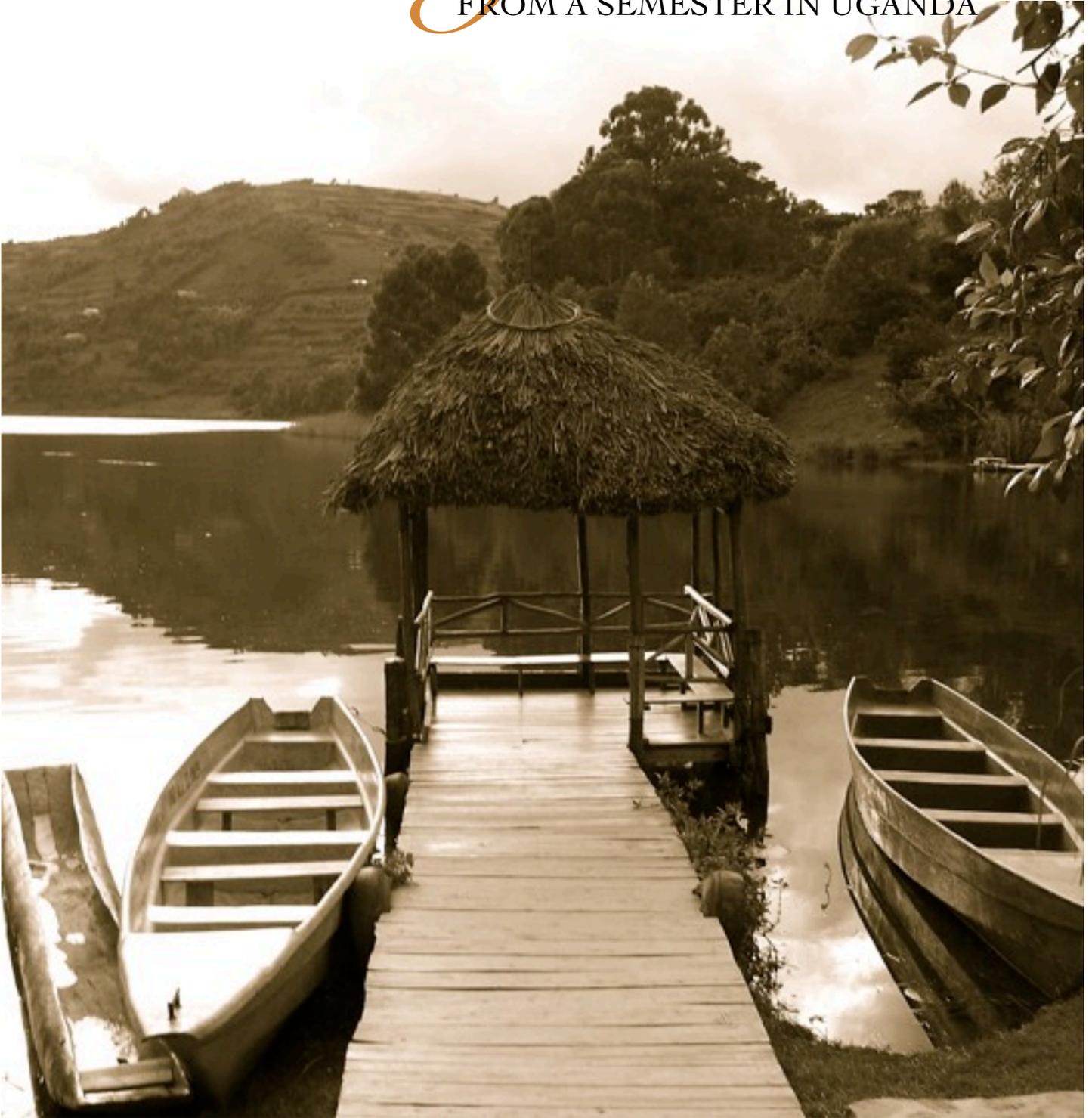


UGANDA STUDIES PROGRAM PARENT'S GUIDE

YOUR STUDENT IS.

