

TO WANDER AND WONDER

How six months abroad became less of a counselling sabbatical and more of a counselling education

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Travel has the remarkable ability to jolt me into direct experience where empathy, authenticity, connection, and community are brought to the forefront. Without my typical routine, I find myself organizing my time and energy using my heart versus my mind. Without the ease of a common language, I rely on non-verbal cues and default to smiles and humility. Without my bearings, I trust in the knowing of others and seek out spontaneous interactions. Without a sense of competency, I enter into new experiences with an open mind and a humble and curious attitude. I recalibrate in unfamiliar settings. I adjust and adapt through a process of noticing, feeling, sensing, processing, and largely accepting. While these skills have the remarkable ability to emerge

naturally and often out of necessity when travelling, I consider it important to develop and sustain them consciously throughout my work as a counsellor and in life in general.

My travel reflections continue to percolate and develop into integral guiding principles within my counselling practice and life at home. Travel has a profound impact on my own life journey.

TRAVEL. A Google search for the definition of the word yields many results.¹ Distilled to a single definition, something akin to “to take a journey” remains. In the conventional sense, travel is often associated with traversing a distance or changing geographic location. If expanded to include the figurative, the metaphorical, the definition is more fluid. Parallels

between journeys taken as a traveller and other types, including personal, professional, or the change and process journeys embarked on by clients, can be explored.

I appreciate that travel, daily life, and counselling skills are often discrete. When I resigned from counselling work to embark on six months of backpacking travel in Southeast Asia and Japan, I was not anticipating integration. I foresaw a dichotomy of experiences in which I would leave work and my typical day-to-day existence to engage in travel, then return from travel to re-engage in work and life responsibilities. I anticipated travel would enhance future counselling work and reinvigorate other aspects of my life through feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, courtesy of a change in scenery and an extended break from



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routine. Pre-departure, travel was to be a counselling sabbatical. Post-return, it was apparent that it was an integral component of my counselling education with continued profound impact.

I discovered that skills acquired and strengthened through travel experiences congruently enhanced my abilities as a counsellor. I should not have been so surprised. Counselling is a unique profession in that I am essentially my own tool. There is an inherent salience between work and life and between related skill development and growth. I have the privilege of connecting with inner worlds in a way that few are privy to.

Whether I am witnessing, listening, empathizing, or attuning, I consider it a process of unending curiosity, filled with twists and turns and constant sources of surprise, of joy, of sorrow. Through my clients, I learn of countless life paths and hear limitless narratives. I can be taken to new places, experience new heights or depths, and imagine new possibilities. I often have the sense that the world entered into during a session by counsellor and client is much larger than the office confines. In this sense, I am always a traveller; I am always on a journey.

The following passage comes from one of my more serendipitous used-

TRY IT OUT!

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR TRAVEL SKILL-COUNSELLING SKILL INTEGRATION



TRAVEL SKILL	CULTIVATE WITH COLLEAGUES	CULTIVATE WITH CLIENTS
DIRECT EXPERIENCE	Take extra time to connect with colleagues. Eat your lunch in a different place. Get outside during your work day.	Normally take notes during session? Put the notepad down. Have a present-focused session. Engage in an experiential intervention.
EMBRACE NEW OPPORTUNITIES	Volunteer on a board for an organization you are passionate about. Learn about a different theoretical orientation. Watch a free webinar on a topic outside of your comfort zone.	Encourage your client to explore additional resources (drop-ins, groups, workshops, extracurriculars).
WIDEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE	Ask to present a case during peer consultation or supervision and hear your colleagues' conceptualizations.	Engage your client in creating a family genogram or life timeline.
OPEN AND NON-JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDE	Make a concerted effort to listen more and speak less at the next team meeting. Visualize leading with your heart versus mind. Explore assumptions and judgments you may be bringing to the office.	View an existing client with refreshed curiosity. Imagine you are meeting them for the first time. Encourage your client to explore their relationship with "jumping to conclusions."
THE POWER OF NON-VERBALS	Reflect on your body language at work. Do you appear rushed? Relaxed? Busy? Approachable? Visualize how you would like to appear to others and set your intention.	Think back to your counselling internships where you likely had to record sessions. Consider recording yourself in a current session and review with the sound off. What do you notice?
SELF-AWARENESS	Engage in clinical supervision and explore the topic "The Use of Self." Reflect on your current level of self-care and ensure your own needs are being met.	Begin and end sessions with a regular 'check-in' and 'check-out' process. Consider introducing a scaling question or a body-scan visualization as part of this practice.

