

*For Solomon, Sarah Joanne and
Jonathan David –*

*“Be strong and courageous. Do not be
afraid; do not be discouraged, for the
LORD your God will be with you
wherever you go.”*

Joshua 1:9, The Bible

Headwinds



A personal story to spark
corporate diversity conversations

Helga Evelyn Samuel

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

“Headwinds is an absorbing and honest account of Helga’s journey from South Asia to the Middle East and on to Europe. It’s a compelling narrative of constant striving in the face of adversity and life’s circumstances. An inspirational book for all expatriates seeking to build a better life in new and unfamiliar cultural environments.”

Dr. Valery Chow

Senior Energy Advisor Shell, UK

“The book provides a truly inspiring account of life as an expat. Join Helga in her journey as an Indian expat and learn along the way how to overcome not only the challenges of living in new lands but also how to grow as an individual. A must read for those moving to work abroad and for human resource managers preparing employees for international assignments.”

Dr. Oli. R. Mihalache

Professor, International Business

Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands

“Storytelling is a skill. When done well its impact can be powerful. The pages of this book reveal Helga’s personal journey as an expatriate in ways that make the reader relate, reflect and reuse the lessons in their own cross-cultural experiences and journey. She’s bold in expressing her faith yet doesn’t disrespect other religions. She’s transparent about her cross-cultural challenges and weaknesses and at the same time demonstrates a high level of cultural intelligence as she navigates through such a diversity of experiences and relationships. I’m not an expatriate but work in this space every day as a professional and I still learned a lot. I’m confident you will too!”

Dr. Sandra Upton

Vice President Educational Initiatives

Cultural Intelligence Center, USA

“Helga’s expatriate life story almost reads like a diary, with ups and downs following each other swiftly. For the expatriate partner and HR manager there are important lessons to be drawn. Great learnings that indeed can draw only one conclusion: Even with headwinds you are MUCH stronger than you think you are. Couldn’t stop reading...”

Dr. Fons Trompenaars

Leading Keynote Speaker, Thought Leader, Leadership Development And Bestselling Author Of ‘Riding The Waves Of Culture’

“Reading the impressive story of Helga’s life was like a trip on a rollercoaster. Helga steps out of the rollercoaster and shows us – as the wife of an expat – the many lessons she learned by trial and error. This makes the book a fascinating manual for expats. At the same time, we see Helga’s development and growing self-confidence. With her objective – connecting cultures – she gently takes the reader on an introspective journey. How strong are you? How do you deal with strong setbacks? And in that way, she holds up a mirror to us. What about your cultural intelligence, and what about your hidden prejudices?

A confronting book, fascinating, and recommended for all. A useful read for entrepreneurs who wish to transform their organizations to obtain a more diverse staffing. It shows the value of the diversity of perspectives and talents of people from a variety of cultures and groups.

On top of all that, this book gives you a wonderful story, with valuable suggestions for expats and for the Dutch host country.”

Henk Van De Langkruis

Retired Manager & Dutch Language Coach

The Netherlands

“With her very personal story Helga helps us understand the hurdles as a trailing spouse and expat. Showing vulnerability makes her stronger. Her courageous book shows us the way to deal with dilemmas in our multicultural world.“

Dr. Sylvia Van De Bunt

Professor And Co-Director, Servant Leadership Center For Research And Education, The Netherlands

“As a European Expat living in India, I found Helga’s story inspiring. Her story can encourage all of us - men, women, local, expat or re-pat. She also explains Indian culture and why it is the way it is, which is helpful. The book is written with soul, elegance and expertise in the field of diversity and inclusion.”

Florentina Peels

IT Operations Manager, Shell, Expat in India

“This book was written by a very special woman. To me Helga S. is a graceful straddler between different worlds who relates with disarming honesty and subtle humour her experiences and those of her family, living as expatriates in very different countries and cultures to their native one. Everyone who has lived, studied or worked for an extended period abroad will resonate with the experiences the author describes. I especially recommend this book to those working in HR who have professional contact with people from outside their own culture.”

Wolf-Dieter Kretschmer

Department Head

Evangeliumsrundfunk, Germany

“Helga’s story is a testimony to the strength and perseverance of an ambitious Indian woman who, with the help of her wonderful family, managed to free herself from the crippling bonds of her native patriarchal culture. Supported by her husband, she struggled and survived many grueling hardships while living in Oman and the Netherlands over a period of twelve years. This slender book is a treasure chest of good advice which can be of benefit to other pioneers living abroad. It is of practical value and inspiring.”