# *Coming Home*

FROM A SEMESTER IN UGANDA



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THEIR STUDENT'S  
STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE AND RE-ENTRY CHALLENGES.



*Uganda's unique culture and people set the stage for deep relationships and life changing conversations. For many students the departure from Uganda is only the beginning of a lifelong passion for service, justice, traveling abroad, or understanding their faith in light of different viewpoints and cultures.*

## Uganda 2008

*A view into the lessons and change your student experienced while on USP*

### **They are finally coming home!**

You have been getting emails and phone calls for almost four months, and your student's voice sounds so far away. Finally, the day has come! The group is departing Uganda in a few days and you have told your friends and family to pray for a safe journey home. As the moment draws near, you begin to wonder how your student will look- sun kissed? Thinner perhaps? Or will they come off the plane with a crazy hair cut? You also begin to wonder about how they have

changed on the inside- what have they seen? Who have they met? What was Uganda really like?

For most students, this moment of homecoming is just as highly anticipated. But, along with their image of the homecoming, there are different questions: how can I help my family understand all that I have learned in Uganda? Will I remember all the faces and stories of the people I have met? Will my friends really recognize how much I have grown and give me a

chance to tell them about it? How do I begin to express everything that is inside?

This handbook is designed to give you an overview of some of the common fears your student may experience during the re-entry phase. Most importantly, this guide will offer helpful tips on how to help you communicate, understand, and walk beside your child as they begin the important step of integrating their Ugandan experience into their American life.



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## From the Horses Mouth: What your student learned

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Students begin the semester at very different points in their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity. Regardless of their original position, students embark on a dynamic process of growth through grappling with issues of faith, poverty, Christian identity, and life in an East African community. It is difficult to capture the deep learning that students experienced over the course of the semester, however, we have attempted to give you a snapshot of some of the common themes of learning that develop each semester. Students describe their own feelings and beliefs better than we can summarize, therefore, we have utilized previous student journal entries to help you understand general learning themes.

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**Developing sensibility to poverty includes avoiding objectifying or assigning labels to people.** Students may experience a paradigm shift in the lens through which they view poverty and the poor. Like so many of our ideas, the meanings we ascribe to an abstract noun construct the way we view, think about, and make sense of our world and the people in it. Without even realizing it, we have made assumptions and developed blind spots in our relationship to people in developing nations. Through direct interaction with Ugandan families and peers, students begin to question their stereotypes, language, and labels used to describe people in economic hardship. One student wrote (Fall, 2007): “*When Africa is mentioned in the news it is either about a tribal war or starving children. There are many stereotypes about what poverty in Africa looks like. Some words often used are: lacking, hungry, dependent, lazy, uneducated, addicted, burdensome, op-*

*pressed, unsanitary, desperate. However, these are generalizations that are often incorrect and cause trouble. These ideas result in one trying to dominate the poor or deny their existence so one does not feel guilty.*” In this vein, students are encouraged to re-frame their understanding of those in need, and to adopt a dynamic concept that reflects Biblical goals of economic fellowship, hospitality, solidarity, and agape love. A student from the Spring 06 semester summed up this view by writing: “*The act of inviting those in need to our feast is much more than a handout given at a distance; instead, it is actually a friendship—both giving and receiving love. I feel like the remainder of this semester will be a continual search—or maybe a request for God to search—the motivations, the desires, and the plans in my heart.*” **In our desire to serve those in need, we must be conscious of power hierarchies.** Resources equate power, both in the western

world and developing countries. Money, education, religious affiliation, family status, and access to technology can be used as tools of influence. When entering into relationships, a power hierarchy is established if one party intends to “give” and another party is intended to “receive” a resource. This may be a shift away from previous experiences on a missions or service trip.

