

20 Some Leaves are Kept for Later: Adventures in Missionary Anthropology

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“...I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some.”¹

One can do anthropology and not be a missionary, but one can't really be an effective missionary and not do anthropology. It can be argued that Paul was the first missionary anthropologist. Missionaries following Paul's example (seeking first to understand others—then to make Christ understandable to them), eventually helped to create the science of anthropology, and continue to influence it in fundamental ways.² Throughout the history of the Church, the greatest value of missionary anthropology remains the same: paving the way for the signs of new life in Christ to appear where they haven't been before. This is why anthropology is referred to as “the number one study for...missionaries.”³

Having entered missionary service without first mastering much of what I share here, and therefore having had to learn it the hard way, it is with great humility that I share the following stories and advice. Realistically, there is too much to learn for



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any one person to be an expert in all the things that cross-cultural missionaries must attempt to do in order to take the Gospel into places where the Church doesn't yet exist. Yet with the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, very often, a little bit of advice can go a very long way in helping us to help others to join with and do what Christ asked: obey him.

Communication

“The task of Christian missions is essentially one of communication...”⁴

The chief, from his strategic spot under the village party tree, saw the arrival of the visiting Canadians that he had been waiting for. Dusty from a morning of fieldwork, barefoot and in ragged work clothes, he broke with protocol and went to greet them before they had come to greet *him*. His gesture spoke volumes.

When I saw the chief coming, I wanted to explain to the visiting Canadians how much they were being honored. But before I could, their leader, also eager to accomplish *his* communication mission, seized the moment. After all, he had come a long way and had little time to waste. He was going to get to the bottom of what was really going on in the work. Without waiting on adequate introductions, the Canadian leader asked me to translate his words for the chief:

“So! What do you think of our guy here?” meaning me.

The question and its timing were jarringly inappropriate. Still, eager to honor my guests, I had to decide what to do about the culture-collision that was unfolding. Do I stop and explain to my guests where they are getting it wrong? Do I choose deception and change their words into other words that will go down better? Knowing the chief as I did, I decided to exegete the relational context for him, and share the guest's question. Producing a wry yet apologetic smile that I hoped would say, “Please forgive my people. They know not what they do as they communicate across cultures—but feel free to be yourself,” I translated their words. With a twinkle in his eye, the chief instantly responded: “*Some leaves just fall, rot, are swept away, and we never think about them again.*”

I chuckled. The chief grinned. Awed, but not astonished by his wisdom (he wasn't chief for nothing), I thanked him and then shared his words with the guests.

“What the heck!” one of them blurted. The rest sat stunned.

The chief, seeing their reactions, was satisfied. He would take no further steps to help them since he'd chosen his words carefully and had me to help the guests run to catch up. Taking the communication baton that had been silently passed to me, I told the Canadians that I had an idea what the chief meant, but in order to be sure

I would need to ask the chief a question. I first shared the following words with the Canadian visitors, and then, smiling, shared them with the chief:

“Chief, are some leaves carefully picked, dried, and stored for use later as food and medicine?”

A smile rippled across his face. “Of course,” he said.

So how are you doing? Ready to explain what the chief meant? Someone *was* ready to speak to the chief that day. Some others who wanted to communicate wouldn't be ready until they'd done a lot of work. That's the thing. As it has been said, “The message that really counts is the one received, not the one sent.”⁵ Knowing, when one sends a message, that it will be correctly understood, is the whole “ball game.” People don't start winning at these games just because they want to.

As anthropologists know, the focus in establishing cross-cultural understanding is two-fold: first, collect accurate data⁶ on the things that open the doors of understanding in a given culture and second, test the accuracy of that data by using it to build working relationships with other human beings. In my experience, I had an enormous relational advantage in doing this. I hadn't come just to gather data. I was there to offer people the chance to listen to Scripture in their own language. Agreeing with my goal, the chief hoped that I could learn his ways so that I could do this work—it was his intention to see that I succeed at it. Some leaves are kept for later.

