. Among other issues, he argues that societies are susceptible to viral contamination. Saying this, he is working with the model of epidemiology. There are all sorts of ills — viruses that infect social organisms — that can make a whole society dysfunctional and sick. Crime, Goodwell argues, is one such virus. Only a few individuals actually 'carry' it, but it can infect, intimidate, and terrorize a whole community. As an example of how to combat this virus he cites once crime-paralyzed New York City. Clean up the environment, he says, get at the carriers of the crime virus and the epidemic can be stopped, or at least brought under control. New York City — for aye a by-word for a megalopolis that went wrong — is now a place where people can feel proud as citizens, comfortable and relatively safe. QED!

I would like to hear Gladwell expound upon terrorism. By talking about crime, perhaps he has. After all terrorism, at source, is simply criminal. Like crime, the virus of terrorism is ‘carried’ only by a few people. In some environments, however, it has held in thrall whole nations. Nazi Germany is a prime historical example; Israel — with its criminal sequestration, brutalization and, yes, genocide in Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine — is another; the *Tâlibân* and *al-Qâ'idah* rampage to which the worldwide Muslim community *must* respond expeditiously, eloquently and forcefully is still another; the insanity of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe is a terrible fourth. The list seems only to grow.

But the antibodies are there to bring these viruses under control. We only have to inject the antibodies into the blood stream of the body politic. And I would argue that the TCK experience is one of those antibodies. The self-aware TCK is the precise antidote to the jingoist. So there, right now, is Barak Obama.

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In my last meditation I spoke about Obama’s role as teacher. He has the tools to clean up the political environment and reduce random violence at home and abroad; he has the equipment to restore sanity to ‘the financial market’ worldwide. He’s the ‘doctor’. That’s his mandate. His surgical instrument must be *justice* — be that in championing the cause of justice for those who were sucked dry by the criminal greed of the money leaches; or in standing with Iraqis, Afghans, Palestinians and, yes, Americans in asserting the rule of law (after all, what is the rule of law if not the rule of justice); and in adhering to those fundamental rights enshrined in the American Constitution as a universal agenda for justice.

There! In one sentence I’ve used the word ‘justice’ four times. And its incisive application cannot be delayed. The old saying is that justice deferred is justice denied. Obama, the teaching doctor, must begin with this ... *with this above all*.

The Arab world, the Muslim world broadly, and everyone else for that matter are waiting to see whether Barak Obama can control the very high octane, diverse, internally contradictory and self-willed staff and cabinet he has assembled, and successfully insist that they hew to principle. It will require moral and political acumen of a very high order, and the TCK factor in his profile will play a critical role. Some have argued that we must allow for the human factor, for the political tactic of compromise. Nobody can reasonably argue for a perfect world. But it will certainly be refreshing if we can see that some basic principles become the threads that now twist together (justice being the strongest of these threads) to make of the Obama enterprise a lifeline that draws the United States and, for that matter, the whole world back from the brink of chaos and into a new day of rationality.

Or is that just a pipe dream?

Hey, friends, it’s 2009, the New Year, isn’t it? ‘New’ is the operative term. *In with the new!* Let’s let it all hang out there and indulge our pipe dreams.

God give all of you ... all of *us* ... a New Year of hope!

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.