

Stepping Out of My Comfort Zone

My first big step out from my comfort zone was when I got married, but I didn't know it then. I was young and in love with a man several years older than I and from a different country. That was just exciting—not uncomfortable. On the surface he looked and acted like what I considered normal, within my range of experience. At the age of 19, who has any conception of the depths of a personality and what may reveal itself over years of a close and committed relationship?

The demand to step out of my comfort zone was made evident several years later, when that normal man, now my wedded husband of five years, revealed his wish to move back to his native Denmark. Denmark was a country that I had thought I would come to know well in my life—but only through visits. The thought of going to live in a foreign country—“forever” was the stated time period—was exciting. The idea of leaving the country of my birth and youth, however, was traumatic.

By the early 1970s Denmark was well on its way to achieving an egalitarian society “where few have too little and fewer too much.” As young professionals in the U.S., we had more than enough: we had already bought our first house, and we took annual vacations to exotic places in Europe and South America and the Caribbean. The only important thing we lacked was time—not money. With the move, we were going to slip down economically. We would have more time, but we would be missing the money to buy and furnish a beautiful house in Denmark, and to provide for exciting vacations or even routine trips home to visit my family and friends.

Even more seriously, I was going to move down professionally, at least for the foreseeable future. I had recently completed my masters degree in library and information science, and was happy and fulfilled in an interesting and rewarding job. Not only was I going to have to give up that job, I knew it would be a long time before I could acquire the language skills to even begin to qualify for work in my chosen field in Denmark. I was tentative and reluctant and fearful that my psyche could not withstand this assault. Was this a visible signal of a failure of my marriage

commitment? I was in a dilemma. I did not know what to do.

I was saved by the sage advice of a friend of the family who had himself moved between Denmark and the U.S. a few times, and who had also passed through a couple marriages. “Give it two years,” he said. “Go and try, and know that if you are not happy with it in two years, you can come back.”

At the age of 24, it’s easy to allow two years for such a test. But it didn’t even require the two years. Eight months later we both decided to return to the U.S. to live. In those eight months, though, I took great strides in learning the language, and did an even better job of learning the culture. In returning to the U.S., we both committed to maintaining a living relationship with Denmark. Almost every year since then we have spent a week in Denmark on vacation. I have become fluent if not perfect in reading, speaking, and writing Danish. I know the streets of Copenhagen better than those of the town I grew up in. I am familiar with Danish authors, musicians, and other cultural icons. In a very real sense, Denmark has become my country, too, and in some sense I have lost my belonging to my own country.

I have been changed by my relationship with Denmark, and I have been privileged to see it change over decades. I am grateful that by committing to stepping out of my comfort zone for “just two years,” I have found a fascinating and very comfortable space (which exists nowhere on the earth, but in my soul) that has lasted for almost fifty.

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