

ON BEING AN ADOLESCENT AND LIVING OVERSEAS

by Peter Hadwen

Peter left Canada in Grade 2 and returned to enter Grade 10. During that time many changes had taken place, not only in the country itself, but in his perspective of it. Adjustment, it is called, and foreign service children must face it over and over again as their parents wander around the world.

Peter, now 25 and at Queen's University studying for a Masters Degree in Public Administration, was asked if he would put into words some of his thoughts about his life abroad and the adjustment process that was needed upon his return; plus, if possible, to offer some words of advice to parents and teens who might well find themselves in the same position. A difficult task, granted; but one that he not only met but exceeded.

Being an adolescent and living overseas has rewards but at the same time, it can create some difficulties. Foreign service life gave me the opportunity of visiting places regarded as legendary and of great cultural importance. It also gave me the chance of relating to people of different cultures. By doing so, I broadened my perspectives not only on what the world was like (a bigger place) but, in comparing other cultures to my own, I gained a greater awareness about Canada and the special and distinctive nature of its society. My travels overseas, in effect, proved to be a profound intellectual experience for me.

Foreign service life is, at the same time, a social adventure fraught both with good times and disturbing ones. Such a life is transient by nature. For an adolescent this can result in a disjointed existence. I found, for instance, that it would initially take some time to get used to a new environment. Once I felt comfortable and had made friends, I began to enjoy and take part in the activities of the foreign community and in school life.

Life in a foreign community is by nature uncertain. It is removed from the regular

pattern of life in the host country. Consequently, everyone in the community, particularly if it is small, interacts more with each other. Bonds of friendship become strong. Because living in a foreign country has natural cultural stresses and strains, you tend to rely not only on your friends but on your family more than you might have in Canada.

Added to this situation is that you are removed from your home society. In my particular case my family was away from Canada for seven years. I left Canada while in Grade 2 and came back and entered Grade 10. In seven years the fabric of Canadian society had changed.

The unfortunate thing about living abroad was that my family and I were not able to confront these changes and adjust our lives to them, as they unfolded. As a result, when we arrived home, all of us suffered a certain amount of culture shock. My brothers and I discovered this when we encountered high school social norms and practices which were strange and a bit intimidating. Our parents undoubtedly realized this, and I suspect found it hard to understand what the change meant to us and also how they, as parents, should deal with this.

I remember the first party that I was invited to in high school. I saw a lot of things that were definite eyeopeners to me and which fostered an anxious awareness that I was not as socially advanced as my prospective peers appeared to be. Girlfriend-boyfriend relationships seemed to be more involved than the relatively platonic relationships of foreign community school life. A fair amount of drinking was done at these parties and even the use of marijuana by some, appeared to be accepted and considered part of the "scene". Out of all this, what faced me was the need to be considered as part of school life yet at the same time reconcile its different nature.

In saying what I have said so far, I don't intend to give an overly horrific presentation of what coming back to Canada involved, yet there is no question that for my brothers and me, returning involved a big adjustment. It may be difficult to translate my family's experience to those of other foreign service returnees. There are a lot of intangibles involved (i.e. the number of years away from Canada, upbringing, personality, age.) Nonetheless, what I am saying may have some relevance to the experiences of other foreign service people.

A big question which may come out of this is "What can parents do when they know their sons or daughters are having difficulty adjusting to and reconciling with a new school environment?" I think firstly, that parents should recognize that they have fostered in their kids a sense of self-respect and self-responsibility. Both character traits will guide them well and in time their offspring will adjust quite adequately to their surroundings.

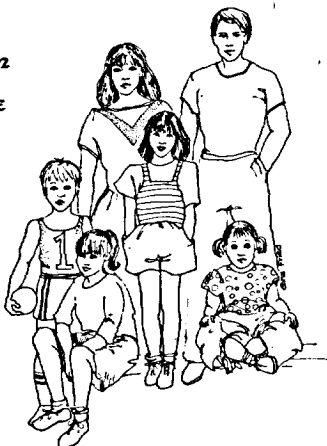
I think two of the cardinal virtues of parenthood should be followed as well: patience and the willingness to provide a sympathetic and understanding ear to problems that arise.

Parents, from my experience, are good worriers (as far as their children are concerned) and it is for this reason that patience is important. A "sympathetic ear" is important, but my view is that parents should not actively seek to sort out the problems of their offspring because this may be perceived not only as an infringement of privacy but also as meddling. Instead they should make themselves available to give advice when asked for.

All in all, despite my difficulties of adjusting when I came back, I thoroughly enjoyed high school. I credit much of this to my thoughtful friends and my loving brothers and parents. In retrospect, I would not have missed my travels abroad for anything.

Foreign
Service

Tots
&
Teens



TOTS

To counter the soft, cuddly CARE BEARS and CABBAGE PATCH KIDS that have been monopolizing the market for the past year, we now have the GREMLINS. These ugly, horrific little creatures are guaranteed to terrify the little ones at first sight...yet, so did E.T. and isn't he loved now. Still, snuggling up to a Gremlin or E.T. at night?

TEENS

The "NERD" look is "IN". Nerds, sometimes known as geeks, dorks or eggheads, are

easily identified by their short pants, short hair, corny glasses, white socks, mismatched clothes and big brains. Other options for the "nerd" look include a pocket calculator attached to the belt, a plastic pocket protector filled with Bics, a large briefcase and rubber bands for keeping trousers from getting caught in bicycle spokes.

Thanks to the amusing, popular movie "Revenge of the Nerds", the "cool" look has been temporarily replaced by the "nerd" look. It's doubtful that it will really catch on, but wouldn't it make life a lot easier if you didn't always have to look "cool".