



Serving as a *Returning Well Companion*

If you have been given this article, you are highly trusted and have been asked to play a significant role in the life of your friend (or family member, client, colleague, etc.).¹ Your friend has engaged the re-entry resource *Returning Well: Your Guide to Thriving Back “Home” After Serving Cross-Culturally*. With this resource, your friend has been encouraged to seek out a trusted individual with whom they can effectively debrief their recent season of cross-cultural life in order to reach a place of dynamic renewal.² They have chosen you to walk alongside them on this re-entry journey. This article seeks to answer the most critical questions pertinent to your role as a *Returning Well Companion*.

What is Re-Entry?

You are meeting with your friend during **re-entry**, which is the term used to describe the experiences a person has once they return to their **primary culture** (most likely the home culture in which they grew up) after having



lived and adapted to a **host culture** (the foreign culture where they have been living). **Culture**, for the sake of this article, is defined as the habits, customs, and beliefs that characterize a particular social or ethnic group.

When a person enters their new host culture, they often invest themselves in learning the culture and language. They may experience **culture shock**, which is described as a state of distress experienced when a person is bombarded with the newness of foreign customs,

¹ The remainder of this article will use “friend” to refer to these roles. Also note that in keeping with a casual style of writing, this article uses the plural “they” and “their” to refer to singular antecedents.

² An **effective debriefing** is reflecting on a recent season of life in order to process the specific aspects of it (events, experiences, emotions, decisions, relationships, thoughts, and actions), understand its impact personally and communally, recognize and accept its paradoxes, identify personal growth and things learned, and bring about a meaningful closure. Effective debriefing naturally leads to renewal. A **dynamic renewal** is experiencing revitalized health (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, relational, and vocational) and wholeness during the season of life following a transition. It is achieved by engaging the process of skillfully implementing action steps (that have been discerned from honing and applying debriefing insights) in such a way as to benefit others and self.

habits, and language. But as they go through the process of adapting, their lifestyle and values change, which over time, changes them.

Once they return to their primary culture, they experience **reverse culture-shock**, also known as **re-entry shock**. Often, this is more difficult than the original culture shock itself. The person expects to be returning to that which is familiar, i.e., their primary culture; however, they soon realize that not only have they changed, but also their “home,” including the people, has changed. They may feel like a foreigner again in what was supposed to be their home.

A person going through re-entry may have many different reactions ranging from joy, excitement, hope, acceptance, anticipation, gratitude, and relief, to grief, anger, anxiety,



fear, embarrassment, loneliness, discouragement, disillusionment, resentment, irritability, criticalness, indecisiveness, confusion, and withdrawal. Left unattended, these varied reactions can manifest in physical symptoms such as illness, fatigue, depression, and insomnia. Such experiences are hard enough, but if a person faces judgment and criticism from those in their primary culture for having these reactions and symptoms during re-entry, the difficulty of the transition is only exacerbated.

But despite these challenges of re-entry, it is also a season that holds great potential value. If a person in re-entry is able to effectively process (i.e., journey through a debriefing to renewal) and communicate their cross-cultural life, experiences, and insights, this will significantly contribute to them thriving in the next season. And also, it may be just what their Creator uses to bless His people and further His work in their primary culture and beyond. The *Returning Well* process is specifically designed to unleash this potential value, and you are a significant part of that process.

What's my Role? How Do I Help?

The first way to help your friend in re-entry is to provide **uninterrupted time** for your friend to **confidentially** share their experiences. Each time you meet with your friend for the purpose of debriefing that leads to renewal, allow about two hours for them to share and you to actively listen. If a person feels rushed, it will be difficult for them to explore and share deeply. Further, your friend has been encouraged to meet with you six times over one of the following time periods:

- six weeks (one meeting per week),
- three months (two meetings per month),
- six months (one meeting per month).

Ask your friend what their preferred time period is, and note that a suggested plan for each of these meetings, including specific questions, is provided at the end of this article. Further, commit to never repeat anything shared during this time, and make that commitment known to your friend before you begin. Please don't miss this! Confidentiality is imperative! Finally, only allow those with a personal invitation from your friend to join these meetings. An environment of trust is indispensable for this time to be effective.

Next, give your friend a **grace-filled and patient presence**. Your demeanor of grace and patience can create a place where your friend feels safe to process the myriad emotions and thoughts they are experiencing without fear of a negative response. Show acceptance of strong emotions as well as silence. Simply your presence is a gift that combats one major challenge of re-entry: isolation.

Because your friend's cross-cultural experiences may have been so different than the experiences of others, your friend may be used to seeing people's eyes glaze over when they share their stories. Thus, you can offer **non-glazing empathy**, putting forth the energy necessary to remain engaged as they share. Sincerely seek to understand their story by putting yourself metaphorically in their shoes. Imagine what their life was like, who was important to them, and what was meaningful about their time in their host culture. Attempt to recognize and acknowledge how their season of life lived cross-culturally fits into their life as a whole and how such experiences might be used in their future.

