

ONE EX-PAT'S CULTURAL RE-DISCOVERY

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One in every twenty Australians lives overseas. For the thousands of Aussies that live abroad, there may be stories of wild experiences in exotic lands or accomplishments that are to be applauded. My own story is one of cultural rediscovery, finding fulfilment in a foreign land and a refreshed sense of what it means to be Australian.

The meeting

My move to the United States was by way of a chance meeting. As is common to many Australians, my desire to go walkabout occurred in my twenties. I wanted to travel to some of the most interesting and remote places on earth as a way to see and experience different cultures, people and places. In late 1991, I planned a trip to Europe where I travelled to many western European countries and it was there that I met a girl in a train station in the south of Spain. We became fast friends, travelled together for a short time, and parted company when our paths diverged. We maintained contact over some five years by mail and telephone and in 1997, we got married in Long Island, New York. It's now 11 years since our first meeting, we have two kids and live in Ohio.

Now, if you had ever asked me during my backpacking days whether I planned to visit the United States, I probably would have laughed out loud. As far as I was concerned, the US was just a nation full of loud, greedy, gun-toting cowboys with nothing better to do than make cool movies and police the world. It wasn't that I didn't like the US, it was just that I had already experienced so much of it through music, television, movies and publications so, it was less appealing to visit since I felt I had seen most of it through various media.

The decision

When my wife Gerry and I decided to get married, we had to make a choice that many couples in our situation do: 'whose country will we live in?'. At the time, Gerry had just completed her law degree and I was a modestly compensated Information Technology Officer with the Australian Public Service. As Gerry was about to really get her law career underway and my skills were easily transportable, we decided to live in the United States. Otherwise, Gerry would have had to do extra studies in Australia to qualify as an attorney/barrister and also get used to wearing

those funny wigs for court. Furthermore, our south pacific pesos would not have gone a long way to paying off her student loans which were the equivalent of a house mortgage.

This is not my beautiful house

The adjustment was challenging for both of us. Most couples need only adjust to being married. We, on the other hand, had never even lived with a *de facto* before and I left my job of 13 years, my family, my country, my friends, and the Arnotts aisle in Woolies. Talk about change! While in Australia, I lived in Canberra—the bush capital and not much more than a big country town in reality. My destination in the US, New York City, could not have been more different in pace. When I arrived in New York City, it finally dawned on me that I was living in the part of America that was best known throughout the world and for a large part was how the world defined America.

I must admit that at the time, many things were racing through my mind - ‘what was I doing here?’, ‘this is pretty exciting’, ‘this is pretty scary’, ‘how am I going to get used to driving on the right hand side of the road and in *this* traffic?’. There were so many things to do when I moved to the US on May 5th, 1997. I had to prepare for the wedding, get my driver’s licence, get married, go on a honeymoon, get a job, and find an apartment. I think that it was this amount of activity that kept me busy enough so I didn't have time to get too homesick or re-think my life-altering decision. I was amazed that even though I felt that I knew so much about America, here I was in a country where many people didn't understand my language, my accent or why I would ever leave such a nice country like Australia! I found that many Americans were guilty of the same sin as myself - and that was to build all opinion and knowledge about a place based mostly on fictitious television shows and movies. For me, it was shows like ‘Seinfeld’ and movies like ‘Top Gun’. For many Americans, it was ‘Crocodile Dundee’. You can only imagine my horror to find out that little titbit of information!

