

Enroute to Home

BY MATTHEW WALLER

Travels have come in amazing variety for the author as a missionary kid, short-term mission trip participant, and agricultural missionary. In his journalism career, however, he travels even further from home—away from the insulated comfort of church culture and into lands of cosmopolitan secularism.

A friend once told me that those who have grown up overseas are most at ease enroute. She herself was a transplant working to do ministry in a foreign land. And I am the child of Baptist missionaries to Bolivia. I found her observation held up.

I do not know what it is about sitting as a passenger on a plane, or bus, or car. Maybe it is the twin feeling that I am simultaneously at rest and yet accomplishing a great feat: getting somewhere. The concept in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* where we will all be traveling closer and closer to God, even in the life to come, brings a homely comfort.

Travel itself is a many-splendored thing. There is the trip you take to the grocery store. The trip you take to visit friends. The trip you take to get out of the house. The trip you take to tour an exotic locale. The trip you take to a holy place. The trip you take to help people in need. And the trip you take to move somewhere else entirely — perhaps because creditors will not stop calling, or hopefully because God is calling you about something in particular.

It is the last kind of trip — to move somewhere else entirely — that I know more intimately than many. Army brats, ambassador kids, missionaries — anyone who has moved around a lot can tell you that the last-listed travel holds a different feel than any other. In all the other kinds of trips, the actual, final destination is home.

In a cosmic sense, all of our travels aim for home, but home defined as the place where we are meant to live. There is the sense of this at the end of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

G. K. Chesterton (who didn't exactly have a fondness of Eliot's poetry — he was in favor of the world ending with a bang) played with the same concept in the opening pages of his book *Orthodoxy*. He envisioned a man setting off on an adventure and accidentally returning home, only to treat everything in his homeland as new and unknown.²

In those two philosophical examples, the move is still to a place that is new, even if we have a shadow of it in our hearts.

With all respect to John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* is not much of a pilgrimage, since very rarely will pilgrims actually pack up and move their family to stay on the grounds of a holy site. Not every Muslim lives in Mecca, nor every Catholic in the Vatican.



My travels as a missionary kid took me to new places. From Equatorial Guinea, to different places around Bolivia, and finally to Texas, a quasi-Republic embedded in the United States. I loved my MK life, and I am immensely grateful for it. I grew up without roots, and that bothered me for a time, but what I discovered is that roots can grow once you stop moving, regardless of early uprooting. And even if I did not have cultural roots tied to a geography, I had anchors in God's kingdom, and those have proved much more valuable.

I grew up sitting on crude benches in a circle under the open air with only a natural gas lamp hissing at the night and lighting the congregation as we sang tragically tuned songs about God's promises. I prayed in church buildings, still with crude benches, as the pastor belted out prayers amplified a thousand times by crackling speakers. And my friends and I received our baptisms in everything from brick baptisteries to rivers, lakes, and oceans. Whatever the cultural divide, we believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the loving, creator God, the renewing Holy Spirit, and Christ's promised return.

Honestly, my life as a missionary kid may have been less about traveling than many other's lives. Salesmen, military, and executives' families probably had to move around a lot more than I did. We just had generally longer plane rides when we went back to see family. My life as a missionary kid was not about always traveling. It was about living in a culture that was

not native to my parents. My parents may have felt as though they were on a very long trip. I was just growing up.

Eventually I returned to the United States and attended Baylor University. That is when I did a bit more travel, the kind with a return destination. I majored in journalism and took a trip to Kenya where I wrote about the visits of a social work team composed of college students. I took a short-term mission trip back to Bolivia with a supporting church in Texas. And I helped my father pioneer his borehole well-drilling technique in Kenya and Ethiopia.

Backing up a bit: my father served as an agricultural missionary. He saw the faces of starving Ethiopians on television during the famines of the 1980s, and he and my mom dedicated their lives to go help people in such need. The Southern Baptist Convention at the time was specifically christening missionaries with backgrounds in agriculture, which my father had. (My parents joined the SBC before leaving it and becoming independently affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas later in life.) My dad wanted to teach good agricultural technique to farmers in developing countries, but plants need water, as do people.

In Bolivia in particular, rural farmers did not have reliable water supplies. Villages generally had an open, hand-dug well or bar ditch infested with frogs or leeches. Children would walk for miles to gather this water rather than go to school so that the family could rid themselves and their livestock of thirst, clean their clothes, wash themselves, water plants, and, in sum, live. In response, my dad invented a way to manually drill borehole water wells with a rig costing about \$300, and to make well pumps for about \$100. My father taught farmers how to make the wells and maintain the pumps themselves, all using locally available materials. Water For All International, the nonprofit my father started, has drilled more than three thousand wells in more than a dozen countries around the world.³

So I went with my dad to Ethiopia and Kenya over a summer to see if the well drilling would work there. It did. After college, I joined a group to re-learn the well drilling, and I pioneered the technique in Togo on my own. It worked there too.

I grew up without roots, and that bothered me for a time, but I discovered roots can grow once you stop moving. And even if I did not have cultural roots tied to a geography, I had anchors in God's kingdom, and those proved much more valuable.

In the end, unfortunately, the most I learned was probably how to drill wells in different places, not much else. This is one of the hazards for me personally in mission-based travel, travel where you have a job to complete: everything else can get blocked out. I am a task-focused sort of person, and though I made a few friends along the way, much of what I remember from

In some ways, the present leg of my earthly journey reflects the kind of challenge that many might face on trips abroad, and which more and more U.S. residents are facing themselves: the challenge of pluralism.

the travels is working hard around a mud puddle surrounded by pipes. Mud puddles and pipes generally look the same in Ethiopia, Bolivia, and Kenya, with minor differences. Kenya did have redder mud. The most valuable moments of such travel were in the down times: trapped in a hut with fellow workers during a storm, eating and

joking with the family I was helping to get a well, or sharing stories on the road from one place to another.



It has been years since I went on any other such humanitarian expedition. Now I have settled into a stage of life in the United States where I am able to financially support others who are overseas. On my own accord, however, I travel now further from home than I did in my youth. I have ventured further away from the insulated comfort of church culture to lands of cosmopolitan secularism. Journalism, the career I chose, is not renowned for its piety. And Austin, Texas, has the reputation of the trendy, cynical cities of the northwest, a hole in the Bible belt, even if there are excellent congregations of believers in its midst.

In some ways, the present leg of my earthly journey reflects the kind of challenge that many might face on trips abroad, and which more and more U.S. residents are facing themselves: the challenge of pluralism. What does one do when one encounters a cultural practice or way of life which conflicts with one's core principles? How does one relate to outsiders, or relate to insiders when someone is an outsider?

My approach for quick trips is simple, even if difficult at times: treat people respectfully, lovingly ask questions, present one's own viewpoint, and move forward on common ground. When this amounts to a single conversation on a plane or a bus or over coffee, it feels manageable, but it is harder to do this every day in interaction with neighbors, coworkers, and friends. It is a challenge to hold tight for a conflict-averse, people-pleaser

like myself. Yet it is a struggle that the church of pilgrim-travelers cannot avoid. Not while we are enroute to our own pilgrimage home.

NOTES

1 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," lines 239-242, in *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, 1968 [1943]), 59.

2 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908).

3 For more information about the Water for All International project "training families to drill their own low cost water wells," see www.waterforallinternational.org (accessed June 17, 2016).



MATTHEW WALLER

is a freelance journalist in Austin, Texas.