

Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections. Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2002)

This is a useful book, with many helpful insights. As the title suggests, the focus is almost exclusively on developing positive relationships across cultures. However, in Chapter 3 Elmer shows that he does not have a naïve concept of cultural relativism, recognizing that there may be wrong cultural practices, though these are best addressed when the Holy Spirit guides the local church as it submits to the authority of Scripture. The bulk of what Elmer recommends is simply a matter of sanctified common sense. Throughout the book there are some glimpses provided of Elmer's underlying theological framework, though there are some cracks in this, e.g. his depiction of God feeling shame, and his belief that in worshiping God what matters is the best way *for me* to worship God.

This book is organized into five sections:

- Getting a Perspective
- Dealing with the New and Different
- Attitudes and Skills for Cultural Adjustment
- Cultural Differences That Confuse
- Returning Home

Section One. Getting a Perspective

Chapter 1. Monkeys, Mission and Us

Elmer begins with a parable cum case study. A monkey sees a fish struggling against the current and, assuming the fish needs help, kindly and at risk to himself, snatches the fish from the water, places it on dry land and goes away feeling he has successfully intervened when he sees the fish settling into a peaceful rest.

In cross-cultural situations, many people behave like such a monkey. They act out of ignorance or from a limited frame of reference and end up doing more damage than good. Just as we would have no confidence in a physician who rushed into practice because he deemed requisite training a waste of time, so those involved in cross-cultural ministry need to be develop competence, skill and expertise through thorough training.

Chapter 2. Your Part of God's Story

In order to disabuse white-skinned Westerners of the erroneous conception of being a majority person Elmer presents a village of 1,000 people representing the global population, first in terms of national origin (e.g. 206 Chinese, 167 Indian, etc.) and second in terms of religion (e.g. 330 Christian, 198 Muslim, etc.).

Chapter 3. Right, Wrong and Different

Elmer recalls being raised in a Swiss-German home in Southern Wisconsin, being taught "there is a right and wrong way to do everything" (reinforced by school, Sunday school and church to a large extent), then later thinking about differences, that is, "all those things, which the Scripture does not directly or in principle identify as sinful, wrong or destructive." He later realized "right" were things like himself and "wrong" things and people unlike himself.

While recognizing the Bible does indeed speak of right and wrong, the issue must be faced, illustrated by inter-generational conflict, of the continual tendency to judge cultural differences as wrong. Elmer diagrammatically illustrates progressive interpretations over three generations in his own family history, showing how the range of differences grew greater with each generation. Yet each Christian generation felt they were drawing the line more in keeping with Scripture. For example, Elmer would categorise as wrong some of things his son would categorise as differences - the point being that many convictions about right, wrong or different are culturally based (e.g. changing attitudes about card playing, dancing, movies, drinking alcohol, etc.):

My Father's Lines:



My Lines:



My Son's Lines:



Western Culture's Lines:



Elmer comments, "I am not sure any one person or group knows the mind of God well enough to be able to draw right-wrong difference lines in an absolute way for all time" (26). Elmer illustrates this with the changes that have taken place over the years with respect to male and female dress and the wearing of jewelry.

Elmer encourages each reader to consider the four lines above and write "M" for me alongside the one that best represents him/her; then P for the one best representing parents; then similarly adding initials for spouse, closest friend, supervisor and other significant relationships, plus C for one's church.

Elmer then encourages each reader to consider an important relationship where there is a significant disagreement about what belongs in the right, wrong or differences categories. He asks the reader to draw two lines (as above, but blank) and identify the things over which they disagree, write them in the category which best fits the reader (first line) and the other person (second line).

With respect to cross-cultural relationships the narrower the category of differences the more one will try to force things seen in the new culture into categories of right and wrong, with a strong tendency to place cultural differences in the category of wrong, accompanied by (1) a desire (often semiconscious or unconscious) to correct it; (2) the loss of opportunity to learn about the new culture; (3) encouraging others to share one's disapproval and collectively act to change things; (4) withdrawing or trying to inflict some kind of sanction if people of the new culture resist one's wisdom and arguments for change.

When a potentially sensitive area is encountered in a new culture Elmer recommends asking local church leaders in the new culture how they feel about the matter, seeking

to find out whether it is an item of discussion among pastors and Bible teachers; how they see Scripture speaking to the issue.

