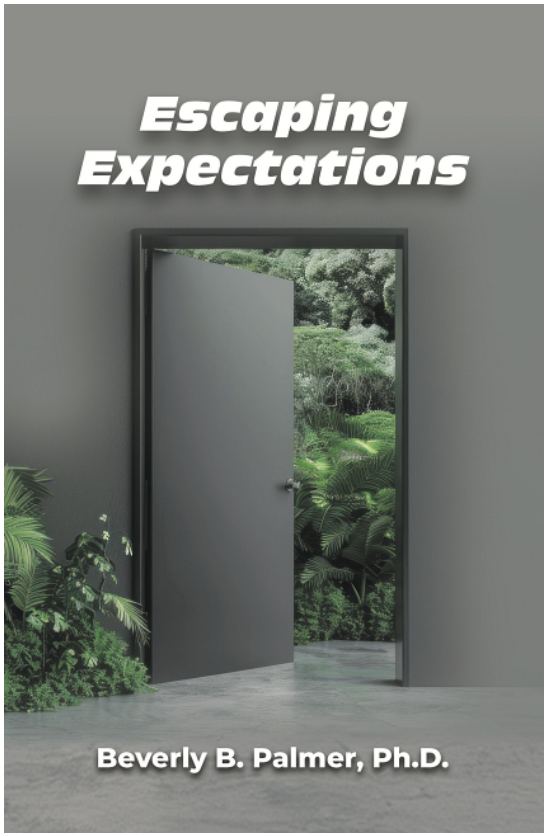

Go inside the mind of a psychologist as she explores the sights and cultures of Borneo. Discover the expectations of Islamic, Chinese, Indian, and tribal men and women. Then discover how to break free from one's own or others' expectations.

Escaping Expectations
By Beverly B. Palmer, Ph.D.

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Beverly B. Palmer, Ph.D.

Print ISBN: 978-1-959623-63-2
Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-046-7

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The events, locales, and conversations in this book are from memories. The names and characteristics of individuals have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2025

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Palmer, Beverly B.
Escaping Expectations by Beverly B. Palmer, Ph.D.
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025911670

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CHAPTER ONE
Shangri-La

After flying over the vast blue Pacific Ocean for over 15 hours, my plane finally landed in Hong Kong. But that was only a stopover on the way to my final destination. I was bound for Borneo, the third-largest island in the world. It was 800 miles off the coast of Malaysia in the South China Sea, but accessible straight south from Hong Kong.

After a three-hour stopover and another three and a half hours of flying, Borneo appeared with its turquoise waters, tan sand beaches, and emerald tropical rainforest stretching to the horizon. There were no visible houses or buildings—just dense greenery everywhere. I had found my Shangri-La!

Memories of the Shangri-Las I had read about as a child flooded my mind. *Lost Horizon* depicts a lush green valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains. There, monks live a healthy and long life of peace and love. I longed to go there, whether it was an imagined place…or real.

In *Green Mansions*, a naturalist lives in the haunting beauty of a Guyana rainforest. A river of transparent aqua flows through a dense jungle of trees, the treetops shrouded in a light mist. The chirps of colorful birds compete with the shrieks of squirrel monkeys. This is the natural world I wanted to be in.

As the plane approached the runway, I began anticipating what being in Borneo would be like. I could snorkel in the clear, calm sea, read a spy thriller on the sunny, sandy beach, and taste exotic fruits and vegetables. Here was my chance to step into the world of my dreams—to not just visit but to live there.

I paid no attention to the possibility of dangers that might be lurking in this strange land. I was too enamored with the adventure that was possible.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
Not What They Expected

One more invitation to a university on the mainland led me to the International Islamic University of Malaysia, a conservative religious institution located north of Kuala Lumpur. This was the same university where Rahim had visited his daughter. Hamida, the head of the Psychology Department, greeted me as soon as I stepped onto the campus. She was dressed in a very conservative Muslim style, with a grey tudung (scarf) and a clasp at the neck that gathered the rest of the material that flowed another foot down her grey kurung (traditional dress). Hamida received her doctorate in social psychology in the UK and began researching the conflicts women faced between work and home responsibilities. Despite her austere appearance, I found her to be quite personable and interested in many of the same psychology topics that I was.

