

# If the Shoe Breaks, Fix It— How New Places Start New Habits

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A decade ago, I sat on my apartment’s hardwood floor, staring into an empty piece of luggage that I needed to pack. My husband, Shawn, and I were moving our furniture and belongings from our place in Germany, where we were living at the time, into storage and would soon embark on a five-month trip through India and Southeast Asia. I was excited. Yet, at the same time, I wasn’t sure how I could get through the coming months with only one suitcase of belongings.

Would I feel restricted by limited wardrobe choices? Would Shawn and I miss our music, books, and board games back home? What would happen if something broke?

Up until that point, I’d been a collector. I’d accumulated clothes, antiques, and foreign cookbooks. I had also stockpiled enough dishes to serve a small army. My belongings rarely wore down simply because the sheer quantity meant that each object was rarely used.

Taking my best guess at what I would need, I packed my bag and awaited the movers. When they arrived, they quantified how much “stuff” I had accumulated over the years: a whopping 11,768 pounds. Over the course of three days, a team of four men boxed and emptied our apartment. They then had to lug the boxes down 87 stairs to get to the moving truck.

Days after the move, Shawn and I arrived on the island of Bali. As we strolled along a white sandy beach in Jimbaran, the clasp on one of my sandals broke. These golden-colored shoes had proven themselves to be comfortable and reliable during our past trips throughout Europe. As a result, I was nervous about finding a replacement in Bali.

With the broken sandal in hand, I balanced on one foot and pantomimed

my dilemma to a group of Balinese locals. Fortunately, they kindly directed me and Shawn to a nearby shoe repair shop. There was no sign out front, but a mound of shoes inside the tiny workshop showed us we were in the right place.

Unable to speak one another’s language, the young cobbler flashed a smile and accepted my shoe. As he set to work on repairing it, Shawn and I were forced to stop and take in our surroundings, away from Jimbaran’s tourist district. If it hadn’t been for my broken sandal, we probably wouldn’t have wandered into this neighborhood.

On a nearby sidewalk, a flowery Balinese spiritual offering called a *canang sari* added a splash of color to the streetscape. A burning incense stick in the center of the display released its

pleasant aroma and mingled with the scent of leather and shoe polish.

Motorbikes whizzed by, sometimes carrying three family members. A young girl devoured an iced dessert under a tree’s lush canopy. A group of men played a game inside a garage, sheltered from the hot sunshine.

A few minutes later, with a wide grin on his face, the young repairman handed the shoe back to me. He’d worked his magic. I slipped the like-new sandal back onto my foot, grateful for the repairman’s expertise and the local residents who’d led me to him.

“*Matur suksma*,” I said to the man (“thank you”), as I handed him a stack of weathered Indonesian Rupiah. The repair cost the equivalent of about \$3.

This repair experience made me think of my grandmother, who raised a family of 13 children after World War II. As the eighth child in the family, my father sometimes shared tales about growing up with

hand-me-downs and all the items that had been lovingly mended by his mother.

As an only child, I grew up in a decidedly different environment than that of my father. Most of my attempts at sewing proved unsuccessful, despite being a Girl Scout. If something broke during my childhood, or later on in adulthood, a replacement was usually at the shop around the corner.

Our two weeks in Bali soon came to an end. After Shawn and I left the island, we journeyed through eight more countries.

In Cambodia, our hosts taught us how to thresh rice. In Vietnam, a man piloting a boat resembling a round wicker basket allowed me to be his co-pilot. And in Laos, local women showed us how to weave magnificent silk scarves.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that I don’t need much stuff to survive and thrive. Experiences and human interactions replaced the need to acquire more and more possessions.

My golden sandals weren’t the last items to break during our Asian sabbatical or on the travels that followed. The sole of Shawn’s shoe came unstitched in Mumbai, India. His leather watch strap gave out while we were exploring Lviv, Ukraine. And, the back of my beloved Indian earrings needed a tiny touch-up when we were in Tbilisi, Georgia.

We simply had them repaired.

I now find that there’s a simple joy in wearing something out. I’ve also concluded that I cherish new purchases more since I’m no longer in the habit of going on shopping sprees.

Extending the life of objects feels better than simply discarding them. It is also more cost-effective and kinder to the environment. Plus, the journeys to repair objects, especially while abroad, offer mini adventures that we otherwise wouldn’t have had. ■

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