Starting out

For the most part, my experience with Americans during my arrival phase was pleasant and interesting. I say for the *most part* because I had the misfortune of having most of my livelihood contingent upon the efficiency and competency of America's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). My experience with INS was always a love-hate relationship. That is, I loved to hate them for all of their mistakes, rudeness, expense, and lack of service. True, it wasn't just me that was taken aback, my wife, Gerry made many calls on my behalf in an attempt to straighten things out. Essentially, the worst problem I had was that the INS agency at Los Angeles International Airport was unable to provide me with a temporary work

authorization card for which I had pre-qualified upon my arrival. They insisted that the local New York office could provide me with one when I arrived there. The first of many lies. As a result, it took me three months to obtain a work authorization card and I almost ran out of money. Thankfully, Gerry's parents let us stay with them until one of us was employed and on August 20th, 1997, I commenced my first job in the US with a telecommunications company called TCG. Gerry got a job not long after and we rented a tiny two bedroom apartment in Staten Island so we could pay off the credit card component of Gerry's loans and simultaneously get a house deposit together. We ran a lean, mean operation and accomplished our goals in one year.

First impressions

I remember some of the most fascinating things I learned in my first year in the US. Nearly everyone I met told me the same thing: 'Arstraluh, yeah, I always wanted to visit there. It sounds wonderful'. It didn't take long for me to realize that most people believed everything uttered by Paul Hogan - whether it was a Subaru commercial or through his Dundee alias and that the notorious Fosters beer commercials had a lot to answer for.

Another staggering thing I recall was that I was living in a country where daily meteorological forecasts were made through the aid of the technical marvel known as 'Doppler 4000'. However, when it came time to deciding how much longer winter would prevail, advice was sought from a much-revered Pennsylvania groundhog known as 'Punxsutawney Phil'. This little creature is a cross between a rat and a wombat. When released from his hideaway every February 2nd, he will either stay outside or go back to his burrow if he sees his shadow. If he goes back to his burrow, it means six more weeks of winter. I understand that this event is nationally televised and draws nearly as many viewers as royal weddings and moon landings! After experiencing lengthy and snowy winters here, I can understand why.

The good times

Living in the northeastern US had its advantages and challenges. In 1997, the US was well into the Internet boom. Information Technology jobs were plenty, money was good, job security was fantastic and the computer industry had many emerging technologies and amazingly innovative ways to apply these technologies. I was there at the crest of the wave riding my technology boogie board to fame and prosperity. In the first few months of working at TCG, I was photographed for a centrefold shot smack in the middle of the company's annual report. I was fully clothed, looking very studious, and representing Australia as one of the diverse cultural minorities that made up the people in the company. It became clear to me after my first few weeks as an American employee that Americans were really into making money. In fact, high finance and investment terms were commonly heard at

watercoolers, inside elevators and in chitchat. In Australia, my financial goals were relatively simple: buy a house, maybe buy a second house at some time and then negative gear it for a long term payoff. Terms like portfolio, IPO, dividends, strike-price and stock options were unknown to me and it was some time until I learned the vocabulary of stock trading and the place of the stock market in America's everyday life.

The not so good times

On September 11th, 2001, the world witnessed in horror—the tragic events that took over 3000 lives on US soil—over 50 of them, Australians. That day started off for most people as a normal day. I was in my car driving to work when I was listening to the local 'morning zoo' and when the news broke, I thought at first that the radio comics were just doing more clowning around. A plane had actually flown into the World Trade Center, a building that I was shopping in 10 days earlier on the way to visiting an Australian friend of mine for lunch. My first instinct was to ring Gerry (who was 8 months pregnant at the time) and tell her what I'd heard. She was already watching live news coverage and as we were on the phone talking, another plane hit the World Trade Center. Traffic was getting a little strange during this time. Some cars were speeding up, some were slowing down. All the drivers were probably listening to the radio. After arriving at work, my colleagues stopped working and turned on radios, got access to Internet live cams and pondered what was going on. We were approximately 40 miles from New York City, in New Jersey. After the other planes made the news, we all received email from the company CEO to leave work and return to our families. That entire day, Gerry and I sat in front of the television just horrified at the events taking place live before our eyes. We witnessed the collapse of the twin towers and as we did so, we realized that people were dying right at that very moment. It was very sad and very stressful. For the next two months, people were more subdued on the roads and seemed to be functioning in a daze. I actually missed highway exits a couple of times myself. Most people I spoke with afterwards knew someone either directly or indirectly who never made it home from New York City on the night of September 11th.