Petra & Ruud Hisgen

Directors

Direct Dutch Institute, The Netherlands

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword: by Dr. David Livermore	11
Author's Insight	15
Section 1: An autobiographic account of my expatriate journey	
1. A Road Less Traveled	19
2. A Middle-Eastern Saga	27
3. A New Beginning in the Land of Tulips	37
4. An Unexpected Lay-off	45
5. Our Lives Thrown off Balance	49
6. University and the Power of Community	53
7. Rebuilding from the Ashes	57
Section 2: Nuggets of Wisdom	
8. Wisdom for Expatriates	63
9. Wisdom for Expatriate Partners	71
10. Wisdom for Difficult Times	77
11. Wisdom for Friends of Expatriates	91
A Few Final Words	95
About The Author	97
Acknowledgement	99

***“The best stories
come from
rock-bottom.”***

TREVOR CARSS



FOREWORD

Life as an expat can be an exhilarating, mind-opening adventure. Or it can be downright drudgery. The research tells us that the number one thing that makes or breaks a global assignment is how the spouse and family handle their new lives overseas. Yet nearly all of the articles and books about expat life focus on the one whose job took them there. Furthermore, it's usually assumed that the expat is a Westerner traveling to some exotic land in the East or South. This book is an exception. It gives you a close look at how an Indian family handles life away from home.

Helga Samuel is the real deal. I research, write, and speak about cultural intelligence, Helga has lived it. Her self-effacing stories are raw, funny, engaging, and practical. She offers guidance to other “trailing spouses” who follow their partners on the expat journey without being preachy. And she links her experiences to research-based findings.

My colleagues and I have spent the last several years researching cultural intelligence and global leadership. Our driving question is: “What’s the difference between those who can successfully adapt to different cultures and those who can’t?” We’ve gathered data from more than 100 countries around the world and we’ve found some recurring characteristics of those who can be described as culturally intelligent. Cultural intelligence, or CQ, is the capability to be effective across any cultural context. It’s hard to overstate how important cultural intelligence is for anyone who wants to succeed in today’s increasingly globalized world and particularly for families embarking on a global assignment. But cultural intelligence has little benefit if it merely remains a grandiose, overarching idea. It has to be applied to specific contexts. That’s one of the many reasons why I’m so excited about this book.

- › Expats need to read this before they go abroad—to help them anticipate what’s to come.
- › Expats in the midst of an assignment need to read it as well—to put language to the joys and challenges of life overseas.
- › Friends and families of expats need to read this—to improve the way they support them.
- › Western cross-cultural practitioners need to read this—to gain practical understanding of how other cultures differ in day-to-day life.
- › And companies who send and receive talent to and from around the world need to read this book—to gain insight into things they may otherwise never hear.

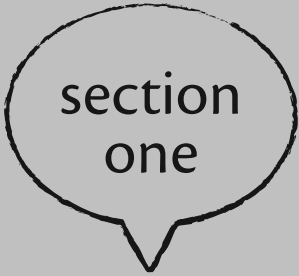
This is such a fun, engaging read, while practical at the same time.

May we all have the resolve and cultural intelligence to persevere through the ups and downs of life overseas as Helga does. She inspires me while also showing me what it looks like to not take ourselves too seriously along the way.

Forward together,

David Livermore, PhD

Thought Leader on Cultural Intelligence and Global Leadership



section
one

**AN AUTOBIO-
GRAPHIC
ACCOUNT
OF MY
EXPATRIATE
JOURNEY**



A Road less Traveled

“A difficult time can be more readily endured if we retain the conviction that our existence holds a purpose, a cause to pursue, a person to love, a goal to achieve.”

JOHN MAXWELL

CHAPTER 1

It is a cold winter morning in The Netherlands. I am sitting at my dining table with an absolute disarray around me. A trail of clothes washed and unwashed hurriedly strewn around the house, breakfast plates with unfinished food, dirty dishes waiting to be loaded into the dish washer. An endless list of household chores demanding my attention. With the co-occupants of the house temporarily away for a few hours this morning, I decide to savor this peace. This lull. This space to myself. To reflect. To mull over.

I am no longer busy during the week for classes at the university, where I'd enrolled as a mature student to get my master's degree in Business Administration. The rigour and routine of classes had helped me temporarily set my eyes on a goal. To get myself upgraded and equipped. To do what I'd desired to do. After years spent as an 'expat spouse'. Our son turned four this year. He is no longer a baby. Our daughter is a preteen. How quickly time has flown. Everyone around me is growing, moving on. Yet this morning I deliberately allow myself to be secretly transported on a time machine going back in time.

Years ago, when I began my bachelor's in Nutrition and Dietetics in India, I did pretty well in college and I graduated with honors. I was young, vivacious, full of ideas and ambitious. I was elected twice by the students to serve in the coveted Student Senate. I juggled college during the weekdays, computer lessons in the evenings, Senate meetings and organizing events in college during and after college as well as intensive German lessons of around seven hours every weekend. My schedule was a stark contrast to many Western university going young adults who have a social life besides studies, socialize over alcohol and many of whom are in relationships with their boyfriends/girlfriends. Back then, the only drinks I had while socializing with my friends were coke, mango lassi, buttermilk, cappuccino from one of the westernized 'coffee hang-outs' or black tea from the tea salon in my neighborhood. In those days in India, students regularly hung out with each other after college hours to chat or work on projects together. Food and drinks in India were and still are quite affordable, depending on where you hang out. There are a variety of options available for everyone based on budget.