The preparation needed to establish good communication for in-depth anthropological research and for mission work is basically the same. People who at first don't know each other must build a common frame of reference for their new relationship. From there, they can visualize the goal/destination of their sharing and come to a mutual understanding of how to reach the objective. The better this preliminary work of relational foundation-building is done, the better the work of learning to communicate goes. This work had been done between us missionaries and the key community people we lived with. As evidence, the chief himself had recently cut the ribbon opening the new Mennonite church building in his village. Now he was feeling free to talk “his way” to some of the people who had paid for the construction, confident that his words would be explained.

Here are some of the principles that had been followed to establish the kind of communication that was taking place in the above case:

1. *Start by explaining the hoped-for results of the work to responsible local people who can help it succeed.*⁷ The chief had agreed to the missionary goal of delivering the highlights of the Word of God translated into the chief's own language. That's both how his relationship with the missionaries began, and how the covenant kept him at work helping them. In this way, something crucially important had

begun: reciprocity.⁸ The chief and the missionaries were supplying vital things to each other as they were needed. Appreciation was expressed, and communications improved as this happened.

2. *Find a way to hear back from the receiving community what it thinks about the work's (and the missionaries') progress.* The receiving community needs to see sincerity, openness to admit inappropriate behavior, and the ability to learn and to change on the part of their guests. This kind of feedback was standard practice between the missionaries and the chief, and helped build the basis for the crucial establishment of trust in their relationships.⁹
3. *Researchers who are eager examples of life in Christ and happy to explain how they got that way run into fewer interpersonal roadblocks.*¹⁰ The sincerity on the part of the missionaries helped disarm the healthy resistance to foreigners resulting from the fear of damage to the status quo that foreigners usually cause.

In Matthew 10:11-15, we hear Jesus advising those sent out to communicate Good News that if a community rejects them and their message—move on. In other words, he asked them to do some research into the situation—get good feedback from the receiving community as to the general receptivity to the goals of the project, and act on that information. Don't be afraid to do what Jesus said to do. *Use your goals to build a bridge into the life of the community.* Also important: discover as soon as possible whether you will be wasting your time. Nothing will help build the trust that is needed like transparency and integrity in your work—and vice-versa.

Back to the dried leaves: So what did the chief say to the Canadians with his metaphor? Let's see how much anthropological advice we can glean from the words of one community leader on the receiving end of mission:

On carefully choosing one's words. Having been abused, the chief's people know how to see it coming. People who are more interested in their own agenda than they are in being warm human beings are often at the front end of some effort to use power to take, rather than give, good things. With adequate respect for the sufferings that his people have already endured at the hands of bad people, a gentle riddle, the use of metaphor, and the patience to let it soak in are a noble invitation to the guests to slow down and try to find their better selves before the conversation, showing signs of going wrong, gets any worse. The chief believed in his guests and their objective enough to show them that patience.

On humility. People must fight corrosive pride all their lives. Those most worthy of respect will be astute enough to see through a bit of humorous irony aimed at helping them to win this inner battle. As long as the missionary (and his guests) is

easily teased, his pride is in check and he is still useful to the community. Smiling, when linked to yard sweepings, was a good sign that healthy humility was in action.

On having fun. Fearful people often stop thinking clearly and make regrettable mistakes. Irony is the mother of humor, and a bit of humor is what is needed at big moments to call people back from the brink of stress-induced blunders. So, comparing the missionary (and possibly the guest who asked the first question) to yard-sweepings is healthy fun. Strong people, the most useful kind who use their strength to help others, often turn big scary things into manageable, even entertaining, things by using humor to bring the right perspective to the moment.