As we strolled through the campus, with its light, blue-roofed buildings, we saw a group of young men, some dressed in kurungs and some dressed in burqas. Hamida said, “They are called softies, effeminate guys. They openly flaunt our Islamic law against homosexuality. It is a crime in Malaysia. But nothing seems to be done about them. And something should be done, especially on our Islamic campus.”

Again, I knew that I must keep my mouth shut. This campus was the epitome of Islamic education, which differed significantly from the education offered in American universities.

Later in the day, Hamida escorted me to a large room, where I was one of the participants invited to present a paper during the Malaysian Psychology Association (PSIMA) conference.

The psychology faculty from various branches of the University of Malaysia attended the conference, with the women wearing kurungs

and headscarves, while the men wore suits. We gathered in a large amphitheater with three tiers of long tables and their corresponding office chairs on three sides of the room. In the center, a large round table accommodated twelve people. In front of each seating area was a folder with the day's agenda and a greeting from the Deputy Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia. His name was Mansour, so I wondered if he was related to Amir Mansour from my university in Sabah.

The Deputy Rector's greeting noted that the conference's theme was "Psychology: Towards Individual Well-Being and Self-Actualization". His greeting went on to state, "…. People often overlook another important aspect of well-being: spiritual well-being. The current technological developments, economic and political instability, changing value structure of the society, and computerization of the workplace and home are some of the stressors that put an individual's well-being at risk."

That preamble sounded accurate, but there was an undertone of rejecting society's changing value structure. I thought it'd be best to prepare myself for a very different interpretation of psychology and self-actualization.

After his greeting, there was a lengthy Islamic prayer session. The men held their open hands before them, turning upward toward the ceiling. The women sat with their hands in their laps. At the end of the prayer session, the men moved their hands to clasp their faces as a symbol of absorbing the spirituality they had received in prayer.

As I reviewed the folder listing the paper presentations, I noticed that the conference's actual theme was religious psychology in Malaysia. That somewhat prepared me for what was to follow.

When it came time for me to present my paper, one of the men sitting in the center of the room introduced me as "he." I was momentarily taken aback, but then I realized there are no pronouns referring to "he" or "she" in the Malay language.

I presented research I had done in the United States on heterogeneous versus homogeneous decision-making groups. My research concluded that heterogeneous groups, characterized by both gender and ethnicity, made the highest-quality decisions.

Apparently, my research's conclusion did not go over well because several men sitting in the center of the room began criticizing my conclusion. "It is well-known that men and women should not mix in work groups," the Deputy Rector declared.

"In Islam, the separation of the sexes leads to better focus and calmness," another one said. "My Western ideas will not be allowed to corrupt Malaysian Islamic Psychology," another man asserted.

I felt embarrassed and defeated. Even wearing a kurung did not protect me. Not only was my presentation not listened to respectfully, as I had expected at a psychology conference, but it was summarily rejected. There again was the pervasive conflict between science and religion. But I took it one step further in my mind. Not only was my presentation unwelcome, but I also felt unwelcome.

After the conference, Hamida told me she noticed my embarrassment. She tried to soothe me by saying, "There are faculty open to taking the best from Western Psychology while still holding onto the tenets of Islam. Then there are those who only want to tell you the 'right path' from Islam. And finally, there are those who will denounce your Western Psychology as being against Islamic beliefs."

"Thank you for helping me see that not all Islamic psychologists in Malaysia are like the ones who spoke up after my presentation," I said.

She continued, "I'm sorry you got such a blowback from this last group of faculty members. They are not really psychologists. Psychologists are scientists, not just religious fanatics."

I stayed overnight in the university's faculty center, and the next morning, Hamida took me to the nearby Islamic Arts Museum. In the

pavilion beneath the large blue tile ceramic dome were all the verses from the Qur'an written in Arabic script, with the English translation below each verse. Hamida was impressed with my staying for over an hour, just marveling at all the information in the Qur'an that I had never known.

