

there and back again

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Sofia Synopsis

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Reverse culture shock

It was hardly the homecoming I imagined.

When I walked into my house the day after I returned from Bulgaria, I discovered that the tenant who had rented it while I was overseas had trashed the place. Mold crawled the walls from floor to ceiling. The bathroom floor was curling up eight inches off the ground. There were holes in the plaster, holes in doors, gouges in the hardwood floors, and something orange growing all over the inside of the refrigerator. There was a square meter of holes in the concrete wall in the basement where he had shot BB guns at targets on the walls. One of my favorite trees had been cut down, sawed off at ground level. Everything reeked of smoke and must and dogs and dampness.

I just stood in the living room and cried.

Leaving Bulgaria was hard. It was hard to leave the best friends I've ever had in my life. It was hard to leave the family who "adopted" me there. It was hard to leave teammates and ministry and the city that had come to feel like home. But I knew God was calling me back to America, so I came. And I think I took comfort in at least knowing that I would be going back to something familiar: my own house, my home church, the city where I grew up.

Looking back on the last three months, the house seems like something of a symbol of my transition back to America: nothing I came back to was quite the way I expected it to be. The transition was much messier than I expected. A heavy-duty crime-scene-cleanup type cleaning company tackled the worst of the black mess in my house and friends rallied around to help scrub and paint. If only the emotional disarray could be set aright with a bottle of Clorox and a gallon of Glidden! As I learned in brief when I came back to visit last summer, so I am learning in depth now: it is every bit as difficult -- if not more so -- to re-adjust to your home country when you come back as it was to adjust to a new country when I went to Bulgaria to begin with.

I think that's true for a lot of reasons. Some are predictable: I changed while I was away; things and people changed here while I was gone. You don't expect culture shock when it's your own culture you have to adjust to, so it hits you that much harder when you don't intuitively understand something. The affluence of America and the pace of life here can be a bit overwhelming after being in a developing country.

But ironically, many of the reasons the adjustment back has been difficult (house problems aside) are the results of the way God answered prayers while I was in Bulgaria. It was hard to leave close friends -- but how grateful I am that God answered your prayers and blessed my life with those friendships! It was hard to leave my Bulgarian family -- yet I know how many of you prayed for that month of language immersion back in 2006 when I first met Delcho and Nina and their children, and that relationship has been indescribably precious to me ever since. It was hard to leave teammates -- thank you all for your prayers that the Lord would strengthen us as a team and give us a deep love for each other. It was hard to leave ministry -- how thankful I am for your faithful prayers for God to be at work through Sofia Christian Academy, the English ministry, and the Mladost church. It was hard to leave Sofia -- thank you for praying that I would adjust well to life there. It has been hard to not speak and hear the Bulgarian language on a regular basis -- I remember how often I asked you to pray that God would give me a genuine love for the language and enable me to speak it well.

Though my term on the mission field was often difficult, and though the transition back to America comes with plenty of difficulties of its own, I wouldn't trade the experience for the world. I am grateful for some of the challenges I am facing in the re-adjustment, because I see in them just how many of your prayers God answered while I was in Bulgaria!

What's next?

Lots of people have asked me what I'm going to do now that I'm back in the U.S. Other than pushing a paint roller, I don't really have a good answer to that yet. God made it clear this winter that He was closing the door to continued ministry in Bulgaria, but He has not yet revealed what He has for me next. There are a number of possibilities, but nothing is certain yet. In this, my last prayer letter as an MTW missionary, I'd like to ask you to join me in prayer:

✿ For faith that God's plan is good and confidence that even though it has been a tough transition and I am uncertain of what the future holds, He is in control. Pray that the Lord would draw me close to Himself and enable me to trust Him with all of the questions and emotions that I am feeling right now.

✿ For wisdom and clarity as to what He has for me next. I have been encouraged to pursue publishing as well as to do more with my photography. I am a bit overwhelmed as I try to think about where to start -- publishing companies, publishing for a missions agency, freelance work, teaching, or something else I haven't even thought of yet? Pray for God to make the path clear.

✿ For continued relationships with some of the Bulgarians the Lord has placed in my life over the past few years. The technology that exists today makes regular communication quite possible, and I have talked to a number of my Bulgarian friends regularly since I returned to Delaware. Pray that God would continue to be at work in the lives of Rali, Nina and Delcho, Lora, Albena, Petia, Zuzi, Sveti and Kristina. Pray that He would use me in their lives even across the miles. Pray also that I will retain my Bulgarian language so that I can keep in contact with those friends I have become so close to.

✿ For God to continue to work in the hearts of my unbelieving friends, and for me to trust that it is Him and not me who will ultimately save them.



*With Rali, one of my best Bulgarian friends.
Praise God with me for Rali's love for Jesus and the encouragement she was to me in Sofia.
Pray with me for her continued efforts to share the truth of the gospel with university students.*



*With Zuzi, another close friend. Zuzi is Turkish and grew up in a Muslim home.
Pray with me that the Lord would bless her desire to reach out to her own people with the gospel.*



*With Nina and Delcho Atanasovi, my Bulgarian parents.
Thank the Lord with me for their sweet friendship.
Pray with me for their ministry to the churches in the Plovdiv region of Bulgaria.*

- ✿ For resolution with the tenant for the cost of the repairs to the house.
- ✿ For a fair settlement from the shipping company for the significant damage to my household goods during the move.
- ✿ For God's financial provision as I transition. The time required for home repairs limited the time I could spend looking for jobs, and I still haven't found full-time employment.
- ✿ For readjustment to life in America, for everything from shopping in stores that feel huge and learning new songs in church, to remembering that it's not customary to take off your shoes in every home in America, to getting used to "how things work" here, which isn't as second nature as it used to be (I tried to sign a check the other day with the stylus on the credit card machine at Walmart!). For three years in Bulgaria, I bemoaned the absence of American grocery products that I missed, but now that I'm here, I still walk out of the supermarket feeling incomplete because I couldn't find a substitute for Bulgarian *sirene* or *katuk*. Pray for this re-learning and for friends and family who are supportive and understanding when I don't always "get it" right away.
- ✿ For the renewing of relationships with friends and family.
- ✿ For the opportunity to use the skills and the insights that God gave me in Bulgaria. Pray for new ministry opportunities, particularly an outreach I'm involved in to international students who work at the Delaware beaches during the summer. Many of them are Eastern European (and some are even Bulgarian); pray that my time in their world will give me a deeper understanding of how to reach them with the love of Christ.
- ✿ For time in the Word in the midst of it all. Pray that God would enable me to shut off the mental to-do list and be still before Him, to hear and be encouraged by His promises.

I am supposed to be a writer, a wordsmith. Many of you have encouraged me in my writing over the years and told me that I capture stories and experiences well. Yet now, as this chapter of the story draws to a close, I find myself at a loss for adequate words to summarize all that I have seen and heard and felt in the last three years. I wish I could bottle up that time, to hold it close to my heart and to pass a little of it around to each of you. I have been so grateful for all of you and your faithful prayers and encouragement over the years. While I am the one with the stamps in my passport, the ministry in Bulgaria was yours every bit as much as it was mine. Your support and friendship are precious to me, and I look forward to seeing as many of you as I can and sharing with you how I have seen God at work in building His church. My official ministry as an MTW missionary is ending, but the blessing of my experience in Bulgaria and the role you played in making that possible is something I will always cherish. May God be honored by it.

In His grace,

Monica

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