On asking a clarifying question. In the chief's society, any important message will be given important feedback that shows exactly how the receiver understood both the message and any action that it suggests the hearer take. The missionary's response to the chief's use of metaphor was to correctly re-use it, thereby confirming in a way equally as subtle that full understanding had taken place. With his smile and his question, the missionary was suggesting that he and his guests would try to be the kind of leaves that one collects and uses. Some questions put others on the defensive. Some open up the relationship to go deeper. One must learn how to produce the right ones.

On leaves. The chief's people are subsistence farmers and depend on leaves for food and medicine—knowing how best to preserve them for the difficult dry season when no fresh ones can be found. The local way to say, “medicate someone” is “use leaves.” The very best leaves are not taken for granted, but picked, dried, and preserved. The chief sees the Word of God this way. The missionaries are helping him get the very best kind of stuff he can imagine. Consequently, both are worth caring for (God's Word and the missionaries). When challenging communication succeeds, it most often has a point to it. Both parties are getting something valuable from it.

A communication bridge had been built that was used that day between two groups of people. The bridge had been built from both ends—at the same time. Missionaries and local people had built it together. The ones who did the work were intent both on seeing reasons for hope found in God's Word, and on continually finding new reasons to *respect* each other.¹¹ Those are good reasons to invest in the work of communication.

Stories of Power

Picture this: a child in your care suddenly collapses. It's a life-or-death moment. What do you do?

1. Kneel and pray. Then call others to do the same. That's all.

2. Call for emergency assistance. Try your first-aid skills while you wait.
3. Lift the child's shirt and look to see if the amulet of magic power you bought is still tied around the child's waist. Seeing that it's missing, quickly tie another on.
4. Panic. Able to think of nothing better, throw the child in the back of your pickup truck and tear off home diagonally across a bumpy cotton field dumping sprinkler pipe along the way as you go since you forgot to unhitch the trailer you were pulling.¹²

This list is drawn from the actual experiences of people that I love. In each case, the child recovered and the caregiver's actions were credited with the child's survival. The common thread that ties these four episodes together is this: at the moment of crisis, none of the different caregivers imagined *not* doing what they *did* do when they *had to do something*. Watching what people actually do as they face life issues is the surest way of understanding what they believe.¹³ Behind each person's actions was a story that explained what to do in order to have the power to stave off death. Whatever we do as missionaries to reach unreached people groups, we must gain access to these stories.

The story of power¹⁴ that guided each caregiver's life was both shared with their community and so much a part of life that it went without saying. Since most anthropology is done by newly arrived outsiders, they tend to have a tough time getting to hear these stories. And since they barely speak the language (if at all; many researchers I have met hired a local translator), and since this thing we are looking at—people living inside their own stories of power—is so hard to see from outside people's heads, anthropologists use a technique called "participant observation"¹⁵ to help unlock them. The idea is that by being there to see things happen, one can begin collecting specific, scientific data about who did what, when they did it, and under what circumstances. Over time, with enough of this kind of information, comparing it to the lives of other people who behave in similar ways in places where the inner stories of power are already known, the anthropologist can begin to build the details of the story in the target culture that explains why they do what they do. This process is similar to the way linguists deciphered a previously unknown writing system found together with two other known languages on the Rosetta Stone.¹⁶ Data is gathered in order to do this, but remember the second task in doing good research: evaluating the accuracy of the data. We will never really understand the stories of power that guide people's lives until our understanding has been affirmed by our host community. Building an understanding of our goals when we build our foundations for communication helps enormously when we get to this stage of the work. Here

again, long-term missionaries tend to have advantages over short-term researchers. The first being the time needed to build relationships and learn the language; the second, the intentional nature of the receiving community's efforts to help. If the goal (in my case, sharing the Word in Nanerigé) is worth it, the right people tend to step up and help get the work done—even when it is difficult.

The single most effective way to help me change my life is to change my story of power. To do this, a new story, one adapted to my context so that I see how it affects me, needs to show me how to get better results for my efforts in life than my current story does. When it works for me, then it becomes a story that I can live in. God will prove himself credible to those who put his story into action by obeying his advice.¹⁷ That's why we chose Isaiah 55:10-11 as the theme scripture for our work. Like the rain that God sends, God's Word, when it arrives, always does the practical life-giving things that he sent it to do. You can count on this.

