

12-2005

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## Recommended Citation

Hartley, Laura, "On living an intercultural life: Reflections of a suburban U.S. soccer mom 15 years after HNGR" (2005). *Faculty Publications - Department of World Languages, Sociology & Cultural Studies*. Paper 15.

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**On Living an Intercultural Life:  
Reflections of a Suburban U.S. Soccer Mom 15 Years after HNGR**  
December 2005

*Laura C. (Merrifield) Hartley '91 (HNGR '90)*

When I stepped onto Wheaton College's campus as a freshman in the fall of 1987, I had a clear vocational calling. I was going to be a missionary, and more specifically, a Bible translator.

Growing up in a middle class (and mostly white) suburb, I had developed this plan for my life as the result of several factors. The first was my upbringing in a denomination and church that placed an emphasis on overseas missions. As long as I could remember, I had been inspired by the many pictures of missionary families that our church supported, which donned the walls of the church narthex. We prayed as a congregation for these families and some of them came to visit from time to time. I was intrigued by the stories of lives that seemed so different from mine.

Related to this first factor was my own experience of short-term mission trips as a high school student. Every spring break, the teenagers of our church, along with a number of adult chaperones, hopped into vans or a bus and drove 10 hours down to Mexico, where we spent a week "ministering" to the people of an impoverished village just over the border. We slept in tents, paid for showers at a nearby town, and drank a lot of bottles of soda purchased from a local man who likely made most of his year's wages quenching the thirst of this group of rowdy American teenagers. While I understand much better now than I did then how hospitable it was of the villagers to put up with us well-intentioned but certainly not very culturally-sensitive *gringos*, the trips had the important role in my life of exposing me to a language, culture and life situation quite different from the one in which I was growing up.

The final experience that shaped my developing vocational calling was a visit when I was sixteen from my paternal aunt and uncle. They had spent forty years in a remote village in Mexico as Wycliffe Bible Translators. Along the way, my uncle had earned a doctorate in Anthropology and had taught in Wycliffe's Summer Institute of Linguistics training program. I was captivated to hear the details of their life and work. I decided that summer that Bible translation was what I too wanted to do with my career.

So when the registration materials for my first semester at Wheaton arrived and I read the description of the Human Need and Global Resources program<sup>1</sup>, I was sold. I signed up for the introductory HNGR course in my first semester, and I mapped out my program of study around the requirements of HNGR. Along the way, I put together an interdisciplinary studies degree that combined courses in Math (which I was good at and my uncle had told me was a good foundation for Linguistics), Communications, and Languages (more specifically, Spanish, Ancient Greek, and Mandarin). I filled out my general education requirements with HNGR courses; Bob Stickney's *Third World Studies*, Dean Arnold's *Biculturalism*, and Zondra Lindblade's *Social Change* were particularly memorable. I learned about development and culture and Jesus' preferential option for the poor. When I embarked on my HNGR internship in June 1990, I was set for a life-changing and vocation-confirming experience.

That was, of course, what I got, although I couldn't have anticipated all that I would learn about God, the world, and probably most importantly myself in that short six-month period. I had the opportunity to live and work with two American linguists in Sabah, Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. It was everything I imagined and nothing I could have anticipated. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Wheaton's HNGR program is a special program open to students in any major, which exposes students to issues of poverty and development within a Christian framework. Students take up to 18 hours of preparatory coursework, which then culminates in a six-month internship in a developing country context during their senior year. For more information, visit <http://www.wheaton.edu/HNGR/>.

difficult and wonderful. It was tremendously fun and emotionally exhausting. It was world-rocking, growth-inducing, life-altering. It was, in short, a HNGR internship.

When I returned from HNGR, my course was set. I would work for a few years to save up some money and to learn how to live as a “real” grown-up. Then I would go off to grad school, earn a master’s degree in Linguistics, hopefully find a wonderful handsome male linguist to become my partner, and go off to translate the Bible into some exotic language. My vision for my life couldn’t have been clearer. Unfortunately (but of course, in hindsight, quite fortunately), life intervened and got in the way of my plans. And it was ironically the HNGR program itself that was largely to blame. This came in four manifestations.

