

## REPATRIATION AND LOVE OF LANGUAGE

One of the gifts of international living is acquiring a new language. For many of us, me included, a language learned overseas has more emotional attachment than the pride of communicating successfully in a second or third language. There is a special poignancy, grounding, a validation, and memory reservoir the language has to our international experience. We are inclined to hold the attachment dear when we return to the United States.

For me Spanish, specifically Chilean Spanish, holds a wealth of memories which can bring nostalgia to my eye with an idiom, colloquialism, or remembered learning. I remember exactly where and with whom I was when I learned having a “Caballo” was a good time and nothing to do with horses. I remember just where I was when, announcing poorly in my new language, I called a colleagues aristocratic elderly mother in law “soup” (cassuela) instead of “Consuelo” , her name. Every week, every month there were experiential markers outside any book or classroom such as; acquiring an audience in the hardware store as I described the function of a tool I didn’t know the word for, the day I learned the serenity prayer in Spanish from a patient, outrageous street slang from the halls of the Nido de Aguilas International School courtesy of my teen age children. How different my emotional attachment to Spanish is from my 6 years of formal preparation in French through High School and College.

Each of us will have her/his own reentry path of how to keep a new language depending on our age, life stage, and experience with the language. Attachment to an acquired language is an asset but you need to be conscious of your emotional reactions or it can be an impediment to healthy repatriation. Early on, keeping your new language with the family eases the transition and keeps the family memories as well as the language alive. If after some time, you find yourself getting tense or controlling about HOW the family keeps the new language you may be in for a painful surprise. Most children adjust quickly and will move into their new life in the US with its language and culture. It’s why young children transport so well internationally. While vestiges of a language, or the ear for it, will always be with young children, they do not have the emotional attachment to it that you do. They will forget. Older children, because of peer pressure, will WANT to distance themselves from being foreign to gain needed acceptance in their life today. It is useful to make a strategy with your spouse about keeping the language in a friendly, fun, culture oriented way. Lead gently. Anything too strict or structured will backfire. Do your grieving with the knowledge that different family members will have different versions of the international experience, language and culture. Write down your stories. Tell them to anyone who will listen. I just told you a couple of mine. Networking is good for repatriation culture shock, and keeping your best memories alive. Find and gather with former expatriates who appreciate your knowledge of your language and your experiences and will share their own as members of the “global travelers club”.