Section Two. Dealing with the New and Different

Chapter 4. Culture is Everywhere, and It Sneaks Up on You

Elmer illustrates how he mistakenly thought he was giving his wife a gift she'd appreciate. The point being, that "we tend to make decisions based on our cultural background rather than trying to understand the cultural background of the other person first" (38). Further, his illustration showed how we "usually communicate from our own frame of reference", often missing the other's frame of reference and cultural heritage. This experience highlights the following principles:

1. Everything we say and do reflects that we are products of our own cultural heritage, which dictates how we see the world and interact with it.
2. We tend to think everyone else sees it the same way and get confused when our positively intended expressions are not appreciated.
3. We tend to pass judgment quickly, both sides concluding negative things about the other.
4. The more we learn about the other person's cultural heritage the more able we are to understand and accept more quickly.
5. We need to learn to withhold judgment.
6. Asking the other person why he/she behave in a certain way or said something is important, because:
 - a. It prompts us to suspend judgment till all the facts are in.
 - b. We learn about the other person's cultural heritage.
 - c. We understand how a particular behaviour naturally fits into that cultural context.
 - d. We learn new ways of communicating our true feelings.

Elmer acknowledges that principle #6 is difficult since often people don't know why they do something and even to ask may (1) be misinterpreted as judgmental, thereby engendering a defensive stance in the other; or (2) create a sense of shame if the other person's ignorance is exposed. So difficult or sensitive questions should be asked (with a winsome tone, avoiding condescension and expressions of frustration or displeasure) of locals with whom trust has been built or "cultural informants", people in the local culture who understand Westerners. Yet another approach is to ask not "Why?" but "What should I do?"

Chapter 5. Culture Shocks

Elmer recounts his own experience of culture shock when, at the age of 17, he went from rural southern Wisconsin to urban Chicago for 3 years of Bible school. He describes culture shock as the frustration resulting "from not knowing the rules or having the skills for adjusting to a new culture" (44). He also recommends Oberg's definition: the "anxiety that results from losing all the familiar signs and symbols that help us understand a situation."

One encouragement is to realize that culture shock may be a means by which one comes to know God better, given that he "reveals himself through all the cultures of the world and all the peoples within those cultures" (45).

The experience of culture shock can lead to distorted thinking such as “I am abnormal”; “I am unspiritual”; “I missed God’s call”; “God is punishing me”; “I am not skilled for ministry” (45).

Elmer lists possible symptoms of culture shock: wanting to withdraw from local people; excessive sleeping; hanging out only with friends; obsessing over missing favourite foods; craving for news from home; doubts about being in the new culture; wishing you were somewhere else; feeling physically ill (from the emotional stress); blaming others for your negative feelings; reluctance to leave the house to socialize; excessive daydreaming about home; criticizing local people and their culture; general sense of anxiety and discomfort; sense of dread, fear, paranoia; lethargy, depression, lack of vitality or energy; spending enormous time on the phone or Internet with friends back home.

Different people process such symptoms differently. Diagnosis is easy in the case of those who externalize and express their thoughts and emotions. Regular debriefing times are necessary to reveal a person’s emotional state and private conversations may be required for those who tend not to talk.

Elmer identifies the following four main possible causes of culture shock (usually the result of a combination of factors): language, relationships, routine, and physical health. For each area he gives some basic common-sense advice.

Chapter 6. Identifying Expectations

Elmer encourages the exploration of our subconscious expectations so as to “name them, own them and then control them in such a way that they will be less likely to cause negative attribution, miscommunication and stressful relationships” (55). He presents a table asking the reader for various identified areas to write down for in one column his/her expectations for each of these areas and in an adjacent column a description of the reality (as best as the reader can know). The areas are: the local people’s feelings about Westerners; my living situation; the food; my/our task; personal hygiene and sanitation; noises/sounds/quiet; relationships with local people; travel/vehicles; language; people’s concept of time (yours and theirs); worship (starting time, dress, style, length, music, prayer, sermon); sports/recreation; relaxation; climate (temperature, rainfall).

It is certain that expectations will be violated, hence the need to be prepared.

Elmer recalls an incident that occurred not long after he went to live with his family in South Africa. Eunice was hired to help with the housework and cooking. He recalls,

One day while we were sitting around the dining room table, we heard a dish drop and break in the kitchen. I called out, “Eunice, did you break the dish?” There was no harshness or judgment in my voice, but for some reason it seemed important to verify what I heard. Eunice replied, “No, the dish fell from my hand and it is dead.”

