Coming Home — of identity, belonging and nostalgia

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11 min read · Sep 13, 2019

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Home is a complex idea. I've lived in my current house for 19 years and it's the longest time I've ever lived in one place.

A nostalgia for an unknown home

Reagh, Roscommon

I grew up in Teesside and lived there for my first 18 years. I belonged to extended families, with both sets of grandparents, aunties, uncles (three who lived with us for periods) and a tribe of cousins (my dad is one of 5 siblings and my mum one of 11) all living within a small radius and regularly visited. I knew nowhere else and yet I grew up with an odd nostalgia for another country.

My maternal grandmother's father, like may people in Teesside, had fled famine in Ireland in search of work. Generations later they still felt displaced and I picked that up, particularly learning Irish rebel songs that my Nanna accompanied on the piano. My uncles visited distant relatives in Ireland, but most of us knew nothing of the place except that it was were we, apparently, 'belonged.'

As an adult, I love visiting Ireland, but couldn't claim to 'belong'. When I return to Teesside, the familiarity is like nowhere else. It tastes like home, from the accent I

hear on my tongue and those of others, to the salt air of the North Sea. Yet despite that intense memory of tribe and despite that taste, I can no longer, if I ever did against the grain of nostalgia for an unknown Ireland, feel that I belong.

Between leaving Teesside and arriving in North Wales, I moved several times. Cambridge for three years, then Bristol, London, Swindon and Birmingham for work. I loved elements of all those places, made life-long friends, had children and enjoyed senses of place that were unique to each, but I was always a sojourner.

My house in Wales is decidedly quirky. The battle with damp is perpetual. The plumbing is an ongoing metaphor for anything broken in the world. The rooms are odd shapes. But it's large enough to run Cinnamon Press from. And the kitchen table will seat 12 gorgeously noisy family members, or students on a writing course, or authors and friends after a book launch.

When the plumbing leaks (which is regularly) or the wind blows tiles off the roof or the snow brings down the guttering or I think too hard about all the ways it's not like a conventional, modern house (no central heating, bits not yet renovated, ridiculously slow internet …) I have flashes of rage against this house. But they disperse and most of the time it's a love affair with an ornery character who also shelters me.

And then there's the village. The view is stunning. After 19 years, I feel gratitude for it every day. It rains a lot. We're high enough (in the foothills of the Moelwyns) to often be inside the cloud, but oh — the mountains are wild and wonderful — slate is beautiful. The air tastes clean to breathe.

And the neighbours. At least 5 other households have keys to our house. These are neighbours that turn out at any time of the day (or night) to clear the waters from the latest plumbing disaster or fix water-logged electrics or help build a new banister. I love my home and I love living in this village.

And yet, 'belonging'? There are families here who've been farming locally for several generations. In some ways I belong, but not like these families and this is not because of any deliberate exclusion. Sometimes 'belonging' is simply elusive. I'm grounded here yet not rooted, here or anywhere.

And yet my experience of moving home and not feeling rooted is tame in comparison to that of many across the globe. In an age when more and more people

find themselves as refugees who belong nowhere and for whom borders are not just inconveniences on the way to a holiday, what does 'home' mean?

Of not being home

Abandoned village, Provence

The brilliant writer, Toni Morrison, who sadly died in August, noted:

> *It may be that the most defining characteristic of our times is that, again, walls and weapons feature as prominently now as they once did in medieval times.*

When what was once home becomes a bomb-site or is destroyed by floods or wild-fires or other ecological disaster, how do people stay rooted or have a sense of belonging? When mass migration is increasingly common, not only by force but also for work or relationships or a hundred other things, then, As Morrison goes on

in the essay, 'The Foreigner's Home':

> *The spectacle of mass movement draws attention inevitably to the borders, the porous places, the vulnerable points where one's concept of home is seen as being menaced by foreigners. Much of the alarm hovering at the borders, the gates, is stoked, it seems to me, by (1) both the threat and the promise of globalism and (2) an uneasy relationship with our own foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *[There is an] inside/outside blur that can enshrine frontiers, and borders real, metaphorical, and psychological, as we wrestle with definitions of nationalism, citizenship, race, ideology, and the so-called clash of cultures in our search to belong.*
>
> *African and African American writers are not alone in coming to terms with these problems, but they do have a long and singular history of confronting them. Of not being at home in one's homeland; of being exiled in the place one belongs.*

What we mean by home is pivotal to our sense of belonging and urgently so in a world where climate change threatens to destroy whole countries. Another American writer, Audre Lorde, sums it up in a crucial question:

> *How can we use each other's differences in our common battle for a livable future?*

And Morrison points to how uncomfortable many of us are with any sense of belonging:

> *This slide of people has freighted the concept of citizenship and altered our perceptions of space — public and private. The strain has been marked by a plethora of hyphenated designations of national identity. In press descriptions, place of origin has become more telling than citizenship, and persons are identified as "a German citizen of such and such origin" or "a British citizen of such and such origin." All this while a new cosmopolitanism, a kind of multilayered cultural citizenship, is simultaneously being hailed. The relocation of peoples has ignited and disrupted the idea of home and expanded the focus of identity beyond definitions of citizenship to clarifications of foreignness. Who is the foreigner? is a question that leads us to the perception of an implicit and heightened threat within "difference." We see it in the defense of the local against the outsider; personal discomfort with one's own sense of belonging (Am I the foreigner in my own home?) …*

Of identity and otherness

Photo by Jens Johnsson on Unsplash

Being ‘foreign’ is a sign of ‘otherness’. Yet identity is a shifting thing. It is complex, multilayered and always evolving. So what counts as ‘other’ is also a changing boundary, one that can be perceived as a threat to one of our own fragile identities of class, gender, race, beliefs, nationality, political persuasion, brand loyalties, musical tastes …

Writing in *In the Name of Idenitity, Violence and the Need to Belong,* Lebanese-born French writer, Amin Maalouf, observes that it’s only by recognising that identity is multiple and changing that we both celebrate our uniqueness and be comfortable with our connections to others.