As a tool for learning, relationships of power are identified, examined, and brought into awareness. Students are encouraged to avoid assumptions that they have knowledge or education to ‘give’ local people. They are encouraged to avoid wielding power in their relationships with Ugandans by entering the interaction as a learner. A student expressed this realization in the following journal entry: “*I have come to the crucial realization that my status of having more wealth than Ugandans is not in any way a reflection of my merit or my superi-*

*ority in any way; I am not smarter, harder-working, more moral, or better looking. If I own more gadgetry, or if I am more knowledgeable in a certain field, it is largely because of the place I grew up...I am still working through the details of how to apply some of these ideas, to begin to interact genuinely with people here, and to create healthy friendships while avoiding living in a way that sets me apart as a superior in any unmerited or unworthy way. I would like to grow in humility while also learning how to lend and give in a way that is generous but wise and never condescending (Fall 06).* Through this process, students learn to adopt an egalitarian stance with people in developing nations.

**Respecting the community’s story is the first step in successful service.** In addition to avoidance of power, students are encouraged to view Ugandans as the experts in their culture, and as having knowledge concerning obstacles and problems facing their country. The community has a well-established survival strategy and development efforts should begin with understanding the local history, skills, and patterns. Outreaches that involve serving the community are not approached as a project to be implemented, but as a partnership to be built with local people. In this vein, students examine the effectiveness of grassroots ventures as well as international development endeavors. Questions of personal agency, accountability, and western

involvement emerge. Students construct meaning and beliefs based on their own backgrounds and the information and relationships they encounter in Uganda. Naturally, students fall on many sides of this multifaceted issue. One student in Spring 2007 reflected on these conversations by writing, *“I have always understood the problem of foreign aid in a very bookish sense, comprehending the theories and ideas but never appreciating the real life examples of this. Being here I have realized the importance of internal development and empowerment....”* Regardless of where they land on the issue, students often depart the Uganda Studies Program with a heightened awareness of government influence on developing nations such as foreign policy and aid organizations (IMF, World Bank, USAID). They also utilize their learning by conducting future missions and evangelical service trips through local partnerships and empowering models of service.

**Intentional stewardship of personal resources is an active response to poverty.** By living for four months with only the items they could fit into one suitcase, students come to realize that they do not require as much “stuff” as they initially believed. Living with a Ugandan family and experiencing a materially simple lifestyle, including proximity to the land and the absence of modern “conveniences,” further confirm this notion. One student (Fall 07) documented her



journey of thought with the following excerpt: *“Before I left for Uganda, I was one day at a farmer’s market with my parents. We were leaving the market, when my mom pointed out a bumper sticker on an old, beat up car, which said, “Live simply, that all*

may simply live.” Although I did not fully understand what that meant, I really liked the concept. Coming to Uganda, however, has changed my idea of what simple living is. Rural home stays contributed greatly to this change in thought. During my rural home stay, we would, in a sense, follow closely the patterns of creation. First, whatever was growing, we would eat. There was no supermarket where we could buy imported apples or grapes or potatoes. Second, we would pick whatever we needed for the day, not more, not less. Third, when it got dark, we would all get together and eat a meal, and then go to bed. There was no electricity to light up our huts and there was no wall outlet to plug our computers into. There was simply no way that we could function like we did in the daytime. So we went to bed. And fourth, I sensed such a strong community life. This community life was the closest thing that I had ever seen to the way that I think God intended it to be. Everybody knew everybody else and, if somebody did not know somebody else, they greeted each other anyway.” This personal growth is closely accompanied with a student’s desire to critically analyze their lifestyle choices at home. As students press further into course readings on economic stewardship, they begin to reorganize notions of spending and living more simply. The same student continues her reflection: “I do not live an intentional life based on

the way I spend my money. I spend a lot of money on a lot of things that I don’t really need or could do without. I rarely think about what I’m buying or how much it costs because I’ve always had enough money to not have to worry about it. I’ve rarely, if ever, consciously made a decision to buy something that would benefit more people than myself.....Someone explained to me once why they were a vegetarian. They said their reason was that they wanted to be more intentional in living. They wanted to know what was in the food they were eating and how the food was processed. I think this can also be applied to spending money. There’s no way to avoid spending money, so I have to think the best way to spend money is to spend it intentionally to benefit others [besides] myself...”