Elmer remembers thinking,

“This behaviour is not normal; she is not normal. What is her problem? Obviously she has difficulty accepting responsibility for her actions.”

...I decided to give Eunice another chance to simply admit she made a mistake so that this would all be cleared up. So I said again in an even lighter tone of voice, “Eunice, did you mean to say that you broke the dish?”

Eunice responded in a firmer voice, "No. The dish fell from my hand and it is dead." She did not admit what she did and I wondered what "fell from my hand" and "dead" was all about. The proof was there - Eunice refused to accept responsibility; she would not be accountable. That she was not responsible was now a fact in my mind. We needed to watch her more closely since she seemed not to be trustworthy.

In Elmer's estimation the root of the problem was expecting Eunice to be normal - like himself. This made him feel he was free to judge her and opened the door to a variety of negative attributions. He advises taking the following counter-steps:

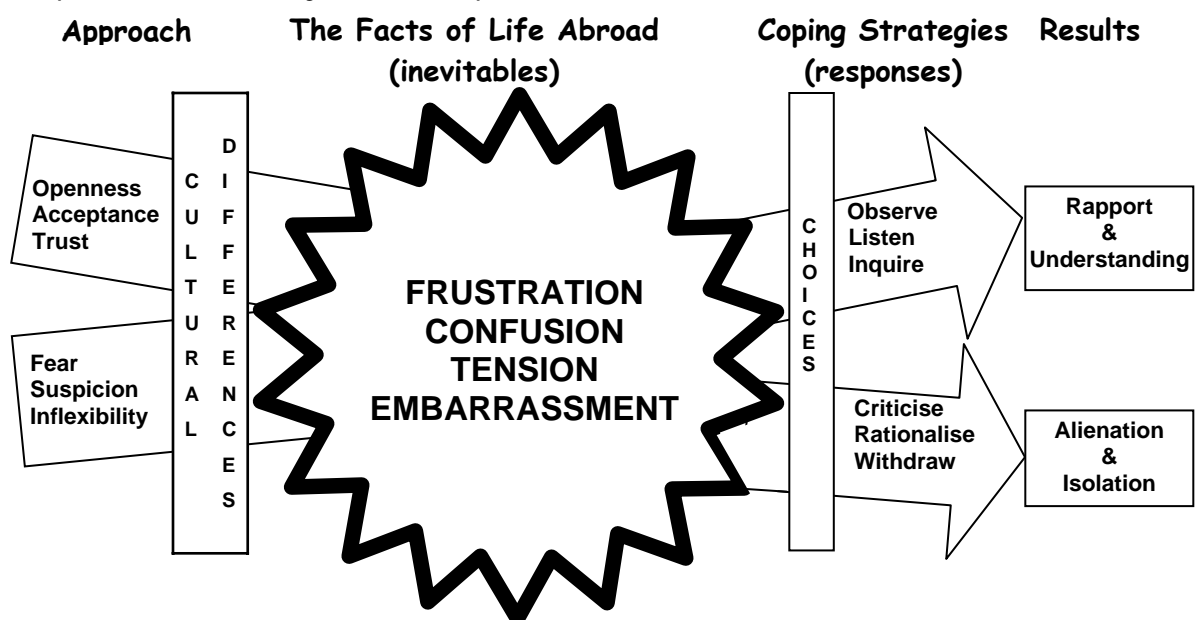
1. Stop: "If you are not sure what to say or do, say and do nothing. Let someone else take the lead or just let the situation pass" (61).
2. Suspend judgment. He notes that "Americans may see suspending judgment as a sign of weakness - being too hesitant or indecisive. Culture has trained them to size up a situation quickly, make a decision and then make it work" (61).
3. Ask why. Elmer went on to discover that in Eunice's native tongue, the Zulu language, people used passive and stative voices with about as much frequency as we use the active voice. Indeed, "many language groups of the world [use] the active voice infrequently because it implies intentionality. Thus, for Eunice to respond, 'Yes, I broke the dish,' would in her mind be saying, 'I intentionally broke the dish,' or 'I wanted to break it,' which obviously was not true. By using the passive and stative voices, she was communicating that it was an accident, not intentional" (62).