Hamida explained some of the passages, but she also added that the purity of these passages has been distorted by male politicians in Malaysia who have used them to assert their power over women and non-believers. I was relieved to hear this voice of reason after some of the outlandish comments I had to endure during the conference.

***

When I returned to the University of Malaysia, Sabah, I was asked to meet with Dato Prof. Amir Mansour, the Dean of the School of Psychology. When I met him the first week I was on campus, I saw him as very accepting. However, my impression was quickly dispelled. With a furrowed brow, he said, "I'm disappointed that you went to so many places instead of staying to work at my university every day."

"I know you wanted to have me do a lot for your department. I'm flattered that you felt I would be valuable to you while I was here."

He then said, in a slow and somewhat slurred voice, "Remember… I was the one who brought you here."

"I appreciate that very much. However, my Fulbright Fellowship stipulated that I would also present and establish lasting connections with faculty at many universities in Malaysia, in addition to being based at your university. I did not ask to attend those universities—each one invited me. In fact, I just returned from the International Islamic University Malaysia, where your brother is Deputy Rector. And, when I presented at the Malaysian Psychology Conference there, I learned a little about Islam."

"That is not what I expected. There was much to do here." He then grabbed a paper from on top of this desk and put it in front of me.

The paper contained all the tasks he had given me in written form when I arrived at his university. The list stated that I would review the curriculum, consult with faculty on their doctoral theses, provide presentations on distance education and recent advances in psychology, create joint research projects with the faculty, and train lecturers in psychological measurement.

"Well, I did accomplish all of that and more. I worked long days, like Noor does." (I felt I had to put in a good word for her.) "I only went to other campuses on some Friday afternoons through the weekend, with two of them being a little longer."

"Just stay here more," he concluded.

I became even more distressed when Noor told me that he complained to the Vice Chancellor, all the other deans, and the faculty of his school about my "visiting so many other universities" without ever telling me that my plans to visit three different universities for two days each and two for four day each were not acceptable to him. Indeed, just two weeks before I left for my first visit, he had given me permission to visit the five other universities. I did notice, though, that during my entire Fulbright visit, he avoided all interaction with me, never attended any of my presentations/lectures, nor read any of my papers.

After that meeting, I decided to give him a list of my accomplishments to prove that I worked hard and fulfilled all his expectations. Of course, that list would contain the specific ways I fulfilled all of what he expected me to do.

While collecting that information, I wondered why I felt I had to prove myself to the dean. Then it dawned on me that I was angry at being unjustly accused. Anger was a strange emotion for me. Growing up, I sincerely believed that good girls do not get angry. They just do as they are told.

Once, when I was 11 years old, I didn't want to get dressed for a ballet recital. I did not like ballet even though I took lessons for six years. I never could get the poses and steps correct, but I stayed with the

lessons to please my mother. Mothers sometimes want their children to have the advantages they did not have. And that was certainly true of my mother. However, at the age of 11, I was old enough to protest. On a day I will never forget, my mother started to grab me to help me get into my ballet costume. I was sitting on a couch with a broad, unpadded armrest. When my mother reached for me, I swerved off to the right, causing her right hand to fall hard on the armrest. My quick move caused her to end up with several broken bones in her hand. I felt so guilty for so long. And I learned the lesson that I should do what is expected and not try to break free from those expectations.

When that memory of childhood welled up while I was angry at the dean, I realized that I had suppressed feelings of anger throughout my life. I couldn't even use anger as a motivation not to do what others expected. Instead, I dutifully performed.

It was not until three months later that I discovered the real reason for all the misunderstanding between the dean and me. Sadly, in late August, he had a major stroke that left him with right-sided hemiparesis. I realized he probably had had a series of mini strokes during the previous months that affected his memory, insight, and judgment. He probably forgot that I was sent there through the United States State Department under the Fulbright program and that my mission was diplomatic. He seemed to be treating me as a contract worker, someone hired by his university to do whatever was asked. A contract worker from New Zealand was in my department, so I could understand how he might have been confused about my role. His strokes likely also contributed to his slurred speech.

Unfortunately, the word is often more potent in Malaysia than the deed. So, although I spent every moment working (rarely taking lunch time and working 10-12 hours every day, including nearly every Saturday and Sunday), it was never enough to convince most of the people in the university that I was not "running off to other universities."