Apropos alcohol: there used to be an unspoken stigma attached to women consuming alcohol in India. Yet this did not deter some who secretly smuggled alcohol into university campus or hung out at places over the weekend where alcohol featured extensively. Those that were discovered were severely reprimanded by university authorities.

I had no time or inclination for a relationship. Even if I did manage to fall in love with someone, the chances were high that my parents would not approve of the person. Besides, we were not under any societal pressure to get into a relationship. Most of my girlfriends did not have boyfriends. Marriages were, and still are, mostly arranged by parents in India.

I was still living with my parents, as is common among Indian families. In India young adults do not move out at the age of 18. Even as young adults, we are heavily dependent on our parents' income(s) to study and we typically live with them until we get married. Some even continue living with in-laws and relatives after marriage in 'joint family' settings. Most young adults in India also do not have the freedom to independently choose their career path, let alone make crucial life decisions on their own like their Western counterparts. Our parents and other family elders make these choices for us. It is considered disrespectful, arrogant, prideful and rebellious to disregard their choices.

During the latter half of my first year at college, my parents had an intense tussle with each other and my mom left us to live by herself in a hostel for two years. Divorce is looked down upon and is very rare in India. Couples stay together even within unhappy marriages for fear of being stigmatized and shunned by the communities they belong to. Since community plays a very important role for the survival of individuals within it, seldom do some go against the popular culture of the society they belong to. Considering these factors, my parents stayed together and still continue to live with each other despite their acrimonious relationship.

I had obtained my driver's license just then, so I was expected to drive down to mom's hostel to spend some weekday evenings visiting her which I did as a dutiful daughter. Each visit was a huge assault on my emotions. Yet, I had learned very early in life to channelize my energies into other places and allow busyness to drown the sorrow and helplessness I felt watching my parents' crumbling marriage. My parents had met and

married the 'arranged marriage' way. Looking at their miserable lives, I'd resolved within myself never to take the same route they did. Marriage was not on my priority list.

At college where I studied for my bachelor's, I found my classmates settling down pretty quickly through 'arranged marriage' and I thought to myself, "Never! I am a career woman and I will never become a homemaker." My professors noticed my ambitious, headstrong streak and advised that I pursue an MBA or software engineering. Those were the most popular career choices at that time. They said, "Helga, you are certainly not cut out to settle down soon as a housewife. You are talented and ambitious. We certainly do not advise you to sign up for the Master's in Food Service Management (FSM)." Back in 2000, the field of Nutrition and Dietetics was not yet a popular career choice in the job market as it is now. I took their advice seriously. I was late to apply for an MBA in a well-known B-school, so I applied for an MBA as well as a Master's in Communication at a burgeoning, popular college in Chennai. I also applied for a course in Software Engineering at IBM. I got selected for all three. My dad insisted I opt for the MBA or software engineering courses. Yet, I was drawn to the Master's in Communication. The course seemed exciting with four internship opportunities and plenty of creative assignments. Dad reluctantly paid for my studies although he was furious at my seemingly unwise career choice. He refused to speak to me for several months because of my poor decision. "You are hopeless at current affairs," he chided. "You are not going to do this well." The more he discouraged me from it, the more I was determined to prove him wrong. I worked diligently and my efforts paid off. At the end of the two-year study program, I was selected to win the prestigious college award. The words 'Best Journalist Award' (awarded for excellence in academics and extracurricular activities) were etched on an ornate silver plate placed within a bright red rectangular encasing. It was a proud moment for me. My father was speechless. The award now has a prominent spot in our living room in The Netherlands. Every time I look at it, I am reminded to persevere in the midst of difficulties.

My master's degree also paved the way for an internship opportunity in Germany in television broadcasting and video editing. Little did I know that the ten weeks in Germany would be life changing. Not only did I richly gain

in knowledge and experience in an entirely German speaking environment, but the interactions with my colleagues continued even after my return to India and eventually developed into deep, lifelong friendships.