Finally, through personal examination, students begin to construct action plans for their return home. These often include replicating a more community-based lifestyle avoiding the temptation to over-indulge in the latest technology or consumerism tendency. Another student applied this lesson to her life by writing, “...Good and fulfilling life does not come from extravagant living. In fact, I think it is possible that good living is simple living. The difficult thing for people in affluent countries may actually be that they have too much. When you have so much it is no longer natural to live simply. Instead it takes intentional choices to live as a counter culture to a cer-

tain extent..... For Christians in America, where it is becoming expected that every college student have a car, computer, MP3 player, a full closet of new clothes etc., living simply is becoming more and more of a counter culture lifestyle. Even so, it is still worth attempting.(Fall 06).” This change of thinking for students is typically the most pronounced when returning to the U.S. Students notice a marked difference between the material levels of American versus developing nations. This experience gives students ‘new lenses’ with which to see their home environment, and this new viewpoint requires adaptation over time. More will be said about this in the section entitled: Reverse Culture Shock.

**Efficiency and effectiveness of service as quantifiable goals endangers our ability to answer God’s call out of pure faithfulness.** Students are challenged to investigate their motivation for service to God – are they answering a call through faith or relying on their skills and resources to effectively change a situation for the greater good? This is a complex issue that sheds light on our prudent efforts to produce Kingdom outcomes despite inadvertent adoption and justification of an “end justifies the means” stance. Through this lens, students examine their views on ministry, baptism, war, prayer, communion, evangelism and church attendance. Students are reminded that faithfulness to God’s call does not guarantee an

effective solution to complex global problems of faith and poverty.

However, we are required to answer Christ's call to love and serve all of our brothers and sisters, locally and globally. This call to faithfulness is not to be confused with accomplishing effective solutions. One student (Spring 06) captures this dissonance in her final semester essay: *"Since I was six years old, when people asked what I wanted to do with my life, I said I wanted to find the greatest need or problem of suffering in the world and fix it. Quite honestly, I came to Uganda to more fully understand the needs of the Third World so that I could work to right wrongs in the future. Though I do not believe that this is explicitly mistaken, Lee Camp has altered my perspective in his book Mere Discipleship. In his discussion of effectiveness vs. faithfulness, he asserts that "it is not our task to make things turn out right, but instead to be faithful witnesses." While my Type A focus tends to be on actions that will save the world, Camp contends that the our aim should rather be faithfulness and devotion to God. Though I agree with much of what he says in relation to this, it makes me uncomfortable. I would rather focus on and spend my hours completing a task than trying to be a representation of Christ. Yet I have made the commitment here to try to keep my primary focus on emulating the life and attitude of Christ within my current activities and hopes to bring about change."* This multifarious issue is often not re-

solved by commencement of the semester. Thus, students may continue to grapple with finding the balance between faithful service and effective means as they return their home campus and take on new leadership and ministry responsibilities.

**Sometimes the best way to serve and love others is to be present with them in solidarity.**

One way to effectively learn about a culture is to 'fit in' and experience life completely immersed in the daily operations of a typical household. During the homestay portion of the semester, students study and emulate the rhythm and norms of their Ugandan family. They learn to cook over an open fire, bath from buckets twice daily, eat the staple food of rice beans, and actively participate in family gatherings and routines as if they are a son or daughter in the household. Among the many contrasts that students encounter during this time of residence, the most marked difference is the incidence of silence when sharing a space with others. In American households, we may show interest in a guest by striking up conversation about life, family, or other topics of shared understanding. This exchange may also occur in a Ugandan house, or a guest may simply sit in silence and demonstrate their participation in a household or friendship by their physical presence. At first, this lack of words and introduction of quiet space can be disconcerting for students. But eventually, students