When Noor and I were walking out of the building, I mentioned that I had met with Dean Mansour and put a good word in for her about

her hard work. I did not tell her anything else about the meeting, though. I didn't want to contaminate her mind with Dean Mansour's opinion of my performance. But there I went again, worrying about what others think of me. I even took my worry one step further by letting others' opinions affect how I feel about myself.

I always saw myself as a very high achiever and was rewarded for my accomplishments. The appreciation of others for those accomplishments made me feel valued. But now I had suffered two blows to my self-esteem, one at the Islamic conference and one at my university.

Before Noor dropped me off at my apartment, I invited her and Rahim to dinner the following Saturday. I thought that they may not have ever had Mexican food because there were not many Mexican restaurants in the United States when they were there.

***

Making a Mexican dinner in my Borneo apartment was a challenge. I had brought some spices back from Kuala Lumpur—cumin, chili powder, paprika, and oregano. I also brought back a package of tortilla chips. An onion, a garlic clove, canned tomatoes, canned black beans, and canned corn were all available in the market downstairs from my apartment. So, I had the ingredients for sort of tacos, with the addition of cooked chicken and shredded cabbage. I mashed the beans with a fork to make them resemble refried beans, and I added some canned tomatoes and sautéed onions to cooked rice to create Spanish rice. For a drink, I made lemonade.

When Noor and Rahim came over, they said they appreciated the Mexican dinner, but I could tell they were just being polite. The tortilla chips were stale, and I used the incorrect portion of each spice. My attempt at creating an authentic Mexican dinner would not pass the taste test of any Mexican—one more example of my not living up to my expectations.

***

Then there was the ultimate experience that stripped away my expectation that my self-worth depended on the approval of others. There were week-long preparations for the visit of the King of Malaysia. Even a special giant chair was made for him and his queen consort. The entire university faculty was required to attend the king's speech, and all the faculty had to be dressed in their academic robes, caps, and hoods.

I had not brought my hood, which signifies my doctorate from Ohio State University, so I asked my husband to send it to me. He sent it via DHL Express, but, of course, after waiting two weeks, it still had not arrived. With only one week to go, I started to panic, but the day before the visit, the university's post office notified me that it had finally arrived. Now I can fit in with the required dress for the faculty.

It was a very hot day (over 100 degrees), and we had to form our processional line outside the auditorium. The women walked behind each other in one line, and then the men in another, with the Deans (almost all of whom were male) at the front of each line.

I wore a sleeveless top and short skirt to stay a little cooler under the hot black robe, never thinking I might take my robe off during the ceremonies. Yet several faculty members removed their robes as they listened to the king, so I decided to remove mine.

I was seated in the first row directly in front of the king, with Noor sitting next to me and Rahim in the row behind us. As she was in the front row with me, I think Noor felt proud to be seen as the host of a Fulbrighter.

When I took my robe off, though, Rahim whispered to me that my outfit was an insult to the king. I did not expect to be removing my robe at all, but Rahim's admonition caused me to remember that in this Muslim society, my shoulders and arms must always be covered. I felt so embarrassed that I raced out of the auditorium halfway through the king's speech. Of course, my impulsive move caused even more attention to be focused on me, further insulting the king.

I tried to recoup my misstep by running back to my office, where I changed into a long-sleeved blouse. When I returned to the auditorium, a reception for the king had already started. I tried to enter the reception, but Rahim glared so sternly at me that I left. Yet again, I disappointed everyone and myself.

I thought I could have an experience of living without all the expectations I felt as a woman, wife, and mother in the United States. In Malaysia, though, I felt even more pressure to fit into narrowly defined roles based on gender and social status. Unfortunately, I experienced these expectations more from my failure to meet them than from my adherence to them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
From Expectations to Empathy

The days at the beginning of September were uneventful as I concentrated on fulfilling as much as possible of the Fulbright fellowship mandate to create lasting bonds through consulting with individuals at the university. My office was constantly filled with lecturers asking me about psychology, their theses, and studying in the United States.

