

What is a Global Soul?

By: Robin Pascoe

What is a global soul? A postmodern wanderer, according to travel writer and essayist Pico Iyer, is a global soul; a person who often exists in a state of jet lag-in an exotic location without any maps, clocks or guidebooks.

Iyer knows first hand what it's like to experience both constant jet lag and a wandering international life. He was born in Britain to Indian parents yet raised in California while being shuttled back and forth to schools in the UK. He now lives permanently outside of Kyoto, Japan when he's not cruising at 30,000 feet over the globe on a speaking tour.

"I feel, when jet-lagged, as if I'm seeing the whole world through tears, or squinting; everything gets through to me, but with the wrong weight or meaning," he writes about jet lag in his just released book, *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign*. "It's like watching a foreign movie without subtitles".

Needless to say, the dark humour of the award-winning movie *Lost in Translation* (which baffles viewers who have experienced neither jet lag nor a foreign culture) was certainly not lost on Pico Iyer. His numerous literary ruminations on subjects relating to the global soul - in books and keynote addresses such as the one he recently delivered at the Families in Global Transition (FiGT) conference in Dallas, Texas - have attracted devoted readers, especially among people who have lived and worked outside of their home cultures in the age of globalization.

"Global is a hot word right now," Iyer told his audience in Dallas, "but it's applied primarily to the market place or to technology." (He admitted later that he uses e-mail for correspondence but hasn't made peace yet with the Internet.) "Human beings are being zapped at the speed of light like data, but there's no time to stay put and reflect. Our dreams and imagination have been changed by globalization but we never stop to think about that."

He uses airports and airplanes often as metaphors for the postmodern conditions of dislocation and homelessness, themes which resonate with anyone living today as an expatriate. He actually camped out in the Los Angeles airport for his research for *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home*. Given the author's well-known penchant for irony, it was not lost on this interviewer that my opportunity to chat with him took place in a location a mere stone's throw from the Dallas/Forth Worth airport.

While he confesses to experiencing jet lag, he never feels culture shock. And although he has described himself as a "global village on two legs", he considers himself neither expatriate nor exile. "I think an expat chooses to live a global life (if only by joining an international company or entering a job that will take them abroad), while an exile is someone who is thrown into the situation, wrenched from home, and often longing to go back. An expat is often a person of relative privilege, able to fly from place to place, while an exile is often helpless, torn from the world they know and unable to get back there. The expat often rejoices to be away from the familiar; the exile may mourn that very state."

Attending Families in Global Transition did make him curious about mobile expats as they are posted around the world by government, multinational companies, church or school. They move not quite at the speed of light, but quick enough to have difficulty in absorbing the challenges of transition.

Just minutes before delivering his keynote address, he was deep in conversation over lunch with an Australian PhD candidate researching the career issues of the accompanying expat spouse. His interest was so genuine; he might have been interviewing a tuk tuk driver in Bangkok for one of his books. It's easy to see why he is such an engaging writer: he talks to everyone with charming attention. "Expats lead liberated lives," he pronounced later. "I certainly believe that being an expat can make a person more aware of one's blessings." He also believes people can do magnificent things with the new global reality. "We just have to think about global living in a more soulful way which means having a global conscience and sense of responsibility."

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