Jesus, knowing that the Kingdom of God was about to burst the banks of Jewish ethnic experience and swell to include families from every tribe, language and nation on earth, did and said some inexplicable things—at least to those who were there at the time. He knew the stories that his people were telling. And very often, he spoke right over them as if they hardly existed. Why? Because he knew that he had the credibility to speak. He also knew that God's story mattered more than popular opinion. Jesus, like the chief we met above, speaking from a position of credibility, was willing to throw stories out there and let people miss them. He knew his enigmatic statements would not be forgotten, but puzzled over until they were understood, because they came from *him*. In this way, Jesus communicated on multiple levels. It was a way to wake people up and get them moving in the right direction. Some of this will have to happen again wherever the Word of God enters for the first time. When people begin to struggle to understand Christ in the Bible, the Holy Spirit will show up and things will happen. When these special things happen, Jesus' stories begin to have power, and the stories of power that people were telling amongst themselves will begin to be forever changed.

Culture

My fellow North American Anabaptist history students and I followed the post Sunday service crowd to the fellowship hall at the Singel Church in Amsterdam. We were there that day because it was the oldest Mennonite Church in the world at the time. But it was also decidedly Dutch. What *that* meant we were about to discover!

Entering, I noticed some of my friends stopped at the door—frozen—like deer in headlights. Local church members who had arrived before us were happily

bunching up in animated conversation, sipping wine, drinking beer and lighting up their cigarettes. Having grown up in a worldly environment, I passed an entertaining moment watching my fellow Mennonites, who hadn't, inch their way into the room, searching for something that could hold them there against the reverse-polar-magnetism of the forbidden elements. Maybe, somewhere, there was a dish of peanuts?

Alas, there were no refreshments that weren't on the sin list. The exodus of my comrades was about to begin. Wanting as I did for this intriguing moment to last, I gathered some of my buddies, broke the ice and engaged the nearest Dutch guy in conversation. After introductions, what else was there for us to discuss on a Sunday morning (it seemed reasonable to assume) but sports? I explained to the Dutch Mennonite man that we often rush home after church to "catch the game" on TV. "Are there any good sports on today?" I asked him.

His face clouded over. He put down his drink, crushed out his cigarette, crossed his arms and went to work, "I thought you said you were Mennonite. Are you telling me that you have televisions in your homes?" This moment was getting better all the time! Our new acquaintance had a lot to say about the evils of the media, and went ahead and said it.

Personally, though I experienced a feeling of guilt rising up in me as one by one the harsh details of sin-ridden TV were brought to mind, I loved every minute of that cross-cultural adventure. One Mennonite man's refreshment was another Mennonite man's sin. Think of it! And I did think of it. My thinking led me to the Bible where the question of what it took for Paul to turn his back on the Law in order to become a missionary to the Gentiles began to burst into living color. Neither cigarettes nor TV are specifically denounced in Scripture, but they were a big issue that Sunday. Upon reflection, I began to understand what it cost God's people to open their doors to the uncircumcised who were eating pork and shellfish. Scripture was clear on those issues—but then the gospel was too. Right from the beginning, Christians who were being used by God to "grow the Church" were special people who could tolerate ambiguity and separate their culture from the gospel, see it against the backdrop of the Old Testament, and then see God at work in people with whom they themselves had little in common—other than new life in the Spirit.

Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect if it had never done what the Spirit challenged us Mennonites at the Singel Church in Amsterdam to do—stop judging people based on their actions alone. One's missionary anthropology will be stunted until this transformation takes root. We must learn the difference between critiquing culture and judging people or we become a hindrance rather than a help to the spread of the gospel.