The first was my roommate in those first two post-college years. Stacey and I had developed a friendship as we prepared for our concurrent HNGR internships. We had written letters (yes letters! – no email then) to one another during our internships to share our experiences on different continents. When we graduated, we decided to get an apartment together on the near northwest side of Chicago. Stacey and I could not have been more different from one another, and our lives in the past 15 years have taken quite different paths (although our friendship has continued despite those differences). What Stacey did for me was to ensure that upon returning from HNGR, I wouldn’t retreat back into the safety of the world I had started to step out of. In being my companion, she helped me shore up my courage and continue to explore different ways of thinking and being. Without her friendship, I can imagine that my life would have gone in a very different direction.

Secondly, my second year out of Wheaton, Stacey and I joined with six other Wheaton grads, five of whom were also HNGR alumni, and formed what we called simply “the community.” We were four women and four men, living together, working in different jobs in

the city of Chicago, praying together nightly, engaging in lively conversations about everything, and trying to figure out what it meant to be disciples in that context and time of our lives. While I could spend pages reflecting on that year alone, suffice it to say that living so closely with seven other people who shared the common experience of having lived for a time in a non-North American country only served to reinforce my growing awareness of the complexities of faith and life.

This second factor also led to the third. One of the young men in the community quickly became much more than a friend, and less than a year after meeting him, I married Ben Hartley ('92, HNGR '91). Ben also had an interest in missions, but he didn't want to be a linguist. After getting married, we went off to grad school together and completed master's degrees (mine in Linguistics, his in International Development). It seemed to us like a great combination for overseas work. The problem came when we applied for service with several missionary-sending agencies. Perhaps it was the timing, perhaps it was the agencies to which we applied, perhaps it was God's hand in our lives. Whatever the reasons, at that moment in time, we couldn't find an organization or placement that seemed to fit.

This was at least partially due to the final manifestation of HNGR's role in disrupting my life plans. Experiencing life and faith through the lens of a completely different culture helped me realize how limited and culture-bound my understanding of God and the world had been. As a result, I was no longer content to return to the Christianity I had left, and that included my old notions of conservative evangelical mission work. I wrote a song during my HNGR internship that captured the questions that the HNGR experience raised for me. The first verse and chorus of this song say:

I'm not sure just where it started or how it all began  
But some people somewhere laid a set of rules.

They told us how we ought to worship and how we ought to pray  
And made us think that we are wise, though we are fools.  
And I believed the formula so I learned it all by rote,  
I thought my balance was good because I didn't rock the boat.

But when I had it nicely packaged, I stepped out into the world  
To heal its wounds with my salvation first aid kit.  
But there was fear and hate and anger and grief I could not bear  
And I realized my answers didn't fit.  
But then I saw the Gospel as an outward-moving force  
It swept away the brokenness and brought laughter from remorse.

How big is your God? How great is he?  
Have you placed him neatly in a box of your theology?  
Or have you felt his power and understood he's so much more?  
My God is bigger than I ever knew before.

Ben and I didn't end up going overseas at least in part because at the time when we were ready to go, we were no longer able to embrace all the aspects that being financially supported by conservative evangelical American churches entailed. Since we no longer felt entirely at home (either culturally or theologically) in that subculture, we didn't know if we could follow God's call for our lives within the constraints that support-based ministry would require. If we were to face that question again today, we might have a different view of the nature and requirements of such partnerships; at the time, however, it felt inauthentic to pursue such funding in the midst of our doubts and questions.