come to understand and expect this silent presence. Through course readings, students come to value the importance of presence by simply being with another person where few words are needed to demonstrate value and solidarity. This is often a welcome learning point for students: *"It was while sitting in this quiet, and somewhat awkward situation that I began to truly notice how much my life lacks quietness and the peaceful presence of others. Whenever I am hanging out with friends there is always a need from everyone to be making noise. Whether it is music, lighthearted talking, or deep conversation there is typically noise going on. It is very rare to find two American people just sitting and looking at each other and not feeling awkward about it. On the walk back to campus I began to think back to what had taken place in the living room and wondered how one situation could make one group so uncomfortable, while the other just sees it as normal. I thought about the practice of presence that Taylor talks about in his book, He says, "Whether it be child or adult makes no difference; one can enjoy the other's presence without fuss or pressure, in conversation or in silence as the mood dictates." This has remained in my mind since reading it because it is such a different way of life than what I am used to. Typically, if someone comes over to my house at home there is something that makes me feel like I have to be the*

*“entertainer”. If there is silence, it is most likely awkward and most people don’t want to hang around awkward silence. After thinking about it I came to the realization that sometimes all that noise, no matter how much we think it helps, can be distracting from truly just enjoying someone. Overall, it was just a good, and much needed reminder of how to practice the sheer presence of others, without feeling the need to fill the silence with my own words. It is in these times that true bonding happens as we learn to just be together.”* This learning is further reinforced by culminating discussion at debrief surrounding compassion and solidarity as a response to those in need. Students discover servicing others by offering the gift of hospitality or simply being present in times of need.

**Living on “African time” means valuing relationships over tasks.** There is an old adage that continues to cycle around the UCU campus, *“Americans waste time while Ugandans make time.”* This saying gives a small glimpse into the different ways that both cultures interact with time.

Human experience is far too complex to fit neatly into any conceptual scheme. However, understanding characteristics of a culture lend to easier transitions and enhanced communication. Traditionally, western cultures operate on a monochronic value system, where time is regarded as linear, people do one thing at a time and lateness and interruptions are not tolerated.

Much of the developing world, including Uganda, operates on a polychronic value system, where time is seen as cyclical, punctuality is not as important as relationships, and interruptions are acceptable and anticipated. Although no society operates solely within one framework or the other, students recognize the value of Ugandan’s emphasis on relationships over accomplishments. This way of life always finds time to greet a friend on the road and have a break for afternoon tea. One student described her evolution of thinking by writing, *“African culture has shown me daily what the love of Christ is like and what we should also emulate. Genuinely showing love to others by offering time is exactly what Christ did and calls us to do. My home stay sister may have taken a long time to go to the market because she stopped and greeted everyone she knew. There was always enough time. Her emphasis on greetings and relationship further encouraged me to live as Christ did: prioritizing genuine relationships over impersonal efficiency. This is going to be hard for me to prioritize over myself, but I want to learn to do so...”* The contrast between these modes of operation becomes very pronounced when students return back to the US. Often, students long for a slower pace of life and the opportunity to leave their watches behind.





## Re-entry & Reverse Culture Shock

In the beginning of the semester, you may have received a phone call in which your child sounded lonely, confused about the culture, or frustrated with Ugandan interactions. These are all symptoms of culture shock, and you were not alone. Most parents receive these phone calls or emails early in the study abroad experience. Hopefully, the phone calls became less frequent and your student moved into a level of acceptance and appreciation of the foreign culture. Through staff guidance, class discussions, and developing relationships with local people, the shock of cultural immersion gives way. In time, the landscape and conditions in Uganda become normal and students grow very comfortable in their African environment.

The longer a person lives in a foreign environment, the more relaxed they become and they even

begin to take on characteristics of the culture in order to “fit in” or more fully enjoy local interactions. Such is the trajectory of our USP students. After four months of living closely with Ugandan peers and families, students adapt and value the local environment. It is this adaptation, along with classroom concepts, that lend to a student having “new lenses” to view the world by the time they travel back home. As a result, familiar things might be viewed as “strange,” like seeing something old as “new” for the first time. For example, students become accustomed to dirt roads and aged vehicles while traveling in Uganda. When they step from out of the airport into a typical US city, the efficiency of travel can be shocking. Shiny cars, ordered expressways and speeding traffic are a stark contrast to the slow moving, clogged roads of Africa. This picture can

present an initial sensory overload for students.

