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Thoughts on Venturing Beyond Borders **By Molly Bingham**

While I have spent most of my professional career as a photojournalist working abroad, I consider every assignment I work on to be an "exploration." A three-week expedition into the deepest wilds of the racing teams during the Indy-500 in Florida was in some ways as "foreign" to me as being outside the United States. I don't speak "mechanic." I don't even know how to change my own oil! But I learned a lot about racing, about engineering, about the pressure of driving, and team-work. And, by the way, I also learned that most of my absurd prejudices about racecar driving, mechanics and fans were completely unfounded. What a shocker!

I will admit I'm not a convert to watching the racecar circuit. But this little example does illustrate several things. First, when we spend some quality time in an environment we "think we know," we often find that we don't know it at all! Second, it is possible to immerse oneself in something without becoming entirely part of it – so no need to worry about losing oneself and "becoming them." Third, there is nothing better in the world than learning something about other people; it is a powerful tool with which to gain perspective; that is, perspective on the world and, sometimes more importantly, perspective on oneself.

For me, "abroad" is anything that is not in my regular route of life; anything that is culturally, linguistically, religiously, economically, socially different from the world I grew up in or live in; anything where I feel "out of place" or "uncomfortable." The fundamental lessons that I have learned while working outside of the United States have been mirrored by what I have learned while working closer to home. Those lessons are: Open your eyes. Open your ears. Forget what you think you know for a while, and allow yourself to discover what is around you – next door, around the corner, across town or overseas.

Every assignment has taught me about myself. The struggles between what I "thought" it would be like – i.e. my "preconceived notions" – and what it is "really like" when I get there are a fundamental element of my life and my work. As a journalist, those two elements are both continually butting up against each other and are always something I need to pay attention to. As a professional I must think ahead, I must prepare, I must consider what I think I will encounter. And inevitably, when I get there, wherever it is, I find

at least *some* of my presumptions were wrong. Some of them were even *ignorant*.

The process of recognizing that some of my initial assessments were ill-founded and then opening up my mind to learning what it really is and feels like to be within a certain community is for me the most essential part of gaining the wisdom, experience, knowledge and perspective of the people that I'm with. Without doing that I can never capably turn around, as a journalist, and relate that learned perspective to an audience (the public). My career in journalism has been both a wonderfully selfish expedition in personal growth – by learning who *I* am in the face of such diversity -- *and* a wholly unselfish effort to relay the understanding of a place or issue that I have gained to a broader audience.

Regarding true “international” travel and work, my perspective is this: It can be exciting, romantic, extraordinarily wonderful and surprising. It can also be grueling, dirty, maddening, gut-wrenching -- in many ways -- and personally confounding. To have the first set of experiences one will absolutely have to have some of the second set of experiences too.

Finally, to young people about to venture beyond Brooks into the world I would say: You will have to cross the boundaries of your comfort zones in many ways to have a meaningful experience within another community's life. And you must always be prepared to try, with the help of some perspective, to recognize your own “core beliefs” and how those may or may not mesh with the belief structure of the community you are in. It is OK to set those beliefs aside for a while as you open your mind, open your ears and open your eyes. You will find that “trying on” someone else's perspective isn't as painful or scary as it might seem at first. Those core beliefs will remain yours. No one can decide to change them but you. If, perchance, you do decide to change those core beliefs, you will have done so for a reason you can identify – and that is called growth.

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