There is probably no typical path of a HNGR graduate. Nonetheless, I suspect that my life's path would be familiar to many HNGR alumni, not necessarily in the details but the overall arch. My life for the past 15 years has included completing a doctorate in Linguistics, living for eight years in a racially- and socioeconomically-mixed urban neighborhood, teaching intercultural communication at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, having and beginning to raise two kids, six months ago moving to the suburbs (to be near my husband's new job), and in general, trying to live faithfully within God's grip on my life.

If someone met me for the first time today, they would probably not think my life to be very uncommon for a middle class American. I own a house in the suburbs. I am an active church member. I take my kids to soccer games and dance classes. I have worked part-time, full-time and inside the home. But as I reflect on the past 15 years, it is easy to see the way that HNGR started me down a path that has radically changed the way I interact with my world. I can summarize this orientation in three principles.

**1. Cultural relativism does not necessarily lead to moral relativism.** Admittedly, I am a student of culture and not philosophy, but in the discourse in which I was raised, I remember strong warnings against the evils of relativism: If we lose our belief in absolute truth, then indeed all is lost. What the many intercultural experiences I have had over the past 15 years have taught me, however, is that while “truth” is no fiction nor mere human construction, it is sheer arrogance to believe that any single person or culture can fully grasp what that is. There are certainly manifestations of good and evil in every culture. Most of what interferes in human relations, however, is not issues of right and wrong (important as these may be) but difference. If humans could somehow collectively shift our focus from trying to prove we are right or better than one another, and subsequently trying to make others into our own image, to trying to understand and appreciate the ways in which we are different from one another, the world would be a very different place indeed. We would also, I believe, have a much better understanding of our Creator.

**2. Context is paradoxically critically important and utterly unimportant.** As a student and teacher of Communication, I am constantly reinforcing for my students the ways in which context influences perception. I have found this to be true both in interpersonal interactions and in life situations. For example, the fact that I lived in a condo complex in

Boston with 20 mostly non-white and working-class families, many of whom struggled each month to pay their bills and provide for children who attended often inadequate public schools, tremendously impacted my faith, not to mention my politics. The choices we make about our lives (for those of us who have choices to begin with) will influence the way we see and operate within the world. This is the predominant reason why, when researching neighborhoods for our move from Boston to Philadelphia this past summer, one of my most important criteria was the amount and kind of diversity within the public schools. As a parent, I am willing to forgo some of the opportunities that my children might have if we lived in a wealthy, upper middle class suburb in order for them to grow up with a better understanding of the diversity of cultures, religions, lifestyles and economic situations that make up our country and world.

At the same time, however, my recent move to the suburbs has begun to show me that my identity and God's call on my life is not context-bound. God desires faithfulness from me in whatever context I find myself. Many U.S. Christians need to redefine their notion of "mission." Mission is not something that a brave few who are willing to pick up and move their lives to another culture engage in. Mission is found everywhere, and it is every Christian's responsibility. There are needs wherever we may be, and we are called to meet those needs. In some ways, I believe it is harder to be in mission in one's home culture. We are so bound up with it that we can be blind to the many ways it distracts us from serious discipleship.

**3. Understanding one's vocation is an active, collaborative process.** I couldn't have imagined when I was a teenager or a HNGR intern the path that my life would take. I have no idea where I will be – either geographically or vocationally – 15 years from now. But I am convinced that all along life's journey, God invites us into a dynamic relationship with him, ourselves, and others. The choices we make affect the path we take. Our calling may change

completely; it will certainly grow and mature. God is always willing to work with the choices we make, but we must take responsibility for them and the consequences they bring for both ourselves and others.

I didn't learn all these things in a six-month HNGR internship. But participating in the HNGR program did open me up to a new way of interacting with my world and ultimately my God. It taught me that ambiguity is challenging, but complexity is fascinating. It taught me that my view of the world will always be limited, but that I can and must work to expand my understanding. It taught me that life is difficult, but grace is abundant. Perhaps most importantly, it taught me that I have never been, and never will be, alone in this journey. For that, I am immeasurably grateful.