The art of work

The world of work that I knew in Australia was so different to what I was involved with in the US. For a start, in Australia, I was a public servant from the time I left school and for thirteen years I had the privilege of working with a very industrious, smart and fun group of people at the Australian Tax Office. Tax was good because I felt that even though being branded as public servants as we were, the people I worked with were very professional. Had this not been the case, my transition into US work life might have been much more challenging. The

adjustments for me were weird but not unexpected - drug tests, learning how to write American (easier from having read so many American publications) and re-training myself not to use phrases like g'day or other Strine-isms. It was hard enough for some people to understand what I was saying just because I had an accent. My wife theorizes that some people hear an accent - any accent and become incapable of even trying to listen to recognize what's being said.

The most peculiar thing I realized about life at work was the basic philosophy that most Americans readily admit to. That is, you 'live to work' and not the other way around.

At the time of my arrival in 1997, unemployment was very low in the USA - between 2 and 3 percent. After leaving a country where the rate was hovering around 10 percent, I thought that low unemployment was a good thing. After living in the US for a few years, I realized that it was not necessarily a good thing. With many jobs open and shop signs everywhere for help wanted, I learned the downside to nearly full employment-terrible service. Whether it was the sales clerk in a department store, a contractor hired to perform a task or anyone required to be helpful as part of their job description, I found little joy. My relatives who came for our wedding also said the same thing about service.

The view from a distance

I noticed a big difference in service when I returned to Australia a few times and only then realized what I had taken for granted (apart from at-will access to Tim Tams and VB). Ten percent unemployment? Not necessarily a bad thing, keeps people sharp!

What I have also realized is that the basic work philosophies among many people in the US and in Australia are radically opposed. 'Live to work' vs. 'work to live.' Unfortunately, Australia makes it too easy and sometimes more lucrative to not work at all. Even though this has been the subject of some debate politically and socially in Australia for many years now, I never really had an opinion about it until I stepped outside Australia and looked at the situation from a distance. I have known people who have tried to get sacked because the welfare payments for them and their families was actually more than holding down a job and contributing to society. This situation scares the *hell* out of me when I think about the future of our country.

Australia is known worldwide for being friendly, fun and far away but its only a matter of time until the world realizes what a bunch of fools we've all been by not cultivating a more industrious, innovative and ambitious working population. Australia does not do a good job of growing and retaining talent. Even if talent develops without government assistance and those people stay in Australia due to Tim Tam and VB proximity, they have every incentive to sell their intellectual capital and

companies to the highest overseas bidder. This has happened with many Australian Information Technology companies and technological innovations. Similarly, Australia once led the world in microsurgery until our talented surgeons moved to Europe. Why? Because our society and government didn't make enough of an effort to find out what would motivate them to stay in our country. Financial motivation may not even have been the most crucial factor.

People like Dick Smith who have strived to make Australians take pride in Australia, have been ignored by people like me for too long and not only need better recognition and support, but they also should be leading our country to take its place as a nation renowned for excellence and savvy rather than just Koalas and Kakadu. However, Australia has also been recognized for more positive things like its work towards making things right with Native Australians who were treated horribly for so long.

Australia is feared and respected in the sporting arena, but it's too bad that we don't apply that same effort and societal value toward more ambitious national endeavours. Every country has weaknesses, but Australia is a young country with a relatively small population that can still go from good to great by learning from the mistakes of others. Australians are generally cautious by nature, but let's take a few more risks to capture more successes and learn from any mistakes along the way.