I did not have any teaching responsibilities at my university in California, even though the semester had already started, because I had taken the Fall Semester off as a sabbatical with no pay. My university had not had a Fulbright recipient before me, so the administration was not aware that they were required to approve my fellowship with full pay. Also, they were supposed to hire part-time faculty to teach my courses (which they did) and to administer the psychology graduate program (which they did not).

I often used a problem-solving method at my California university, which I found myself applying when helping lecturers at my university in Sabah, Borneo. To use it, though, one had to first listen intently to what was being described as the problem.

One time, a Malay lecturer who often waved to me when I walked past her desk approached me to help her decide what she should propose for her thesis.

“Oh, don’t research what you think you should study. Research what you want to learn about,” I told her. I knew the lecturers were often passive in their learning and just wanted to do “the right thing” or give “the right answer”.

As she sat down on the chair across from my desk, she said, “Well, I know stress is what Noor likes to study,” still conforming to what she thought was an approved topic.

“Do you feel stressed sometimes?”

"Yes," she said softly.

"What stresses you and what do you do about it?"

She hesitated before replying, "I try to please my husband, but I don't think he likes me anymore. I try harder to please him, but it doesn't change anything."

"So, the stress comes from feeling helpless because you don't know how to please him."

She looked down and started to get up from the chair. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you about my husband. I don't know why I let that out."

"Do stay a moment. I'm glad you told me. Let's try to solve this problem together. It might even lead to the topic you want to research because researching something you are personally conflicted about may motivate you to keep working on your thesis when it gets rough." I tried to change the focus to her thesis to save her from the embarrassment of sharing such a personal issue with me.

"I could find out how a wife could please her husband in my research, then. And my stress would be less."

I didn't want to confront her too early, but I could see that her central assumption was preventing her from achieving her goal of having a happy husband.

"You want to please your husband because you feel responsible for his happiness," I blurted out anyway.

"Oh, isn't that a wife's duty?" she replied.

"Yes, you expect yourself to be a good wife. But sometimes a husband must take charge of his happiness so he can be a good husband."

"Oh, I never thought of it that way. Maybe I could ask my husband what's bothering him. But he probably won't tell me anything."

From the years I had seen patients as a psychologist, I was used to this type of "yes, but." So, I pulled up the one response that usually worked. It is simply to reflect back what I heard and maybe even the message beneath the words.

I continued, "You sound frustrated about the lack of communication with your husband. He may not want to answer a direct question, but have you ever tried saying what you see if you notice him slumped over with his elbow on the dinner table and his hand on his forehead?"

"Does that work? That's something I never heard of."

"Yes, what you would be doing is called an empathic reflection. You would be saying out loud what you infer from his posture about what he might be feeling. And I just gave an empathic reflection to you when you told me about the lack of communication in your relationship."

"Now I remember I did hear about empathy in one of Noor's classes. Why should I use it with my husband?"

"Your husband might feel deeply understood when you tell him he looks dejected. That might encourage him to tell you more."

She sat straight up and said, "And then I could help him understand why he is so unhappy."

"Just keep reflecting what you see and what he says. Resist the temptation to tell him what to do," I cautioned.

"OK, I get it. I also want to learn more about how empathic reflections affect communication in marriage. I have my thesis topic now. Thank you, Dr. Palmer."

After she left, I was pleased I could help her find a thesis topic she was really interested in. I also relied on the one skill that has helped me not only as a psychologist with my patients and students but also in all my relationships at home—empathy. Then I thought about how Sumita and I talked about the ability of empathy to heal divisiveness when I was at her university in Sarawak.

It was not until the next day, when I was walking around the campus after lunch, that I realized I had not been giving myself the empathy I had so freely given to others. Empathy is the process of listening closely. I had not been listening closely to what I had been telling myself. I berated myself for being so impulsive. Indeed, that view of myself became so ingrained that I only noticed the times that I was impulsive and not when I was cautious.

My impulsive comments and behaviors during my interactions in Borneo caused me much consternation. I worried that my remarks might have been hurtful, and my behavior might have been insulting. Furthermore, I was supposed to be a model of the United States' diplomatic stance. I was so focused on the times I was impulsive that it became difficult for me to take credit for all the times I gave considered and empathic responses to others. My quiet moment during this walk allowed me to re-examine how I saw myself.