Chapter 7. Square Heads and Round Heads

"If we grew up in square culture, we would look square. If we grew up in round culture, we would look round.

When you leave the comfort of your own culture and enter another, you don't leave your squareness (cultural baggage) behind; you take it with you. You become the proverbial square peg in a round hole. At this point you have a choice: you can maintain your squareness, or you can choose to adjust, knock off some 'corners' to fit in and identify more and more with your host culture." (65).

Chapter 7. Cultural Adjustment Map



Culture must be approached via the higher not the lower track.

When negative emotions are experienced ask:

1. What cultural difference prompted the negative emotion?
2. Which negative emotion did you feel?
3. What thoughts ran through your mind during the negative emotion(s)?
4. Did your negative feelings prompt any action(s) you now regret? If so, describe.

Towards handling it better in the future consider:

5. If you could do it over again, what would you do differently? Look at the upper track. Be specific about what you might have done differently.
6. Look at your response to the fourth question. Is there some way you might have broken trust with someone? What can you do to restore that trust?
7. Looking at the upper track, and assuming that negative emotions will arise at some future point, what options did you have? Or what options would you prefer to exercise in future situations?

Section Three. Attitudes and Skills for Cultural Adjustment

Chapter 9. How to be Approachable

Elmer's tips are smile genuinely, reach out, ask questions, engage people, suspend judgment, be expressive, be generous, be slow to bid farewell and give invitations to return.

Chapter 10. Acceptance: How to Be Positive

Chapter 11. Trust: How to Build Strong Relationships

Elmer gives the following helpful example (99-100):

Mary and Joe Smith, working in another culture, decided they would like to build a relationship with a local couple. Joe worked with Koko at his job and believed a friendship would be possible.

Joe talked with Koko, and he and his wife agreed to come to Joe and Mary's home for an evening meal. Everyone had a delightful evening. Now the Smiths wanted to see if the local couple would do something to show they wanted a friendship - perhaps an invitation for the Smiths to come to their house. Several weeks went by and nothing. The Smiths decided they would try it again and essentially went through the same routine. The other couple came again, the evening was wonderful and everyone departed happy. Weeks went by and nothing came from the couple that would signal interest in pursuing the relationship.

Both couples wanted a friendship and both concluded the other couple did not want it.

He explains that "[in] much of African, Hispanic and Asian culture, setting a time, place and agenda for an evening together signals that you want a more formal, prescribed relationship, not a friendship. One signals a desire for friendship by stopping by the person's house, *unannounced*" (100).

There are three reasons why Westerners might find it difficult to adjust to this model:

1. Western etiquette teaches it is rude to just drop in unannounced.
2. They often feel it is important before receiving guests to have a clean house and prepare special meals.
3. Since the evening meal may be family time for Westerners it is assumed that to drop in someone unannounced means interrupting their family time.

Elmer finishes the chapter by presenting a series of four concentric circles, "Circles of trust." The "bulls-eye" is oneself. Moving out from the "bulls-eyes" the circles are numbered 1, 2, and 3 (outermost circle) consecutively. Having put one's own initials in the "bulls-eye", Elmer encourages each reader to put the initials of those people one trusts the most in circle 1, those trusted to a lesser degree in 2 and those one doesn't trust much or not at all in 3.

Chapter 12. Skills for Cross-Cultural Effectiveness

Here Elmer presents a number of pointers:

1. Be prepared for it to take time to learn how to adjust cross-culturally.
2. Monitor one's emotions: (a) think about one's emotion; (b) name it, especially if it is negative; (c) identify its cause; (d) consider options re thoughts, speech and actions; (e) choose the best thoughts, words and acts.
3. Recognise building trust is culturally defined: "that which builds trust in your own culture may not build trust in another culture" (109). The key is to carefully observe how in the other culture what good friends do with and to each other, e.g. how close they stand to each other, whether they touch each other (in some cultures two males or two females who are friends may walk down the street holding hands, without any sexual connotation).
4. Make a strategic withdrawal when necessary, physically removing oneself from the situation that causes unbearable pressure or strain. Recognise, however, that withdrawals taken too often or for too long may be symptomatic of culture shock and this needs to be dealt with as such.
5. Develop a good sense of humour, while recognizing humour rarely translates well across cultures.
6. Learn to treat confusing behaviour as different rather than wrong (while recognizing there will be some things that do fall into right and wrong).

