

Coming Home: A re-entry experience

Sophia To 杜智言



Everyone has to say goodbye some time in his or her life. Goodbyes seem to be particularly characteristic of missionary-kid-life, but even then the experiences are highly individual. Some say fewer goodbyes than others, and others have said more goodbyes than it seems humanly possible to handle. Some were ready to say goodbye, others were not. But the whole experience and the lessons that one learns from it are what build up one's unique walk with God.

When I left Dalat International School in Malaysia at the end of my sophomore year (Grade 10), I was mentally prepared to close the chapter. I thought I was ready for change and a fresh start, having studied there for the past six years. I didn't fully realise that it meant losing all my ambitions for the highly anticipated last two years of high school - the memories the memories I would make with my friends, the leadership positions I would hold in my sports teams, class and school as an upperclassman, and so on. Having just arrived at a new school, I would not be entitled to many leadership positions, whereas the other students would have been working their way up the team or class to earn that privilege.

I had always thought that I would graduate from Dalat. I had imagined countless times the scene in which an underclassman and a staff member would read out my tribute in the Junior-Senior Banquet and the graduation ceremony¹. I tried to predict who would be giving my tribute and what they would say. I envisioned myself seated among my classmates, donning the graduation gown, eagerly listening to my

teacher or dorm parent reading the tribute: "Sophia joined the class in 2001, in Grade 5..."

But before these dreams could materialize, I left Dalat and moved back to Hong Kong with my family. After having lived in boarding school for nine years, I adjusted to living at home quite easily. Not every former boarder does, as I am sure even my sister has a different story to tell. But I was glad to live with my parents after having missed most of my childhood with them. People say my sister and I lived life backwards: living away from home in our primary and secondary years then coming back to live at home in our university years. Some people also have the misconception that boarding school makes you more independent. Rather I found living at home forced me to become much more independent. In boarding school we were extremely protected and well cared for, being so young and away from home. At school there were services, like laundry and cooking, and other facilities that we would not get at home. I lived on campus and almost all activities were held on campus. If ever I needed to go somewhere beyond walking distance it was with an adult who drove a school van or car. Now I had to learn to ride the public transportation by myself to get to school and to meet up with friends. I had to buy food by myself. I owned my own cell phone and I had to do the laundry from time to time and even cook when my parents were away on trips. Kids growing up in Hong Kong will have done most of these things since primary school but I had to learn to adapt to this kind of life in my teenage years.

Uncertainties and confidence issues riddled this process of adaptation.

It was also the first time in seven years that I was starting at a new school all by myself. In the past my sister had always been with me or at least I was younger and broke out of the newcomer mentality more quickly. This time I was 16 years-old, entering the Junior class near the top of the high school pyramid, when relationships have just about stabilized and class cooperation is most needed to plan and execute fund raisers for the JSB. In the orientation I had hit it off with one of the girls who was also entering Grade 11, so at least I knew one person on the first day of school. However she had attended International Christian School before and so she knew most of the people at school and they knew her. So essentially I was the only new person in our class. I remember at the end of the first day of school, all I wanted to do was to get home. The day had not been bad at all. Everyone had been very friendly and inviting, but it was all too overwhelming. In that turbulent state of mind I needed stability and familiarity. All I thought of was getting back to my family. I would not have to say anything and they would understand because they were going through the same thing. It was all I could do to keep from crying on the bus. The whole way home I prayed profusely that God would make the bus hurry up. Suddenly, in the midst of my frantic pleas a magnificent “PEACE!” resonated through my heart and mind, and I felt the storm subside. I admit that I panicked again a few times during the remainder of the journey home, but I recalled that command to be at peace and clung on to it. After the trauma of the first weeks faded, catching the bus home became a humorous game between me and God. During that time I enjoyed a sweet friendship and reliance on God.

The friendships with my new classmates also grew. There were times when they started to talk about their past and I felt very alienated and wished that I could have been back in Dalat where I was one of the longest standing members of my class. But when I actually did go back to Dalat to attend my former class's graduation, I realized that the two years had reshuffled the whole social network, and I could not reclaim the position I formerly occupied among my friends, my class, and the Dalat community at large. It was a painful reality to face

but it helped me recognize my place in my present class. Being with my current classmates, some of whom are my closest friends now, I believe I have learnt lessons from a different dimension and perspective than those I would have learnt in Dalat.

This learning will continue throughout my whole life. Many more relationships are waiting to be established, maintained, and picked back up or let go. Difficulties with adjusting to change and facing new situations are an expected constant. Having come through such challenges has not made me invincible or even problem-savvy. Rather than giving me clear-cut formulas to solve my problems, God reveals a bit more of His infinite character through each circumstance or reminds me of a certain aspect about Him that I have neglected. My focus should not be on getting the solutions but on getting to know my Holy God more and more.

I have to admit that despite having known of God for 21 years, I have yet to truly know Him. I have by no means been exempted from the fluctuations in my fervor towards God. Especially recently I have experienced a long dry period. Like the journey home on the bus, there are times when I recall His calling and I cling close to it, and then come the times when it fades and I drop into preoccupation with my own thoughts and feelings. But with each step and stumble I am getting closer to home as I cling onto and pursue His promise in Jeremiah 29:13 - “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (NIV).

Note:

1. Junior-Senior Banquet (JSB): Our school has a tradition where the Junior class (Grade 11) would organize a banquet honoring the Senior class (Grade 12) at the end of the school year. (The whole Junior year leading up to this banquet would be spent fund-raising through different class activities. These were the two most anticipated years of every student's life at this school.) During the banquet a member of the Junior class who had a special friendship with a member of the Senior class would present a ‘tribute’ – a personal memorial speech – to honor the part that person has played in their lives and in the school over the past years. A similar speech is given by a staff member to individual members of the graduating class.

(作者曾跟隨父母在泰國中部宣教，現定居香港。
作者保留本文版權)