



Walking in Their Shoes

Greg H. Parsons



Over the last year I've done a couple of things differently and a couple of different things. I'm not talking about once-a-year or once-a-lifetime things, but new things that then become regular patterns. My example is in exercise. For years I swam regularly, and after awhile I didn't think about it much. Yet during the last two years I've stopped swimming and started mountain biking, prompting me to think in different ways.

Most of what we do each day is the same; we live in patterns. Much of that is good and necessary: driving on the designated side of the road, mealtimes, types of food consumed, patterns of devotional life, and more.

But when you start doing new things or doing things differently, you begin to better understand people who do comparable things. You learn new words, and you think in different ways. Though biking champion Lance Armstrong is a "roady" (someone who rides on streets, rather than on mountain roads), I can now understand a little – very little, but a little – of what he goes through in his training.

Often new activities not only help us to understand others, but to grow in new areas. Our vision grows by thinking in different patterns. Many have discovered that they grow spiritually when their minds are challenged in new ways – just like our physical muscles grow with exercise. Experts on human development observe that the best way for people to grow at their work or ministry is to get a new job or assignment. When we're stretched, we grow, often with pain and hard work.

Isn't that what we should expect in our outreach to mission frontiers? Many have said that the frontiers are frontiers because they are the hardest to reach. We at the USCWM have contended that this is not necessarily because unreached peoples are spiritually resistant, but often because we haven't walked in their shoes long enough or well enough. The more distant – culturally, socially and economically – we are from others, the more difficult it is for us to understand them and to communicate effectively.

I have a friend, a disciple of Jesus, who has empathetically walked in the shoes of Muslims. "Bill" has worked hard at learning one language spoken by millions of Muslims, and he is now living in the Middle

East and working on his second language, Arabic. He knows all the people in his neighborhood and has connected with many families through members of his own family. He has deeply studied their way of life and enters into that way of life as much as he can. He doesn't rely on book study alone, but has engaged with Muslims for years: he eats what they eat, dresses like they dress, acts much as they do.

"Bill" has found that when he does this – which looks surprisingly like an "Old Testament" prophet like Abraham – his Muslim friends perceive him as a "holy" man. They quickly learn that he is a follower of Jesus, which they can't always understand, but they know that Jesus was a prophet and they are prompted to learn more. "Bill" doesn't have to "argue" with Muslims through the standard questions. He knows their way of looking at sensitive issues, and common Western ways of looking at these issues, and a variety of historical perspectives on the same issues. He can disarm most people – even mullahs – with his calm, informed, sensitive replies.

If I sat next to Lance Armstrong on an airplane – like Bill has done with mullahs – I'd hope to converse with him. I'd ask a lot of questions to understand more. I'd realize afresh the depth of commitment he has to his goals. He is different because of that depth of commitment – weird in some ways, by my standards. He has been willing to give up things I would never give up to achieve his goals, but I would hope that by understanding him a little more I might gain a platform to share my perspective more effectively.

In your ministry today – wherever it is – ask yourself, "Have I walked in their shoes enough to make a real impact?" As we go around the globe, on business or mission or both, we should work as hard at cross-cultural understanding as Lance does in cycling or Bill does in relating with his Muslim friends. 🌐



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