**Change Management**

There's a period of time when you move country, usually within the first three months, where you feel overwhelmed and lonely. Call it culture shock, call it alienation, or call it a dip in the emotional cycle. Whatever catch phrase you want to use, it is the same thing. I call it homesickness and I’ve lived “away” for so long that I am no longer sure what I am homesick for. No matter how many times you jump to a new life, it is still there. It makes sense. After all, you've uprooted your life and plonked down somewhere new where you don't have a support network and you don't know how to get things done. Naturally this is harder when there is a language barrier where you have to rely on other people, and you don’t know any.

You might think that it would be a little easier moving back somewhere you have lived before. It's not. In fact, it comes with a host of different problems. Firstly, things change, so no matter what your expectations are, the reality is going to be different. Even when you expect things to change, the kind of change can still take you by surprise. It’s not always bad, it’s just, well…different. Moving back to the same country but to a different city is possibly the easiest of the scenarios. You have a head start on knowing how to do things, but you recognise that you are going to have to put yourself out there to find new friends and establish yourself. Your expectations are as close to reality as they are going to get.

I’ve learnt that moving back to the same city is the hardest and this extends to moving home after living away as well, technically know as reverse culture shock. Life has a flow and you can’t go backwards. You have missed vital events. You have changed and so has everyone else, in subtle, often indefinable ways. Your niche has changed shape and you don’t quite fit in it anymore.

The hardest part is that your friends are not used to you being there or, more accurately, they are used to you not being there. When you fly in for a weekend you are the hero. Everyone makes an effort to see you in the limited time you have available, making you think you have this amazingly supportive social network. Once you live there they can see you any time. The urgency is gone. It’s not even that the social contact is more protracted. It is also limited. Your friends have built lives without you while you were gone. Many of the people you expected to be there for you won't be. It's not that they don't care. It's that the you-shaped space in their life has been filled by other things; other people, other activities, other commitments.

It’s difficult when you come to the understanding that things really are different. Even when you expect change, there’s a part of the brain, or perhaps the heart, that anticipates familiarity. When that familiarity dissolves you are left feeling lost and alone and wondering why. Welcome to my world.

In a practical sense, I recognise this emotional landscape. I’ve been here before, many, many times. I know intuitively that the best way to deal with it is to get out and do things; to meet new people; find new interests; build a new life. The cynical part of me says that this pep talk is a cover up and I need some time to wallow in my misery. Alternatively I can vacillate and do nothing. Either way the loneliness will pass.

There is a wonderful African myth about birds’ nests made of smooth, round river stones that have been found in remote, often mountainous parts of the world. The myth explains that these are the nests of the loneliness birds, birds that are seen only as shadows. The birds lay their eggs among the stones. If you are tempted to pick one up, you will find it is heavy, like the heaviness you feel when you are grieving. When you are sad it is because the loneliness bird has laid a stone egg in the nest of your heart. A heavy heart weighs you down and makes everything a little bit harder.

As with every good fairy tale, there is a happy ending. You learn to live with the stone as you carry it, and you grow strong. One day you wake up and the world is a different place. The stone egg has hatched and your heart is light. The loneliness bird has flown and life is once again good.

The moral of the story is that this too will pass. I’ve met the loneliness bird. Every now and then it flies back to visit, but it always leaves.