What we say about culture we can also say about people: though there is usually something lovable about each one, none are perfect. Cultures emerge to guide individuals through all of life's challenges together with the people who matter most to them. If we distinguish between rich and poor cultures by their ability to provide graceful solutions to life's many challenges (from what is good to drink, to what is good to watch—for example), we see that some of the world's poorest people live in the richest of cultures, and some of the world's richest people live in cultures that are so impoverished that most of life's major challenges and transitions are marked by trauma. As people try to make their lives better, they develop cultures. Then their cultures develop (or inhibit) them.

With this in mind, culture can be described as the prevailing attitudes and practices resulting from the quest for quality that we go on together with those who matter to us. Culture aims for what's best, but makes room for compromise. All of us, together with our people, in order to find some degree of peace in a deadly world, set up camp on all of the important issues of our lives at various points along the trail that goes up from the valley of vulgar chaos to the peak of blissful perfection. We find a place that feels comfortable, a place where our quest for quality can attain a compromise with perfection that we can live with, and allow that place to suffice as our definition of the measure of quality we can accept. We hate to leave it. TV is there for some—cigarettes and beer for others.

This place we settle in for any given life issue has no fixed point but one arrived at by current consensus (and then afterwards very often by tradition). Our people's levels of quality will of course be different than others', yet always somewhere below perfection. This should help us remain humble when we are tempted to do what comes naturally and sin by judging others.¹⁸

The indwelling of the very Spirit of God is the gift to humanity that Jesus mediates. When the Spirit comes into us, as Jesus described it, we are "born again" spiritually, and the very power of God flows through us into the dead world around us bringing new life. As Christian communities, the points where we make camp along the trail up to holy perfection can now be placed higher. We actually can do anything that God asks of us—through Christ who strengthens us. We discover this reality as we give it a try. We love the results, and so we share this transformation process with others. Often, the most powerful tool we have for sharing is the quality of our transformed lives. As Shenk puts it, "Each Christian community needs to think through the use of ritual, symbols, and practices which truly express the meaning of the gospel in (their) ...cultures."¹⁹ We who have been through the transformation can help others rethink their traditions.

Consider just this one place where Christians and their campsites have changed the global culture: Christian-style marriages are the envy of the world. As Campolo

puts it, "...most of the people of the world long for the tenderness between mates that characterizes our [Protestant Christian-influenced] ideal of marriage."²⁰ Every other model of family-building has fundamental problems. The character of Christian marriages has become the benchmark to such an extent that many people have forgotten where the ideals came from—and how then to have the power to make them work.

When you are doing missionary anthropology, go ahead and be biased. Analyze culture based on what is possible through Christ rather than on what is doable by ordinary people. You, after all, are the light of the world, seeking to let that light shine into dark places. Some of the light you bring will be seen as you share God's perspective and see lovable people behind (what may be for you) unlovely external features.

Our daughter Maria was four years old when we came back from Africa and she was confronted for the first time with a church supper, held in the basement under the sanctuary. We came down a flight of steps to enter the fellowship hall. From this vantage point, one can see everything at once. Arriving a bit late, the room was almost full. Pausing on the steps, my wife and I scanned the sea of faces we loved so much and had missed for so long—looking for a place to sit. Then we saw our Maria. As we had dawdled on the stairs, she had slipped off and gone straight to her natural, African, first order of business. She was systematically greeting her elders, a job made easier by the fact that they were sitting together in a sort of self-selected "grey ghetto" in the northwest corner of the room. We watched—spellbound. As she moved along, it was like following a bushfire spreading through dry grass. Old grey faces that had been subdued were lit up with hearty smiles. Heads were turning. People were chattering. Before long that entire section of the room was glowing with light and human warmth. Such was the impact that one little girl was having by simply doing what anyone from Maria's village in Africa would normally do.