Lastly, you can be a **non-judgmental explorer** who seeks to understand your friend's story by avoiding the following: interrupting, giving advice, and sharing your own stories. Please don't miss this either! It is imperative that you make space for your friend to talk. Consider the time a success if you talk only three percent of the time. Use this three percent to acknowledge what your friend is sharing and ask **open-ended questions** (i.e., questions that can't be answered with a yes or no). While your friend shares, avoid offering suggestions or trying to "fix" your friend or their situation. Further, avoid "why" questions as they often put people on the defensive.

Thank you for taking the time and energy to fully engage this vitally important task. One

very consistent theme discovered as others used the preliminary version of this guidebook was the value of a skilled companion. The majority of those with the most successful outcomes from *Returning Well* all had trusted companions that walked alongside them in these ways. And so, as you serve as a companion, you are helping your friend reach a dynamic renewal—this may be the **best re-entry gift** they will ever receive!



What's the Plan?

On the following pages is a suggested plan for the six meetings laid out in *Returning Well* and open-ended questions to consider using at each. Before your first meeting, you are encouraged to watch *Cast Away*, a movie that depicts transition, adjustment, and re-entry. Your friend has also been encouraged to watch it, which will enable the two of you to share a common reference during your meetings. Your friend has a "Cast Away Content Advisory for Faith-Based Audiences" should you desire to be aware of scenes that may require viewer discretion. Although watching *Cast Away* is encouraged, doing so is not required to serve as a companion. Finally, also note that you do not need your own copy of *Returning Well* to serve as a companion.

“I thought it [*Cast Away*] was a tangible example of what one experiences in a new host culture and upon their return to their home culture...not only for those who had the experience, but also as something that could be referenced to help others understand what it's like to re-integrate into a culture/society that others expect you to claim, know, and relate to.”

What helped to make the time with your companion(s) successful?

“Them being a listening ear. Not trying to fix or solve my problems but letting me talk and think through things and process things with them.”

“Uninterrupted time.”



Meeting One Focusing on Building Rapport and Getting Started

The goal of this first meeting is to build rapport with your friend and facilitate an intentional conversation that assists them in processing their initial transition experiences. To achieve these goals, use the following questions as starting

places for listening well, and be sure to leave time for the wrap-up questions.

Exploration Questions for the Majority of Your Meeting

- What parts of the movie *Cast Away* most resemble your experiences?
- What has re-entry been like for you thus far?
- What do you most desire to tell people about your season of life that you lived in your host culture?
- What questions do you wish people would ask you? (*If appropriate, ask your friend the questions they mention.*)

Optional Exploration Questions

Use the following questions as your friend demonstrates energy and interest.

- Who were the most important people to you?
 - What made these people important to you?
- What do you miss the most from your host culture?
 - What do you miss the least?
- What were some of the most difficult parts about your life in your host culture?
- What joys from your time in your host culture stand out to you?

Wrap-up Questions for the Final Portion of Your Meeting

- What will help make our time together the best it can be for you?
- What do you hope our meetings together will help you to accomplish?
- How else can I be helpful to you during this time?

*Consider closing your time together by asking your Creator to bless your friend's *Returning Well* journey as well as your future meetings together. After this, ask your friend when they would like to meet again.*

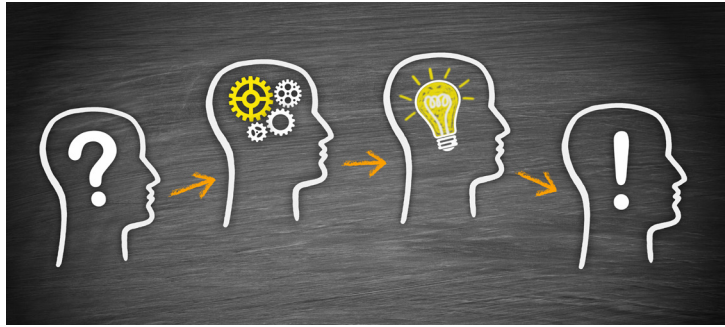
- When would you like to meet again?

For meeting



Meeting Two, Meeting Three, and Meeting Four Focusing on Part Two: “Inquiring”

The goal of these meetings is to help your friend effectively process the questions and insights most pertinent to them from the chapters in Part Two: “Inquiring” of *Returning Well*. Before each of these meetings, your friend will engage questions related to their life in their host culture and then discern which questions they would like to further explore or insights they would like to share in their meeting with you. The following questions will help you to assist your friend in effectively processing these things. Again, your role is not to “fix” your friend; your role is to be a non-judgmental explorer and use these questions as starting places for



listening well to your friend as they share and process what is most important to them. And finally, be sure to leave time for the wrap-up questions.

looking back

Exploration Questions for the Majority of Your Meeting

- What additional thoughts, if any, did you have from our last meeting?
- Which question or insight would you like to focus on first in our time together?
 - What makes this item meaningful to you?
 - What would you like to process or explore about this item? (*Help your friend process this item by listening well, reflecting back their thoughts to them, and asking open-ended questions. After your friend completes their processing on one question or insight, repeat this pattern, and ask what insight or question they would like to focus on next, what makes it meaningful to them, and what they would like to process regarding that item. When no other insights or questions arise, move to the wrap-up questions.*)

Wrap-up Questions for the Final Portion of Your Meeting

- What was most significant to you from our time together today?
 - What difference do you think that will make for you going forward?
- What requests would you like me to bring before our Creator for you? (*You may be able to ask this question more overtly if you are meeting in a spiritually open environment. Either way, consider closing your time together by bringing these requests before Him.*)
- How else can I be helpful to you during this time?
- When would you like to meet again?