A few years after my master's degree, I'd dreamed of pursuing a PhD in Cross-Cultural Management at a university in Germany. I found a professor who liked my topic and was willing to work with me. I worked hard to write my initial draft of the research proposal. I diligently set aside my salary from my full-time job at a fintech company to finance my dream. Yet despite my best efforts, life had other plans. My parents put a stop to my ambitious goals and decided to get me married through the dreaded arranged marriage route. In India, marrying off their sons/daughters is one of the duties of parents. Typically, parents finance their children's schooling and college education, support them in finding work, find a spouse for their 'adult son/daughter' through arranged marriage, get them married, pressurize them to have grand-children 'in order to be entertained in their old age' (many Indian parents still do unashamedly state this for a reason!) and then finally expect their 'adult children' to take care of them during their old age. It more or less follows that order. In India most married 'adult children' continue to financially support their parents and sometimes even siblings. Owing to the absence of a state pension system in India that elderly members can rely on, financial support from their adult children becomes very important.

Now my mother had formally registered me at many Christian marriage bureaus in the city, some run by churches, some by private individuals. She had a small notebook with handwritten notes on potential 'grooms' that I had to review. I was not going to take this bait, so I played along and decided I would reject every potential suitor with an excuse: "he's too fat, he is too thin, he is too short, he sounds boring, goodness who would have that for a hobby!" My mother's 'suitor list' for me grew longer. Two notebooks were used up with her notes. My excuses got more and more creative. My parents finally found me out and said the following to me, "Get married and then do whatever you want. If your husband allows you to pursue a PhD, then go for it. If he doesn't, accept it and move on." Those words were like a hit below the belt. It was a very Indian thing to be 'an obedient child' to parents before marriage and 'an obedient wife' to your husband after

marriage. My dad also made it clear to me that he was unwilling to partially sponsor my doctoral degree, should I need the financial support. With my PhD dreams shelved, I met my husband through arranged marriage. My fiancé was a research assistant pursuing a PhD at a university in Chennai. He had selected my photo from 400 pictures of prospective brides registered at a marriage bureau. I had secretly hoped he would understand my crazy desire to study further since he was already in the middle of a doctoral degree himself. We both shared a love for music. He played the guitar that was mostly self-taught. I was a singer and dreamed of learning to play the piano. We met twice before we were engaged in a public ceremony that is akin to a mini-wedding. We had about 750 guests.

A few days after our engagement, my husband-to-be asked me, “What do you desire to do in your life?” I rambled with excitement, “I want to travel the world, meet people from different cultures, learn to cook different kinds of food, and just live this life of adventure.” I had expected my fiancé to be excited about my dreams. Yet he began to cry, much to my shock. “I cannot provide for that. I am so sorry,” he sobbed. He was earning a meager stipend, as was the case for research assistants those days. Yet with my new-found Christian faith and driven by optimism, I told my fiancé, “God knows my heart’s desires. I trust Him to bring them to pass.”

We got married seven months after our engagement, exactly one day after the tsunami wreaked havoc in South Asia in 2004. We had a modest 2500 guests at our wedding. In India, weddings are public declarations of the union of two families, not just two individuals. Therefore, the invitee lists tend to be very long. Considering how community oriented the Indian culture is, the guest lists can easily run to a few thousands.

A month before our wedding my husband got a job as a Civil Engineer in a well-established and globally recognized firm in Chennai. It was a miracle. Although he had to sadly abandon his desire to pursue his PhD, it was not altogether catastrophic since he enjoyed the perks of a good salary and other benefits.

We worked ourselves to the bone. I was away from home for at least 12-14 hours a day working for the fintech company. They had many offices in the city, and my work often involved traveling to the offices in the city to

conduct training programs. My husband had even longer working hours. He worked until close to midnight, and sometimes even longer, for six days a week. Despite the long hours, he had to report to work at 8.30 am every single working day. Employees that reported late to work on two subsequent days were shamed by the company management. Their photos were displayed publicly on a notice board. Moreover, we barely even had our weekends to ourselves for our parents lived in the same city and expected us to spend our Sundays with them.

Two years went by in this fashion and then our daughter arrived. A few months following her birth, through the most mysterious circumstances, a work opportunity opened up for my husband in Muscat, the capital city of the Sultanate of Oman.

So, while my husband headed for Muscat alone, I stayed back in Chennai with our eight months old baby. We'd planned to join my husband four months later.

During this time, I quit my full-time company job and worked temporarily as an assistant to the German long-term visa officers at the German consulate in Chennai. I replaced an employee going on a break. My mother supported us in caring for our baby and hired a maid to assist her while I was at work. With lesser work hours than my corporate job, I had more time with my baby.

I learned my work quickly and was offered a full-time permanent position at the end of my short four months' stint. My German boss was even willing to reserve a place for me for years later, should my husband's contract in Oman be a fixed one and we return to India after that. His contract in Oman was however a permanent one. So, I turned down the offer to continue working in Chennai and headed to Muscat with our 11 months old daughter in November 2007. With a 11-months old baby in tow, I began my odyssey as a full-time stay-at-home mom and expatriate spouse. I was fiercely optimistic and thought I could handle anything that came my way. Yet nothing, absolutely nothing, prepared me for what lay ahead.