These symptoms are all indicators of a common state called *reverse culture shock*. Reverse culture shock is a phase of transition that most people feel after living in a foreign culture for an extended time. Surprisingly, reverse culture shock feels very similar to the initial culture shock experienced when entering a foreign country. Except that reverse culture shock can be more persistent. On USP, we refer to reverse culture shock as the gift that keeps on giving. Some students report that it took them up to a year or more to gain the necessary perspective on their experience to allow them to feel completely at home and fully functioning. Although there is great variation, in general, the greater the success students have had in appropriately fitting into another culture, the more

difficulty they have in coming home. More accurately, the physical act of coming home for an individual who had made deep friendships abroad and participated fully in the community is much harder than a sojourner whose overseas stay was less intense or more isolated. Thus, great success in adaptation overseas may be followed by a much lengthier and rocky period of readjustment at home. For most students, however, a reasonable re-adjustment home takes about the same amount of time that working through culture shock did while abroad, a few weeks to several months.



Several other factors are known to lead into a difficult re-entry. Re-adjustment difficulty is related to the time one spent overseas. The longer a student is overseas, the longer it may take time to adjust. Additionally, students with prior intercultural experience, including reentry, are likely to be better able to cope with the transition experience of coming home, while the first-time returnee may exhibit a

wide range of reactions during re-adjustment. Although this is generally true, it is possible to have no reverse culture shock returning from a first stay abroad but suffer severely from it after a subsequent sojourn.

Another factor in re-entry is issue of visibility. The contrast between an individual's status in the host country and status at home can have a large influence on how he or she views the return. Related to this factor is the degree to which students were "visible" or "invisible" in the host country and how they evaluated either state. The loss of being "special" abroad can be offset by the comfort of returning to familiar people and places, but it can also be perceived as a profound loss.

Finally, the greater the economic difference of their overseas experience, the more difficult the adjustment. Your student is returning from four months in a developing country with a stark contrast in landscape, material comforts, economic means, and social values. However, students often adjust quickly to these extrinsic differences. It is the intrinsic values that these external things represent that are more difficult for students to adjust to. Many returnees develop "critical eyes," a tendency to see faults in the society they never noticed before (e.g., Americans are so wasteful, materialistic, fat, in a hurry, etc.).

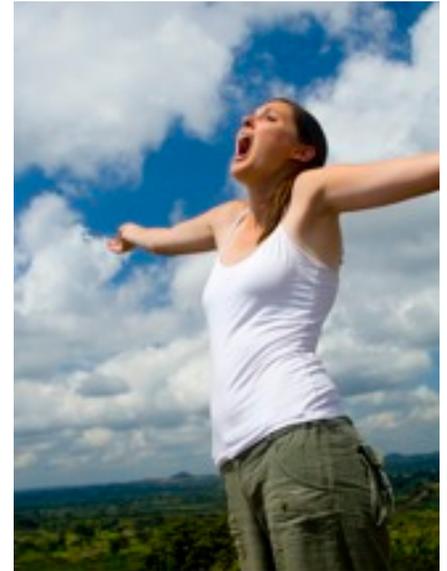
Let me explain. A shiny car on the expressway is something that



we are accustomed to seeing and accepting as a means of work and social function. Likewise, choices in a supermarket are the benefit of a functional global economy and productive trading relationships. To your son or daughter returning from a developing country, these items represent negative tendencies in our culture. New cars might denote a materially wealthy culture that neglects caring for those in need. Modern retail stores encourage consumerism. The choice of brand and variety in supermarkets demonstrate a global economy that has devastating effects on some parts of the world. All of these feelings and emotions are part of the growth continuation process that began in Uganda.