Section Four. Cultural Differences That Confuse

Chapter 13. Time and Event

1. Neither value - time or event - is better than the other; neither value is more godly.
2. Different cultures may prefer one value over the other but move back and forth on the continuum.
3. Most of us, when our time-orientation needs are satisfied, can easily adjust and even enjoy someone who is event oriented and vice versa.
4. Start where the other person is, whether time or event oriented.

Elmer sees the difference in orientation as largely belonging to the difference between industrial and agricultural economies. Elmer consider New Testament words for time: (1) *chronos*, which he identifies with clock or calendar time, and (2) *kairos* (used much more often), which he identifies with opportunity, as per event-oriented cultures. Since the New Testament is not addressing the difference between industrial and agricultural economies this is a dubious distinction.

In event-oriented cultures one needs to learn patience and waiting. Elmer recommends reading, praying, observing, listening and relating in such situations.

Chapter 14. Task and Relationship

Elmer considers those who devote their lives to achieving goals and getting the job done, contrasting them with the majority of the world who put a higher premium on nurturing relationships. He suggests balancing the Great Commission (focused on by many task-oriented Christians) with the Great Commandment.

Chapter 15. Individualism and Collectivism

Elmer points out the danger of assuming, on the basis of Western individualism, that people are able to make important decisions on their own. In collectivist cultures people cannot act independently, but will need to consult others first, especially family members. This needs to be borne in mind when we are sharing the gospel. Indeed, in collectivist societies there are often group conversions.

Also, while individual success may be rewarded in the West and boost morale, in a collectivist society the honouring of one above others will deflate morale.

Elmer illustrates the clash of individualist and collectivist values with respect to cross-cultural marriage.

Chapter 16. Categorical and Holistic Thinking

Elmer describes many in the West as black and white thinkers, seeing things as good or bad, moral or immoral, right or wrong, me or you, church or state, secular or sacred. Along with this, they typical opening question, "So, what do you do?" serves to enable Westerners to place a person in a category or box, which then clarifies how they should relate to that person. Categorical or two-dimensional people typically draw a timeline, with ups and downs in it, to represent their life and horizontal lines intersecting it to represent significant events, e.g. becoming a Christian, getting married.

Elmer compares many Two-Thirds World cultures as more holistic in their worldview, seeing life more as a tapestry than as a timeline. This has political ramifications. For example, the US may say it is only targeting Al-Qaeda, but many from Muslim nations see any attack on a Muslim as an attack on all Muslims.

Elmer observes that the categorical lines of "yours" and "mine" are not firmly drawn in such cultures and attitudes to possessions may vary considerably. Elmer provocatively discriminates between the three parties of Luke 10:25-37, though the ascription to the priest and Levite, while appealing, is a little forced:

The robbers: What is yours is mine if I can take it from you.

A priest and Levite: What is mine is mine, and I have a right to keep it.

The Samaritan: What is mine is yours if you have need of it.

Chapter 17. Logic: Straight or Curved

Elmer characterizes Western logic as sequential and linear, sometimes likened to the links of a chain because of its connectedness and allowing for more direct communication. By contrast, Asian spiral logic, starting from the outside and slowly winding its way to the centre, allows for more indirect communication, important for protecting people's face and not causing shame. Western directness may be perceived as aggressive by Asians, perhaps offensive and even humiliating, while Westerners often find Asian modes of communication confusing.

Elmer finds sub-Saharan African logic different again. He likens it to a daisy, with many petals surrounding and being attached to the centre. That is, beginning with a point (the centre), but then expanding into one of the petals, returning to the point, then going off into another direction (another "petal"), etc. He also closes with a citation concerning Latino logic which, in the absence of supporting illustration, fails to clarify its distinctiveness.

Chapter 18. Achieved Status and Ascribed Status

In the West it is common to think of one's status as something anyone can achieve through diligence and hard work. By contrast, in many other cultures one's status is determined not on the basis of hard work but on such things as birth order, parentage, gender, age, rank in a company, education, title, the group into which one is born and wealth. These differences are expressed in forms of greeting, e.g. contrast the informality with which Western teenagers might greet their grandparents with the bowing and/or other forms of formal respect showed by teenagers towards their grandparents and other elders in many other cultures.

Because in many cultures what matters is not what one has done but who one is, business cards may be exchanged early in a relationship by way of determining the status of a person and what signs of respect should be shown in relating to that person.