Maalouf writes:

> *Identity isn’t given once and for all: it is built up and changes throughout a person’s lifetime… Not many of the elements that go to make up our identity are already in us at birth. A few physical characteristics of course — sex, color and so on. And even at this point not everything is innate. Although, obviously, social environment doesn’t determine*

> *sex, it does determine its significance. To be born a girl is not the same in Kabul as it is in Oslo; the condition of being a woman, like every other factor in a person's identity, is experienced differently in the two places.*
>
> *The same could be said of color. To be born black is a different matter according to whether you come in to the world in New York, Lagos, Pretoria or Luanda…*
>
> *[…] … even color and sex are not "absolute" ingredients of identity. That being so, all the other ingredients are even more relative.*

Identity, Maalouf considers, owes most not to 'essential' characteristics, but to ' the influence of others' … those who try to make him one of them; together with the influence of those on the other side, who do their best to exclude him.

We become who we are in this matrix of context, influences and choices. The story we inhabit at any one time is of a piece in our experience. Less like a patchwork and more like

> *a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Toucn one part of it, and … the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound.*

This reaction might be positive, but in a world in which so many people's identities are under threat, it's hardly surprising that more often violence erupts or that otherness is demonised. As Malouf points out, fear isn't rational.

Of being at home in the self

Photo by Aleesha Wood on Unsplash

In a world of mass migration, we are likely to be most deeply uneasy at the 'otherness' of others when we are not at home in ourselves. If we cannot value and have mercy towards ourselves, it should come as no surprise that we feel suspicious of others who represent difference.

In her *Letter to My Daughter,* Maya Angelou, says

> *We feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do.*

And yet, in a fast and stressful world, so many don't have this internal safety. So many people are neither grounded nor rooted. They are dangerously adrift, clinging to scraps of identity that may not be true to their stories, but are all they have.

Just before the Russian Revolution the poet, Marina Tsvetayeva, wrote:

> *Not to go onwards (in verse, as in everything) means to go backwards — that is, to leave the scene, …*

But if we are afraid to go inwards, if we are unable to face ourselves, shadow and all, then backwards we will go.

This is why writing is a prophetic and noble art. Whether through story, poetry or journalling, it is a way into the ever-shifting terrain of identity and into the mercy we need towards ourselves in order to feel it for others. The poet Derek Walcott puts it most eloquently in this poem:

> *Love After Love*
>
> *The time will come*
>
> *when, with elation,*
>
> *you will greet yourself arriving*
>
> *at your own door, in your own mirror,*
>
> *and each will smile at the other's welcome,*
>
> *and say, sit here. Eat.*
>
> *You will love again the stranger who was your self.*
>
> *Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart*
>
> *to itself, to the stranger who has loved you*
>
> *all your life, whom you ignored*
>
> *for another, who knows you by heart.*
>
> *Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,*
>
> *the photographs, the desperate notes,*
>
> *peel your own image from the mirror.*
>
> *Sit. Feast on your life.*

Setting the table of our life

Ty Meirion Kitchen

But how do we find that place to make a home in, to set the table at which we can feast on our lives so that we can also find the grace to make space for others?

The poet and philosopher, David Whyte, answers like this:

> *To feel as if you belong is one of the great triumphs of human existence — and especially to sustain a life of belonging and to invite others into that… But it's interesting to think that … our sense of slight woundedness around not belonging is actually one of our core competencies; that though the crow is just itself and the stone is just itself and the mountain is just itself, and the cloud, and the sky is just itself — we are the one part of creation that knows what it's like to live in exile, and that the ability to turn your face towards home is one of the great human endeavors and the great human stories.*
>
> *It's interesting to think that no matter how far you are from yourself, no matter how exiled you feel from your contribution to the rest of the world or to society — that, as a human*

> *being, all you have to do is enumerate exactly the way you don't feel at home in the world — to say exactly how you don't belong — and the moment you've uttered the exact dimensionality of your exile, you're already taking the path back to the way, back to the place you should be.*
>
> *You're already on your way home.*

Ultimately, it comes back to facing ourselves, to finding the home within. This is how Hermann Hesse puts it in *Wandering Notes and Sketches:*

> *A tree says: My strength is trust. I know nothing about my fathers, I know nothing about the thousand children that every year spring out of me. I live out the secret of my seed to the very end, and I care for nothing else. I trust that God is in me. I trust that my labor is holy. Out of this trust I live.*
>
> *When we are stricken and cannot bear our lives any longer, then a tree has something to say to us: Be still! Be still! Look at me! Life is not easy, life is not difficult. Those are childish thoughts. . . . Home is neither here nor there. Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all.*

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