# What Your Son or Daughter May Feel When They Return Home.



**Boredom.** After all the newness and stimulation of their time abroad, a return to family, friends, and old routines (however nice and comforting) can seem dull. Your son or daughter may miss the excitement and challenges that characterize study in a foreign country.

**No one wants to hear.** Although USP warns students during debrief, they are surprised that not many people are interested in hearing about their adventures or seeing

their photos. This can be disconcerting and make students feel alienated in their experiences and new perspectives.

**They just can't explain it.** Finding the right words to sum up four months of life changing moments is difficult. Doing it in 30 seconds is nearly impossible. However, students find that most people want just the highlights of their time abroad. How can they tell the most relevant tales of their trip and

*"Coming back to school was hard. Really hard... The first night there I sat in my spacious room that was well furnished (without mosquito nets or mouse poop to aid in the furnishing), temperature controlled, and had an adjacent bathroom with toilet paper. I was in the newest building of Gordon. I couldn't understand why people could justify paying the extra \$800 to live in this "comfortable" building that seemed sterile and cold to me....Hence the beginning of my last year at [college]. I'll be honest; the first month was awful. I walked around like a zombie, comparing everything to Uganda. No one else seemed to realize that wearing jeans, eating cold cereal, and sitting on porcelain were all privileges." (excerpt from student letter, Fall '07).*

most exciting growth they experienced? Students find it hard to explain all that they saw, heard, and learned.

**Reverse "homesickness."** Just as your son and daughter missed home after arriving in Uganda, it is natural that they will miss the peo-

ple, places, and things that you grew accustomed to as a student abroad. To an extent, writing letters, telephoning, emailing, and generally keeping in contact can reduce this, but feelings of loss are an integral part of international sojourns and must be anticipated and accepted as a natural result of study abroad.

**Relationships have changed.** It is inevitable that when students return that they will notice that some relationships with friends and family will have changed. Students are so caught up in their own adventure in Uganda that they do not take time to consider what life changing things are happening to family and friends at home. This is especially difficult for students who have

wrongly remembered home or their home campus as utopia. When the reality of home comes into focus, some students may feel let down, especially if home has changed significantly.

**People see the "wrong" changes.** Sometimes people may concentrate on small alterations in your son's or daughter's behavior and seem threatened or upset by them. Others may ascribe any "bad" traits to the influence of their time abroad. These incidents are profoundly discouraging for students and encouragement through these rough spots is essential.

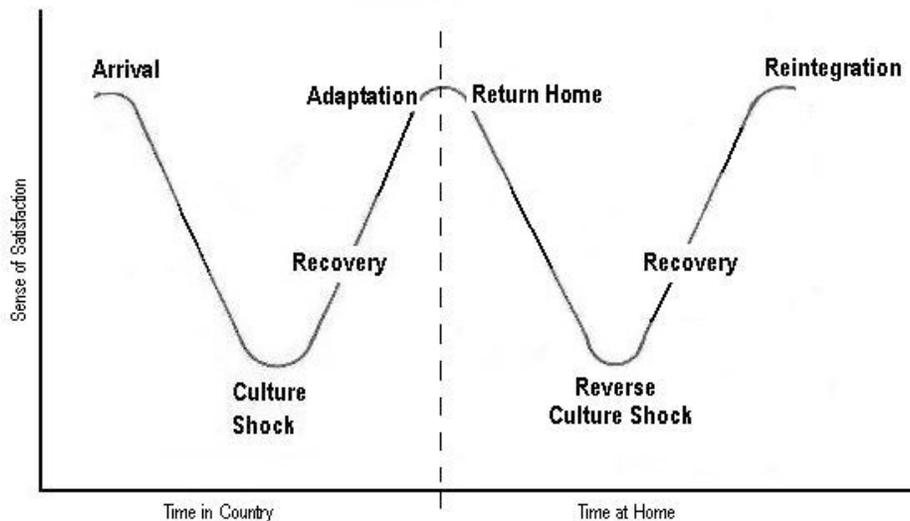
**Inability to apply new knowledge and skills.** Many returnees are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to apply newly gained social,

linguistic, and practical coping skills that appear to be unnecessary or irrelevant at home. These annoyances will be relieved with time as students learn to integrate their experiences.

