

Ambiguous Loss in Missionary Life

Missionaries living away from their passport countries often experience a phenomenon known as ambiguous loss. This term, which developed in the 1970s, fits missionary life well. Global workers can experience a loss from leaving their passport nation, but it is still there. Then when they return, they can experience the same kind of loss related to their host nation, even though it is still there. This paradox can lead to immobilization and depression. It is critical that member care staff help missionaries identify this pain point so they can live with acceptance of the tension it creates.



Culture shock, family strain, burn-out – these are common terms we see applied to the overseas missionary experience. Those who care for missionaries are familiar with conversations about the losses that a global worker experiences. These losses need to be *grieved well* in order to arrive at *closure* and maintain a positive state of mental health. Experiencing a sense of control is easier when feelings can be kept in the *boxes* where they belong. But what happens when emotions refuse to stay in those categories?

Let us turn to the field of family therapy in order to consider another type of stress which, when understood properly and applied to the cross-cultural missionary, proves insightful in developing long term resilience. Dr. Pauline Boss coined the term *ambiguous loss* in the 1970s, and it has been employed ever since in the mental health field.

She defines an ambiguous loss as a loss without clarity which cannot be verified and therefore remains unresolved.¹ Dr. Boss describes two classic types of ambiguous loss. The first is when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. The other is when the loved one is physically present but psychologically absent. In both of these cases there is an ambiguity between the absence and the presence of a person.

When someone is physically missing, but there is no certainty that the person has died, the family may keep them psychologically present with the hope that they will return at any moment. For example, when a person disappears in a war, at sea or due to some type of natural disaster, there are normally no rituals, such as a funeral, to bring closure because the physical body is not there.

Although the person is physically absent, the family lives as if the person might come back. They do not want to modify or touch their loved one's room, nor do they want to give away their clothes. The usual roles and relationships among family members freeze, and they do not think much beyond the absence of their loved one.

The same can happen when the person is physically present but psychologically absent, as with Alzheimer's, dementia, or severe autism. But it can also happen when a loved one has

addictions such as alcoholism, is a workaholic, or struggles with chronic depression and remains distant from the family structure.

The ambiguity between absence and presence entails a lack of closure, and hinders confronting and grieving the loss. This can result in immobilization and depression if one does not learn to live with the paradox. To develop resilience, a person must grow to accept this paradox and learn to live with two opposing ideas in life at the same time. The two conflicting ideas must be kept in balance, instead of living as if one or the other did not exist.

LIVING WITH AMBIGUITY

This has an application to cross-cultural missions. Dr. Boss herself spoke about immigrants, but did not extend the application to missionaries. This is where the global worker experiences the conflicting paradox of living in one *world* (or country) physically while the other *world* (or country) continues to exist. However, they are no longer an integral part of that world.

It is important, as we walk alongside missionaries, that we help them to understand that this feeling of ambiguous loss between the two worlds is not a psychological illness that needs to be cured. It is a normal experience in cross-cultural living.