“I liked that I had time to reflect and [talk with my Creator regarding] the questions in Returning Well. But, then it was encouraging to talk through the questions with my companion and get a chance to express my discoveries to another person.”

What could your companion(s) have done differently to provide a better experience for you?

“Asked more questions. Listened more than talked. Helped me come up with action steps. [Lifted up my requests to our Creator] with me.”

What would have made the time with your companion(s) better?

“If we had been more focused in our conversations.”

Meeting Five

Focusing on Chapter Twenty and Chapter Twenty-One

In Chapter Twenty, your friend will pull together all of the insights that they have collected during their *Returning Well* journey thus far. Then, in Chapter Twenty-One, they will discern specific ways to apply those insights, including defining a goal and tangible action steps for living out renewal in their next season of life. Your goal is to continue to be a grace-filled and patient presence and to use the provided questions as starting places for listening well as your friend considers critical steps toward renewal. As before, be sure to leave time for the wrap-up questions.

Exploration Questions for the Majority of Your Meeting

- What additional thoughts, if any, did you have from our last meeting?
- What would you like to focus on in our time together?
 - What makes this item significant to you?
 - What would you like to explore or process about this item? (*Help your friend process this item by listening well, reflecting back their thoughts to them, and asking open-ended questions. After your friend completes their processing on this first item, repeat this pattern, and ask what they would like to focus on next, what makes it significant to them, and what they would like to explore regarding it. Once no other items arise, consider the optional exploration questions, or move to the wrap-up questions.*)

Optional Exploration Questions

Use the following questions as your friend demonstrates energy and interest.

- As you considered all of the gleanings that you collected in Chapter Twenty, what themes did you see?
 - What value do these themes hold for you as you move forward?
- To the extent that you feel comfortable sharing, what were your five most significant insights (from p. 177)?
 - What difference do you expect these will make in your coming season?
- What is the goal that you committed to work toward in Chapter Twenty-One?
 - How can I be a support to you, if at all, as you take steps toward your goal? (*In this chapter, your friend is also encouraged to draw a sketch that visually represents their season of life that they lived in their host culture, including the meaning of it. The two following questions pertain to that topic.*)
- What was your final encapsulation sketch?
 - What is significant to you about that sketch?

Wrap-up Questions for the Final Portion of Your Meeting

- What awareness do you now have that you did not have before our meeting today?
 - What is the value of that awareness for you going forward?
- What requests would you like me to bring before our Creator for you?
- How else can I be helpful to you during this time?
- When would you like to meet again?

For meeting



Meeting Six

Focusing on Chapter Twenty-Two and Bringing Closure to Your Time Together

This meeting has two goals. The first is to help your friend process the communication strategies they developed in Chapter Twenty-Two: “Crafting Your Communications.” The second goal is to bring about closure to your time together by celebrating key insights and solidifying next steps for living out renewal. To



achieve these goals, use the following questions as starting places for listening well, and be sure to leave time for the wrap-up questions.

Exploration Questions for the Majority of Your Meeting

- What additional thoughts, if any, did you have from our last meeting?
- For this meeting’s agenda, we can focus on some questions I have that are specifically designed to help you process Chapter Twenty-Two, or we could focus on something else of importance to you from your *Returning Well* journey. What would you like? *(If your friend chooses to focus on something of importance to them, utilize the exploration questions that you used in Meeting Five. Otherwise, continue to the following questions.)*
- What was most valuable to you from Chapter Twenty-Two?
 - What makes that valuable to you?
- What is most difficult for you when it comes to communicating about your host-culture life with those in your primary culture?
 - What is different about the times you are able to communicate well? *(Chapter Twenty-Two encourages your friend to create a statement to use in talking with others that includes basic information about their time in their host culture. The following question pertains to this statement.)*
- What is your basic-building-block statement from p. 195?
 - How comfortable are you with using this statement?
 - What, if anything, would help make it more natural for you to use?
- What stories and insights that you listed in Chapter Twenty-Two do you hope to share with others?
 - What influence do you hope these stories and insights will have?

Wrap-up Questions for the Final Portion of Your Meeting

- What do you most want to remember from all of our meetings?
 - What difference are these items already making in your life?
- What next steps will keep you moving toward a dynamic renewal?
- What requests would you like me to bring before our Creator for you?
- How else can I be helpful to you as you move forward?

moving forward

For meeting

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