The first step to becoming more flexible in how I saw myself was to identify what I noticed and the messages I gave myself. Taking a moment to listen to myself helped me to choose to break out of viewing myself in only one way. When I saw myself through empathetic eyes, I realized I can sometimes be impulsive and at other times cautious. I also noticed my impulsive tendencies a little before I acted on them. Then I could take a deep breath and pause instead of immediately saying or doing something that might be damaging to others or myself.

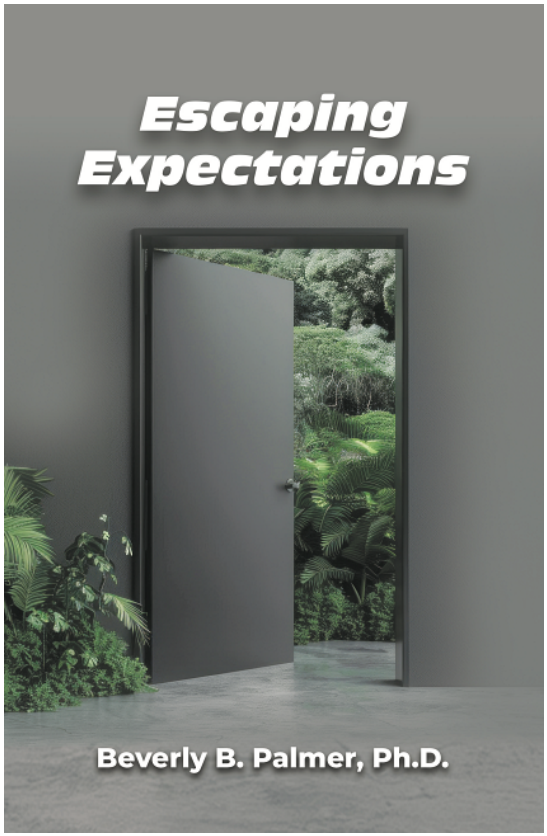
It was not only a flexible view of myself that I started to become aware of. I had always thought I was selfish, and I knew this was unacceptable. As an only child, I was often told I was selfish. I did not have to share anything or even notice the needs of others around me. At least that was what I was told. Those voices of others now resided inside me and became my own voice. My identity as a selfish person became so ingrained that I could not see myself as anything other than that. Gradually, though, I tried to drown out that voice and identity by being a giving person. I would notice what someone needed and then supply it. But was I doing that as a defense against feeling selfish?

Maybe I was doing it to receive something in return. That something would be gratitude. Indeed, if I were being thanked, that meant I wasn't a selfish person.

I was always open-minded, tolerant, and accepting of others, so how could I be more accepting of myself? I didn't need to disparage my negative trait of being selfish. Nor did I need to give in order not to be selfish. I could sometimes be selfish and sometimes giving. I did not judge my selfishness as unacceptable because someone else might be judging that trait negatively. I did not give to others expecting something tangible or intangible in return. I gave because I felt like giving. Giving and selfishness were just expressions of who I was. I realized I could equally accept all parts of myself, my strengths and weaknesses. I could accept myself just the way I am.

My self-worth no longer depended on what others thought of me. I became the one who determines my self-worth.

Those realizations may not have come to me if I hadn't had the time in Borneo to escape the everyday expectations of myself at home and then had the opportunity to reflect on my present experiences. During my interactions with people from various cultures in Borneo, I noticed the expectations they placed on themselves. I then noticed how quickly and subtly, even in Borneo, I had started to make others' expectations of me my own. For example, I wore the traditional tudung at the university so the other female faculty would accept me. I worked hard every day to fulfill the expectations Noor had of me. If I disappointed her, my self-image would be damaged. In her eyes, the amount of work I produced was a measure of my worth. I then worked to receive approval. Once I recognized my need for acceptance and approval from others, I could sometimes dress in Western clothes at the university and not work to the degree that work became drudgery. I was pleased with my achievements at the university. I didn't need to accept anyone else's judgment about them.



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