bookstore finds and offers an eloquent rumination on the power of travel:

*Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am. There is no mystery about why this should be. Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines, your refrigerator full of food, your closet full of your clothes—with all this taken away, you are forced into direct experience. Such direct experience inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience. That's not always comfortable, but it is always invigorating... I eventually realized that direct experience is the most valuable experience I can have... travel has helped me to have direct experiences. And to know more about myself.*²

I return to these words to reconnect with the values that are highlighted naturally through travel and that can be part of any journey, personal or professional.

The following scenarios are snapshot memories pulled from a repertoire of travel experiences. There are consolidated recollections where once stressful experiences fade into the best kind of stories, tinged with humility and humour. There are perspectives captured in vivo through volumes of detailed travel journals, completed near daily and diligently. There are hard drives and memory sticks full of photos. There are grainy phone videos, emails, postcards, and souvenirs. There is a well-worn backpack, flip flops which outlasted the most liberal estimate of lifespan, and a collection of bug repellent that would likely impress the most seasoned of exterminators. And most important of all, less tangible but nonetheless ever present, there is a repertoire of strategies; a skillset honed and developed that accompanies me on every kind of journey, whether at home, at work, or afar.



SNAPSHOT MEMORIES

As I open the door and step outside, a bucket of ice cold water is emptied on my head from several floors above. I knew this was a possibility but still find myself stunned and now also incredibly soaked. I look up to see how this event may have transpired and am greeted with three wide smiles, waving arms, and choruses of "Happy New Year."

YANGON (RANGOON), MYANMAR (BURMA)

I am napping on a sun-warmed rock face when a phone screen appears in front of my face. "Look at what was in our bathroom!" exclaims my husband. My freshly opened eyes focus on what looks like a picture of a green snake. That can't be right so I rub my eyes, blink, and look again. Yes, it is definitely a snake, approximately five feet long. "Apparently, it shouldn't be too much of a problem because it was off the ground when I saw it. That should mean it's a tree species, which should mean it's non-venomous," my husband continues, these newfound wildlife facts offering little comfort.

KOH TAO, THAILAND

I begin to realize the boat has not moved for a while. Then I notice the captain is not in his usual spot. In fact, he is no longer even on the boat. I spot him perched on a floating tree that blocks the river passage, hacking at the thick trunk with a machete. Yesterday, I learned about the origins of this body of water's name, how the surface of "Black River" reflects like a mirror, making the water appear incredibly opaque. I also learned of the crocodiles that teem in its murkiness with crocodile-to-human in-water approach time estimated at under two minutes.

BORNEO, INDONESIA

My relationship with travel remains one of gratitude and awe. It contributes to a deep sense of fulfilment, ongoing curiosity, and an ever-expanding global perspective, and it lends itself easily to an inherently mindful way of being. Travel invites continued opportunity to embrace diversity and reinforces the value of direct experience. It increases self-awareness and interactions with others. Travel enhances my abilities as a counsellor through expanding my understanding, appreciation, and gratitude for greater humankind. This perspective can be

heightened through travelling to far-away locales, though it can also be practised at home, through connecting with colleagues or clients. I believe this skillset is an important part of counselling work and a significant component of existence. Travel offers a catalyst for growth. ■

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