

A Book Reflections & Summary

Subversive Mission: Serving as Outsiders in a World of Need

by Craig Greenfield

Reviewed by: Andy Bettencourt

I came across this book after listening to a podcast interview from its author here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTOxkUIEirw>. The language of the author distancing himself from the term “missionary” as well as his own use of the term “alongsider” interested me. This term “alongsider” has been discussed frequently within my organization, Frontier Ventures. Although it has other applications, its primary use is toward those engaged at the edges or frontiers of mission among unreached or least reached people groups, especially those who have seen an insider movement (a group of people or community that wishes to remain within their cultural and religious tradition while following Christ) develop. This author, Craig Greenfield, knowingly uses this terminology in another context or at least among what he, himself, has labeled (in an e-mail to me) as more “traditional” movements. However, this author’s approach broadly equips cultural outsiders with a way forward in unfamiliar cultural contexts. His recontextualization of Hirsch’s APEST model is commendable and a great edition to “alongsider” literature. It encourages cultural outsiders to innovatively approach their giftings in foreign or unfamiliar contexts.

Early on, Greenfield asks an important question, **“What if the temptation we face as people with power and privilege in a world of need is not so much the temptation to pursue evil-rape, murder, or pillaging? Instead, what if our temptation is to pursue good in the wrong way? (5)”** Although we cannot deny human proclivities to sin and dark evil, it is worth considering from where our temptations may come. This leads the author to reflect on the temptations that seemingly good people encounter in their desire to help others in a foreign context.

After spending some time in Cambodia, Greenfield and his wife prayed about how to serve as cross-cultural servants who were seeking wisdom and insight instead of the limelight (22-3). With this goal in mind, Greenfield introduces the term **catalyst** (in place of the term apostle), as one who sees the potential of insiders, recognizes big-picture patterns, and works with locals to spark new ideas and explore new frontiers to create something that local leaders can own (29-33). Greenfield warns of the danger of power when benevolent outsiders are tempted towards postures of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence (48). He then recommends the posture of an **ally** (in place of the term prophet), as one who knows God’s heart for the marginalized and amplifies the many local voices that are struggling to be heard (62). This requires a creative and thoughtful approach that both cares for and centers local voices. It calls the outsider to intentionally take a back seat to local leaders. This may be difficult and even be discouraged by local persons, as they seek to provide the benevolent outsider with a valuable role in their community. However, the outsider must both consider how well they know the culture and their own option to leave and return home at any time. **How might their work live beyond their time present in that community?**

Greenfield then shares the danger of complicity through the lens of Daniel’s repentance for Israel’s waywardness and the ways that he, himself, has benefited from his ancestor’s colonization of other peoples and violence to other communities (85-7). He then mentions the

seeker (in place of the term evangelist) who searches for cultural touchpoints as a way of bridging the universal truth of the gospel with local understanding by asking questions more than offering answers and working with evangelist-insiders to understand and communicate what the kingdom of God looks like in each context (106). Thus, the seeker always sees themselves as partner or alongsider and never as sole communicator. If anything, the seeker is seeking out others who have greater understanding on either the context or the good news, itself, to communicate in clearer ways. Regardless of how long one has known the universal truth of the gospel, it does not mean one will be an effective communicator of it in a local context, especially if the context is new or “foreign”. Greenfield understands the incomparable value that insiders bring to the work of evangelism, which cannot be provided by outsiders regardless of their sincerity.

Greenfield presents secularism or compartmentalized Western faith as a danger in its mechanistic approach to physical, economic, political, or social challenges instead of more holistic approaches (119). Then, Greenfield describes the **midwife** as a pastorally gifted leader who nurtures and protects the people of God, helping insiders birth and care for communities of faith without utilizing outside resources (132). Outsiders can unwittingly endanger a movement through their own philosophies, ministry approaches, or by creating systems of dependence through reliance on outside resources. These resources, systems, and approaches are brought with a sincere desire to do good, but they can undermine the development of local leadership, ideas, and approaches, which often better fit these maturing groups of Jesus followers.

For Greenfield and many involved in missions work, money is a great danger fraught with numerous challenges in contexts of poverty, which require creative, sustainable ways to fund work through social enterprises or local resources (152). Again, we see how simple desires to help can backfire rather than produce a healthy and sustainable community.

Greenfield finally notes that **guides** are gifted teachers who not only understand and explain truth but guide local people to discover the truth for themselves (157). The cross-cultural worker is always aware of their temporality and the need to invest in local people and resources, because outside resources can easily be cut off. Thus, the help must come from local people and resources to be truly sustainable. The use of local resources and people will also buttress the work of the community, which may begin slowly, but will likely have a greater and deeper cultural and communal resonance, because it is from the local community and not from outsiders. It is more recognizable to the locals as a part of who they are.

Greenfield additionally notes the danger of individualism within his own worldview and original understanding of the Gospel, because the Gospel is about far more than individual salvation and includes the restoration of family, community, honor, shame, and even poverty and feasting (174-7). This more holistic understanding is good news to all people and especially those in more collectivist societies, as they can genuinely see their people, communities, and families flourish instead of seeing a few isolated people come to faith.

Greenfield’s approach is slow and hard to measure, but it allows for greater connection than merely baptizing individuals. This approach desires to raise up people for their own communities rather than to bring something to the community from outside. Thus, the alongsider receives, partners, and could potentially see far more work done than they were capable of themselves with all their tools and resources.

Greenfield's book is tied closely to his own work, calling, context, and story. However, it also has implications for how we think about cross-cultural workers more generally even how we think about their temporality. A cross-cultural worker is by definition always crossing something and has the opportunity to go back, while the locals are more deeply rooted, invested, and knowledgeable about their community. **How can a cross-cultural worker take a posture that communicates their own temporality? What postures ought a cross-cultural worker take in how they use their gifts in those contexts?**

These are essential questions that Greenfield begins to answer in this book and demand our attention as we engage with people and communities from different cultures. **Are we mindful of our own limitations, the limitations of our giftings, and how they might be contextualized for the short-term or long?**