Elmer seeks to illustrate the tension between seeking to apply biblical values of servanthood and honouring all people and the recognition of long-entrenched cultural values.

Chapter 19. Guilt and Shame

Elmer begins with some citations which associate shame with explicit and external pressures to conform to the norms of society and guilt with an internalized sense of "wrong." He observes that in a shame culture a person might commit violence without any sense of shame if such an act is considered valid in the community of significant people. Shame and guilt are present in all cultures though the emphasis varies across cultures. The Bible has more to say about shame than guilt.

Elmer comments on the importance of maintaining honour in many cultures. He observes:

- The Thai word for losing face literally means "to tear someone's face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community."
- The corresponding word among the Shona in Zimbabwe literally means "to stomp your feet on my name" or "to wipe your feet on my name."

In the Two-Thirds World the worst thing that can happen to a person is to be shamed. This is often not the case in the West, where unlike the Two-Thirds World, differentiation is often made between criticism of an idea and criticism of a person. Further, in the Two-Thirds World, to shame a person may bring shame to that person's entire family, school, office or even nation, depending on the status of the person and their network of relationships.

A person may experience shame, loss of face and dishonour from failing to achieve certain goals (e.g. denial of entry into university, not getting a contract, making a serious mistake), by the actions of a family member (e.g. someone within the Muslim community becomes a Christian).

Westerners can unintentionally cause shame by:

- Stating or implying the other person is to blame for something. Alternative: hold one's tongue.
- Pointing out a shortcoming. Alternative: don't do it or, if necessary, do it in private with statements about how much you value the relationship and want to preserve it.
- Suggesting he/she has made an error. Alternative: don't do this.
- Asking for something that would be difficult, costly or impossible to do. Alternative: make indirect requests.
- Comparing how things are done better in one's own country than the other. Alternative: praise their country.
- Saying no to a request made of one. Alternative: "I would like to help you out, but right now I do not think I can. If things change, I will let you know."

Elmer's attempt to factor in shame thinking to one's way of communicating the gospel is unsatisfactory. He has the idea that our sin "caused God shame" and that "Adam and Eve caused God to feel shame when they sinned." This concept is alien to the Scriptures. Rather, we should speak in terms of treating God with dishonour; that Adam and Eve dishonoured God when they sinned (cf. Romans 1:21).

Chapter 20. Worship Expression: From Low to High

Elmer begins with a dangerous assumption, that worship is all about what is "the best way for me to worship God." Elmer describes how many North American churches, struggling with the issue of a contemporary worship service, incorporate such things as modern music, drama, relaxed form of dress, hands held up and moving in various ways, hand-clapping, body swaying, dancing, emotional expressions, praise-shouts, preaching styles, etc.

Elmer observes that Caucasian traditional worship involves limited participation by participants, with such styles often associated with more planning, direction, uniformity, order, schedule, punctuality, solemnity and with 1 Corinthians 14:40 often appealed to. He goes on to illustrate how worship styles are considerably different in other cultural settings.

Chapter 21. Re-Entry: You are Never the Same

Elmer outlines reasons why people may experience reverse culture shock when returning from a culture in which they have been immersed: (1) one's self has changed; (2) the home culture has changed; (3) family, friends and colleagues have changed.

Elmer considers re-entry issues for those who have had (1) a short-term stay; (2) a medium-term stay (2-6 months); (3) a long-term stay (6-24 months); (4) very long-term (over 2 years).

Upon re-entry initial euphoria often gives way to disappointment. Elmer advises those who experience this to:

- Build realistic expectations.
- Accept that many people simply want a five-minute version of what one has been doing.
- Show only 15-20 photos with one-sentence explanations, only providing more detail when asked.
- Look for 1-2 people who will listen longer, ask questions and enter meaningfully into the world of one's cross-cultural experience.
- Be patient with the others.
- Periodically insert bits of insights and changes as relationships continue.
- Resist being overbearing in talking about what has happened to oneself.

Elmer identifies reasons for the negative emotions often experienced after re-entry (frustration, anger and sometimes depression): not being heard; sensing people don't care; not having had time to adequately debrief what one's cross-cultural experience has meant; meeting other people's expectations as though nothing has changed; having to perform as if one is up-to-date on everything; a general sense that coming home was not what one was expecting.

Elmer follows through with practical advice on how to deal with such emotions and how to move on.