**Loss/compartimentalization of experience ("shoeboxing").** Being home, combined with the pressures of job, school, family, and friends, often conspires to make returnees worried that they might somehow "lose" the experience. Many fear that it will become compartmentalized like souvenirs or photo albums kept in a box and only occasionally taken out and looked at. Where possible, students are encouraged to integrate their overseas experience into ongoing life and activities.

### PHASES OF RE-ENTRY

- 1) **Initial Euphoria** -- Students are pleased to be home and everyone is glad to see them.
- 2) **Irritability and Hostility** – After the initial euphoria they may become irritated and hostile towards others for any number of reasons.
- 3) **Gradual Adjustment** – It may take time for them to readjust to the way life was before their trip.
- 4) **Adaptation** – They have been changed. Life went on when they were gone and it may take time for your son or daughter to catch up. Give them time and be patient.



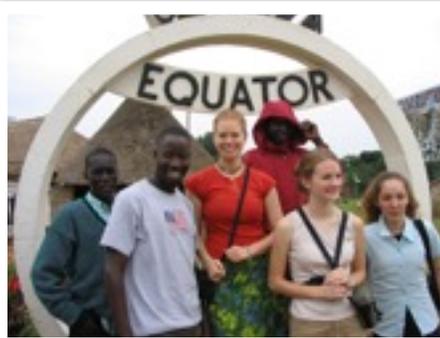
## How to Help: Advice From Students to Parents

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*“My dad has proven to be that best person to talk to since I've been back, in terms of someone to tell stories to. He asks great questions and really wants to learn about the culture and learn from what I learned there. Because both He and one of my best friends have taken alot of interest it has made it easier on me to not be concerned about those who don't care to hear too much.” (Student letter, Spring '04)*

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1. Understand that "reverse culture shock" is a real possibility and learn to recognize its symptoms so you can offer appropriate support to your son or daughter.
2. Realize that returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than either the returnee or you anticipate. Be prepared to offer support long-distance as your son or daughter anticipates coming home and adjusts to re-entry.
3. Understand that most students are, in some ways, different than they were before they left home. They may initially seem to be "strangers." It is hard to know what their experiences have meant to them and how they have changed. It may be necessary to "renegotiate" your relationship with son or daughter, but your history together will provide a basis for this process.
4. Be aware of your own expectations on the returnee. You may wish that they would just "fit back in" but it is more helpful if you avoid forcing the returnees into old roles and relationships. Allow them space and time to readjust and reconnect.
5. Be conscious of all the things that have changed at home. Help returnees to understand what has taken place both in the society and among friends and family. Even if they have heard about events, the impact at home may not have been obvious. You have much to tell them and they can tell you how events at home looked from their overseas location.
6. Avoid criticism, sarcasm, or mockery for seemingly odd patterns of behavior, speech, or new attitudes.



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7. Create opportunities for the son or daughter to express their opinions, tell their stories, show their pictures. Listen carefully and try to understand the significance of their overseas experiences. Seek to know what is important to them.
8. Acknowledge that all returnees experience some sense of loss. Strange as it may seem, students often grieve for what they have left behind. They may be missing overseas friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.
9. Encourage your son or daughter to maintain personal contacts with friends and their host family. Perhaps they can send along a few photos back to Uganda. They will be happy and feel more connected if they are able to stay in some form of communication. (So will their Ugandan friends and family!)
10. Offer to mark and celebrate the return of your child. Discuss his or her preference for how and when to do so. Be careful of "surprise" parties. Ask if they would like to host a family or friend photo night.
11. Expect some critical comparisons of culture and lifestyle. Keep your responses neutral. It can increase your chances to learn something important about their experience and how their world view has changed. Don't take their comments personally.
12. Make contact with people who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home and refer your son or daughter to them—it may help both of you through a difficult period of re-adaptation.



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