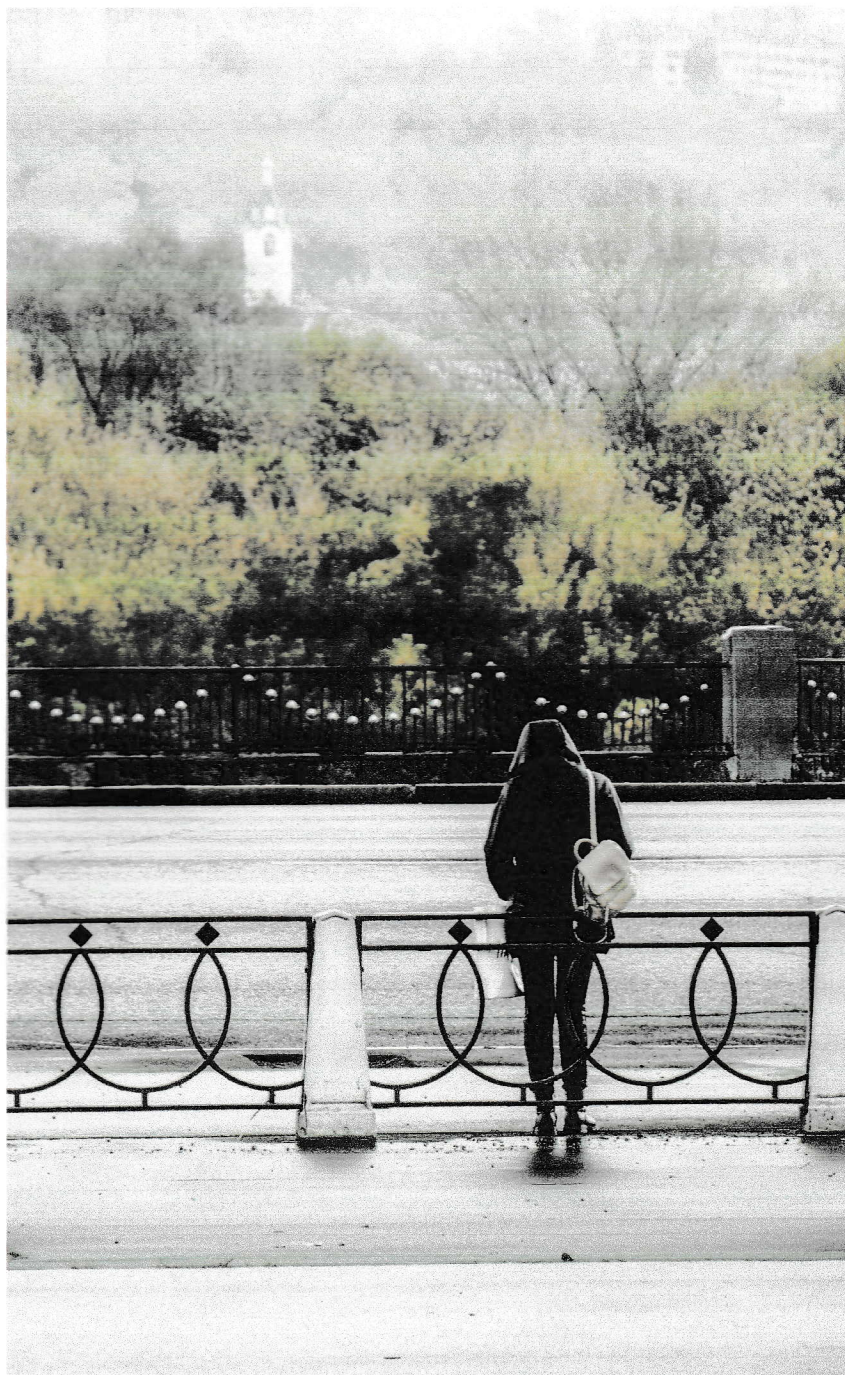


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Neither, however, are they completely disconnected from that world because psychologically they maintain ties there. Because of the constant mobility between both places, this is a recurring theme equally when the missionary is in the host country and during home assignment in their passport country.

When missionaries begin to live

cross-culturally, everything is different. The new environment requires adjustment time. Although they settle into the host culture, with new friends, and new employers, they remain psychologically connected to the former world without being physically present there.

Life goes on in their passport country without their participation. There are

births, deaths, weddings, and changes in the church. Although missionaries long to be a part of it all, they cannot. But neither is it possible nor healthy to completely disconnect from this other world. Missionaries experience constant losses because they cannot participate in life there. It is like seeing family on a screen without the option to enter the room.

The same thing happens during times of leave when the person returns physically and reconnects with life in their passport country but maintains a connection psychologically in the country where they serve. Missionaries are physically absent but psychologically present. Learning to live with this ambiguity becomes a crucial element in developing resilience.

It is important, as we walk alongside missionaries, that we help them to understand that this feeling of ambiguous loss between the two worlds is not a psychological illness that needs to be cured. It is a normal experience in cross-cultural living. We can help missionaries live with this constant tension by building on their own strengths so that they can discover ways to increase tolerance for this ambiguity.

If workers can recognize and identify the cause of the ambiguity as something external and part of cross-cultural living, the tendency to blame themselves for their mixed feelings diminishes. There is no need for closure because the two worlds will continue to exist.

In Western countries, Dr. Boss proposes that people generally prefer to have all the answers and solve problems instead of living with ambiguity. However, when missionaries can learn to hold these two different worlds in their mind simultaneously, the need for closure in one world or the other transforms into acceptance of the paradox, and resilience grows.

Our goal should not be to seek solutions to the paradox, but to help missionaries find ways to adapt to living with ambiguity while connecting to the moment and the country where they are physically present. Dr. Boss has identified six goals for dealing with ambiguous loss: find meaning, moderate the need for control, rebuild identity, normalize ambivalence, modify attachment, and discover hope.



FINDING NEW WAYS TO LIVE

Member care providers can guide cross-cultural workers to identify their losses and to grieve those losses while at the same time, celebrate the present. Living with ambiguity in a healthy way means that the identification of losses will not negate the positive things in the present life. We can encourage the missionary to *find meaning* in the paradox of living physically in one country while living psychologically in the other.