Sometimes in the spring, old snow pack breaks free from its winter bed on a hillside and suddenly tumbles away—exposing the seed-filled earth beneath that was waiting for the sun. New life springs up. Seeing Africa in my daughter in America, I suddenly saw "that which is of God" in the Africa we had so recently left behind. The culture stress that had blurred my vision was lifting. Not only did I see "common ground" with people who had been a challenge to understand, I now saw reasons to deeply admire them.

What makes missionary anthropologists effective is not so different from what makes any human being admirable: simple respect for others, evident in the way we think and the way that we behave towards them. This respect helps lead us to a place where we can understand each other and then share the very best things we have in a reciprocal way. Like African villagers do when they pick, dry, and carefully

preserve leaves for others, we work at the business of bringing life to each other. God is showing this kind of respect to each of us and invites us to model it in our mission work. If we do, our missionary anthropology will more likely bring the signs of new life in Christ that this world needs.

Notes

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:22, *New Living Translation*.

² “It is noteworthy that anthropologists have been loath to recognize the great debt they owe to missionaries, not only in the early stages of anthropology’s development, but even today as missionaries provide hospitality (to researchers), vocabulary lists, and other aids to fledgling anthropologists in the field. It is arguable that the discipline of anthropology would not have emerged without the heavy reliance upon ethnographic data provided by missionaries.” Darrell L. Whiteman, “Part I: Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20:4 (2003): 36, accessed February 13, 2014, http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_1_PDFs/35_44_Whiteman2.pdf.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures, Anthropology for Christian missions* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1954).

⁵ Petros Malakyan, “Biblical Leadership across Cultures” (lecture presented at the Academy of World Mission, Korntal, Germany, July 4-5, 2013).

⁶ Referring to grounded theory, see Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1967).

⁷ Matthew 10:11-15.

⁸ Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 304-305.

⁹ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 55ff.

¹⁰ 1 Peter 3:15-16.

¹¹ Mary T. Lederlietner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 33.

¹² The child, electrocuted by touching a sprinkler pipe to a power line, had his heart “jump started” by the pounding his body took on his wild ride. An example of “automotive respiration?”

¹³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 112.

¹⁴ Some call this “metanarrative.” See John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature*. (New York: Garland, 1998).

- ¹⁵ James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1980).
- ¹⁶ The discovery of the Rosetta Stone made possible the understanding of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. On it, the same message was written in three languages, two of these were known, one of these, hieroglyphics, was not. “The term Rosetta Stone has been used idiomatically to represent a crucial key to the process of decryption of encoded information, especially when a small but representative sample is recognized as the clue to understanding a larger whole.” “Rosetta Stone,” Wikipedia, accessed May 2, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone.
- ¹⁷ John 14:18-21ff.
- ¹⁸ Matthew 7:1ff.
- ¹⁹ David W. Shenk and Ervin R. Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom, New Testament Models of Church Planting* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), 114.
- ²⁰ Tony Campolo, *Partly Right, Christianity Responds to its Critics* (Dallas: Word, 1985), 17.

Study Questions

1. The author establishes three aspects necessary for good anthropological insight (and therefore communication) that assume a situation where openness about being a missionary is possible. How do these principles apply in places where a missionary must be circumspect about their real goals?
2. Reflect on the difficulties in communication that exist in your own culture and language in light of this statement: “a communication bridge had been built that was used that day between two groups of people. The bridge had been built from both ends—at the same time. Missionaries and local people had built it together. The ones who did the work were intent both on seeing reasons for hope found in God’s Word, and on continually finding new reasons to *respect* each other.”
3. When you misunderstand someone, is your first reaction to wonder what’s wrong with them? Imagine being a newcomer to a different culture where almost everything initially appears “wrong.”
4. Can you think of activities your culture group used to think of as “sin” that are no longer problems? Discuss some of the reasons why, and whether you agree.
5. Do you agree with the author’s statement: “This place we settle in for any given life issue has no fixed point but one arrived at by current consensus”? Is sin defined by a culture or something “higher” than that?