

MAY YOU ONLY HAVE A LIGHT CASE OF C.S.

(Adapted from a speech by the Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg)

Culture shock is a malady which afflicts almost every Canadian on a new posting abroad. Like most ailments, it has its own causes, symptoms, and cures. It is precipitated by the anxiety a person feels when he loses all his familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.

These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways which orient him to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when meeting people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not to, and how to judge what one's expectations can be in relation to promises given.

These cues or customs one learns automatically, as he grows up in his own culture.

When an individual enters a strange culture, many or most of these cues or customs change.

No matter how broad-minded or full of good will one is, a series of props have been knocked out from under you and you suffer from anxiety and frustration.

Some of the symptoms of culture shock are: excessive concern over drinking water, food, dishes, and bedding; fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations; delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country; excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured; and finally, that terrible longing to be back home, to be able to have a good cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie, to walk into that corner drugstore, to visit one's relatives, and in general to talk to people who "really make sense".

For some, the strangeness, and the inability to cope with it, becomes so overwhelming that physical ailments result.

Although not common, there are some individuals who simply cannot live in foreign cultures. But the vast majority suffer culture shock in varying degrees, progress through the ailment, and continue on to a satisfactory adjustment.

Culture shock has its stages. The first stage is often a fascination with the new. Everything is so unusual and strange, people are trying hard to please, it all seems romantic and exciting. This stage may last a day or two to a few weeks, depending how soon you are turned loose to really cope on your own.



The second stage, and most difficult, occurs when you settle down to seriously trying to live your new life in the new country.

This stage is often characterized by a hostile and aggressive attitude towards the host country.

This hostility evidently grows out of the genuine difficulty which the visitor experiences in the process of adjustment.

There is servant trouble, house trouble, school trouble, language trouble, shopping trouble, and the fact that people in the host country are largely indifferent to all these troubles. They help but they just don't understand your great concern over these difficulties. Therefore, they must be insensible and unsympathetic to you and your worries. The result, "I just don't like them".

You become aggressive, you band together with your fellow Canadians and criticize the host country, its ways, and its people. But this criticism is not an objective appraisal but a derogatory one.

Instead of trying to account for conditions as they are through an honest analysis of the actual conditions and the historical

circumstances which have created them, you talk as if the difficulties you experienced are more or less created by the people of the host country for your special discomfort.

You take refuge in the colony of your countrymen and other English (or French) speaking foreigners and its cocktail (or daytime bridge) circuit, which often becomes the fountainhead of emotionally charged labels known as stereotypes.

The use of stereotypes may salve the ego of someone with a severe case of culture shock but it certainly does not lead to any genuine understanding of the host country and its people.

The second stage of culture shock is in a sense a crisis in the disease. If you come out of it, you stay; if not, you leave before you reach the stage of a nervous breakdown.

If the new arrival succeeds in getting some knowledge of the language and begins to get around by himself, he is beginning to open the way in the new cultural environment.

He (or she) still has difficulties, but takes a "this is my cross and I have to bear it" attitude.