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## Downdrafts and uplifts

By CATHERINE YIĞIT



*"One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar." – Helen Keller*

It can be tough to reconcile life-as-we-would-have-lived-it versus life in a new culture. I imagined I'd live close to home and family, and yet have a jet-set lifestyle of travel and cultural learning.

Even for people living in their birthplace, reality clashes with idealized dreams. But the far-flung person has additional challenges. If you haven't arrived because of your job, career prospects may be narrowed by visa concerns, nationality or language. Outside the English-speaking world, language teaching may seem the only option, apart from the brave step of [entrepreneurship](#).



From Asia to Europe: View of Gallipoli by CWYigit

A potent mix of [home-sickness](#) and don't-quite-fit-in-ness leaves us strangers everywhere.

*Defining who we are can be a challenge when those around us don't have the same cultural waypoints.*

As I dream of spreading my wings, others see me as the ideal settled wife. My mother-in-law is deeply comforted that I can cook [kuru fasulye](#),

providing her son the Turkish food she's too far away to serve. I've arrived in her eyes, by accomplishing her tasks.

The combination of reality and the limitations of other people's expectations can get a person down.

When the downdraft catches, a few things help. Connecting with [similar-minded people](#) in parallel situations. Immersing myself in the wonders of my adopted culture, [as Jocelyn does](#). Exploring my identity by [nurturing my creative side like Judith does](#).

Or really seeing the continent-spanning landscape on my doorstep.

### What strategy keeps your soul soaring?

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Catherine Yiğit is a native of Dublin, Ireland and writes from Çanakkale, northwestern Turkey where she lives with her Turkish husband and two children.

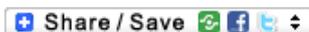
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- <http://www.expatharem.com/identity-messages/ Anastasia>

*"Defining who we are can be a challenge when those around us don't have the same cultural waypoints."*

Beyond the imagined life vs reality you mention, Catherine, this is the crux of so many problems. Having trouble gaining support for our plans, figuring out our wardrobe (that one's mine!), choosing goals that are truly ours.

I'd agree connecting with truer peers — whoever they may be, wherever you find them — is a good way to tap into a larger reality. A reality that can accommodate your dreams.

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- <http://www.jenniferlawler.com Jennifer Lawler>

I'm sort of the opposite of an ex-pat (you can pry me out of the US Midwest only occasionally), but so much of this resonates with me. I'm at an age where I'm thinking, I should know what my life \*is\* about, not what I wish it were or what I'd like it to be. If that makes sense.

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- <http://avagabonde.blogspot.com/ Vagabonde>

You said : "It can be tough to reconcile life-as-we-would-have-lived-it versus life in a new culture." You are so right. I never thought I would live as an ex-pat in the USA all my life. You asked "what strategy keeps your soul soaring?" All depends what the problem is. If I have not heard my native language for a long time and miss it, I go on the Net and watch YouTube in French (I don't know anyone around here who speaks French.) During the Iraq war when I used to received so many French bashing jokes or heard them so often on TV, and also got physically threatened because of my accent, I would again go on the Internet and read French newspapers. Now I can read blogs on Paris as there are so many – but then I get so homesick. I did not think I would live in a country where I could not talk about politics or literature with people around me and I thought I would have some friends. I don't because I live in a very conservative super Christian county of Georgia – Newt Gingrich county, in case you have heard of him. People from different cultural backgrounds are not too welcome around here, and above all not liberal people – this is the area of the "Tea Baggers".

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- <http://www.skaiangates.com> Yazarc

The internet is such a huge thing for those of us outside of our native land. I really can't imagine how isolating it would have been to be an expat fifty years ago.

The downside is that we can end up in a vicious cycle of homesickness and withdraw into ourselves.

It's hard to be the only representative of your culture locally, you get blamed for all the negatives. You shouldn't be afraid to claim all the positives things too though.

.-= Catherine's latest blog ..[Subordinate passion](#) =-.

- <http://www.google.com/profiles/theskaiangates> Catherine

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I was feeling down over Christmas and one of the things that comforted me was the realization that what I was feeling wasn't just related to my being an expat, that I might feel the same even if I was in Ireland.

It can be very easy to blame one obvious factor and overlook all the other things that actually make the difference.

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Absolutely true. It can be difficult to explain why something is important to someone who's vision doesn't include that thing. (And again that may have nothing to do with culture, generation gaps can lead to the same problems.)

And as with Vagabonde above the internet is such a terrific tool to connect with those peers and to expand our worldview.

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50 years ago...try 100, or more! This is exactly why I am drawn to historical travel literature, and the writing/lives of women who we might call expats today but back then — they were adventuresses on long term trips abroad. I have found succor in reading what they went through, and how they dealt with it. Some really embraced local conventions, like Isabel Burton, the wife of the adventurer Richard Burton. Others took to reinvention of the most fantastic sort like Anna “King and I” Leonowens. Still others, whose names are not well known, languished in ways perhaps even more of us can identify with. [Here I review four books](#) about historical travelogue by or about women.

- *Anastasia*

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- <http://www.isaokato.com/> Isao

What strategy keeps my mind soaring – this is really a tough question, and like in all tough situations, the solution I have chosen so far is to carefully stand in between two extremes (this case, local and non-local) and keep that balance. Not too pretty, but who cares 😊

1. Local culture

I tried migrating myself completely into local (Taiwanese) culture when I was dating a Taiwanese girl but soon found out that I couldn't fit well into the Taiwanese family-oriented relationship just like I couldn't fit into my native Japanese culture (probably from being a TCK). I learned that keeping an open attitude toward the local culture (tri-lingual: try anything at least once, ripped off from Sex In the City) but also drawing a subtle but firm line works for both parties.

2. Communities of expatriates

Read "Western community." Being with a Yoga- and Tai-qi practicing group of foreigners work well: not too isolated, not too localized.

3. Homeland culture

Fortunately Taiwan is awash with the Japanese culture, so I don't have to do anything, except for trying not to eat expensive Japanese food for more than once a week.

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Isao I think that's a terrific strategy! Tailoring your response depending on what's getting you down is probably the best thing. I like it!

The biggest challenge in applying that to my life is the lack of other expats and knowledge of my home culture locally. Once again the internet comes to the rescue!

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- <http://www.bazaarbayar.blogspot.com> Catherine Bayar

"...really seeing the continent-spanning landscape on my doorstep"

That's an important strategy for me, Catherine. Reminding myself to look around and savor where I am and stop longing to be somewhere else. Otherwise, I'd be homesick for whichever country I'm not in at the moment.

And like Isao, I'll dip in and out of the multiple cultures that surround me – having the option to blend them as I chose is a comfort. Not as easy to do where you are, as I know from my years in a small Turkish town. I've definitely had those moments of abject culture shock, wondering how on earth I ended up sharing a house with people so different than I, who could never possibly understand me or where I come from.

But with time, a big sense of humor and a stubborn hold on the vision of what my life will be like someday soon (and I've come so far already!) has kept my soul soaring. Thanks for reminding me with this thoughtful, honest post.

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