It is important to discuss these ambiguous feelings with the whole family and in groups with other missionaries in order to normalize them. When we help missionaries accept that ambiguous loss is one of the costs of taking the gospel to the ends of the world, he or she can find positive meaning in the paradox and develop hope for the future.

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The reality that missionaries live in one world physically while living psychologically in another is something beyond their control. It is important for global workers to *moderate the need for control* of this ambiguous situation, and instead, accept it as the imperfect reality that it is. The situation is not caused by the missionary, but rather this paradox is part of cross-cultural life.

We can help them discover ways to live healthily in their host country while at the same time, celebrating their passport country. Perhaps one way to do this is to reconstruct known rituals and traditions in their new context.

How will they celebrate Christmas as usual, without pecans for pecan pie? Is there anything from their host country that can be incorporated into their new Christmas celebration? How are they going to teach their children to love both countries instead of choosing between one and the other? Adapting family customs is one way the missionary can accept and live well with the absence or presence of one country or the other and thus temper the need to have control over the paradox.

It is key to help missionaries *rebuild identity*. While learning new customs, values and points of view, a person can feel confused about their identity. "Who I am?" is the question of the day. It is also possible that as the missionary incorporates new things into their identity, they will receive criticism from their friends and family in the passport country. As member care providers, we can guide them to seek balance, integrating who they were with who they are now. It is necessary to preserve old customs, values, and points of view, and at the same time, incorporate the new ones.

One danger is when the missionary, in responding to ambiguity, takes on the role of a victim, acting as if he or she has no

power to decide who they are. We can encourage the worker to accept the changes without losing the continuity of their family and cultural history. Ambiguity does not have to define their identity and behavior, but the person themselves defines it.

Perhaps we can say that the missionary may never achieve what they see as a perfect fixed identity, but it is possible for them to accept the paradox between the old and the new life and thus live in a healthy and fruitful way. When the missionary can develop resilience to and adapt to change, he or she can rebuild a new, healthy identity.

When conflicting emotions come to light, it is important to *normalize ambivalence*. It is perfectly fine in the cross-cultural context to simultaneously love one country while missing the other and vice-versa. As we walk with missionaries, we can bring conflicting feelings to light and normalize them.

Missionaries can get stuck in the feeling of ambivalence, unsure which of the two countries they should pin their allegiance to. It is more important that they learn to adapt to ambiguity instead of constantly struggling to find the answers to questions of this kind. We normalize ambivalence when we acknowledge its existence and help the missionary face and accept it.

The global worker also has to learn how to *modify attachment* to the country where they are not physically present. The connections are not the same as before, but the closure of those relationships is neither healthy nor possible. The goal is not to let go of the connections where they are not physically present. They must learn to modify their attachment to those networks in order to live in a balanced way between absence and presence.

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Sometimes because of the pain of loss, missionaries avoid establishing new connections where they live physically and remain very attached to their connections (with people and customs) in the other country. Today this is more feasible with the use of the Internet. But the danger is that this can be very isolating for missionaries in the places where they are physically present.

Or perhaps the missionary feels guilty as if he or she has a divided loyalty when they begin to become attached to the country where they are serving. The challenge is living with the ambiguity of their attachment to one country while making connections in the other. We can help the missionary think about how to modify their attachment to the far country in a healthy way while establishing a new attachment where he or she lives.

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DISCOVERING HOPE

The ultimate goal is to guide missionaries to *discover hope*. If workers live longing for the life they had when they were mono-cultural, their resilience will stagnate because this is an unattainable dream. We can guide missionaries to develop attainable hopes and dreams. We can talk together with them about how to balance both worlds while being content incorporating new relationships, traditions, and customs with the old ones. To strengthen resilience, missionaries must be encouraged to discover new hope for the future instead of seeking closure in one world or the other.

We want to provide member care that is both informed and comprehensive. As we have seen, that care will recognize ambiguous loss as a factor in missionary life. Instead of judging global workers, we must help them understand and normalize the tension they have living in one world physically while living in the other psychologically.

We can walk alongside them, listen to them, and guide them to find meaning in the paradox, thus moderating the need for control. If their attachment can be modified to include both worlds, the ambivalence will be normalized, and this will enable the missionary to reconstruct their identity.

As long as global workers understand that ambiguous loss is part of cross-cultural living and that they can thrive with this paradox in a healthy way for the sake of leading others to faith in Christ, they can let go of the drive to seek closure. In this way they will discover hope and continue in their work with resilience. ■

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1. For a more comprehensive explanation of ambiguous loss and its therapeutic treatments as referenced in this article see Pauline Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).