The consumer society

America is so different in how the 'money-go-round' works. It's a very 'consumer-centric' society that drives people to want and work to have the best of everything. When I arrived in the US, I had about three pairs of shoes, a few shirts and trousers, various sundry items but nothing much at all, not that I couldn't have bought more, it was just that I never saw the need. Nowadays, living in the US, my wardrobe has tripled in size and quality and I'm a bloke! If there's something to be invented, you can count on it being invented in the US first. There are probably more catalogues available here than there are shops in Australia. I admit that it's quite entertaining to sift through the wide range of products that are inflicted upon the US consumer. Most entertaining of all are the drug commercials. In Australia, you might see the odd headache or hay fever tablet commercial, but in the US, nothing is sacred. Cholesterol reducing drugs, blood pressure medication, sexual enhancement pills and the range of allergy medications await you nightly during prime-time television viewing. What makes them so entertaining is the rapid-fire commentary at the commercial's end providing an exhaustive list of possible side effects like uncontrollable diarrhoea, etc. Consumer society? Maybe the US is a more of a society consumed. Whatever the case, it seems to work.

Hi-ho to Ohio

In 2000, everyone was worried about the dreaded Y2K bug which was not the worldwide catastrophe predicted by many doomsayers. Instead, everyone was caught by the sudden and surprise downturn in the economy and collapse of dot com businesses later dubbed 'dot bombs'. That crashing economy wave dumped many technology boogey board riders on their faces. Even I had trouble keeping my head above water. Thankfully, I never got laid off. However, I did have to become a survivalist in career management and adopt strategies to ensure my continued employment. Being unemployed in the US, does not come with the same government sponsored welfare that you qualify for in Australia.

While working for my fifth company in as many years, the staff was being decreased so we decided to accept an opportunity for me to work in Virginia. Working as an IT consultant there, I was lucky enough to be able to work from my home and spent more time with my family. As far as the high-tech industry was concerned, things were not improving and thankfully a few opportunities presented themselves as options to consider since my continued employment was in doubt. I examined these opportunities and selected the one that was most consistent with my career and family goals. Now, I work for a major company in Ohio and I am no longer in the consulting industry, also known as the 'flesh-trade.' I enjoy working for a large, stable, and progressive company. Our family has been able to re-group and settle in for the long haul. Moving to the Mid-West, although a leap of faith, was a big risk that has paid off already. As I look back, New York City was stressful, New Jersey was frustrating, Virginia was actually quite decent, but Ohio is even better, has everything we need, and five weeks of annual vacation doesn't hurt either!

The future

Travelling around the world has been a superbly rewarding experience and something that I always thought would be the most intellectually stimulating part of my life. In actual fact, I can now see that having lived in two different cultures has also helped to open my eyes a lot more. If there was something that would make our politicians think more about Australia and how it might be improved, it would be to send them on sabbaticals overseas to see how other parts of the world operate. Not as visitors on diplomatic missions, but as ordinary people who need to find work and adjust to life so they could then really think about Australia and see it more objectively.

All of the Australians I have met overseas are much more fiercely patriotic about Australia than they would ever have been at home. This is not to imply that what we need is a movement of right-wing fascist radicals to stir things up and dictate Australia's future, but as a nation, we need to think long and hard about how much we

really care about our country's future instead of taking sickies and being lackadaisical about our national pride in the world scene. We need to ensure that our children will be able to take pride in Australia. Australia needs to cultivate tall poppies and the desire to be great and live well. It doesn't mean we no longer have fun or try to buy every new product that comes on the market, but we should definitely stop trying to cut down and isolate tall poppies. The film, 'The Dish' is something that all Australians should see — Australians represented as contributors to world science, but still having fun.

Luckily, my children, Cassandra and Matthew will always have the best of both worlds. They are already official dual citizens and can travel, study and work in both the US and Australia. Maybe it will be the dual citizens of the world that can make Australia's future brighter than a mere twinkle in the southern sky.



Russell Cotter was born in Sydney, but grew up mainly in Canberra. He has worked in the field of Information Technology for 20 years, the last 5 as a consultant in the USA. He has lived in the US for 6 years, is married to an American and has two children, ages 2 and 1. He has travelled through Asia, Northern Africa, Europe, Australia and the United States.

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