

Reflections of an Existential Migrant.

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Sometime ago I went to Kathmandu on my first visit to Nepal. Not that I was a novice traveller, as, by then, I had visited many countries in the world and lived abroad for the best part of my adult years. The novelty of that trip resided in the fact this was my first solo experience.

The plane touched down in Kathmandu after midnight. By the time my baggage arrived it was nearly one in the morning. I had arranged for a private car to meet me at the airport. I looked for the driver holding a card with my name, but I could not see him. Slowly all the passengers went their own way and I was left standing outside the airport, in the darkness, in the company a few stray dogs excited by my presence.

Eventually I went back into the safety of the airport terminal, by now deserted, and found a little booth for taxi bookings. The man had already converted the booth into his sleeping den and I had to wake him up to enquire if he could help me find a taxi. This he did right away; he asked for my destination and pointed to a driver, gave him some instructions and signalled to me to follow him. I got into a rusty old car and off we went into the Nepalese night.

They don't have street lights in Kathmandu. Nor street names. Riding along the deserted streets I soon realised that the driver had no idea of the whereabouts of my hotel. He was asking me for directions, I imagine, in a language that had no resemblance to anything that I considered familiar. We travelled at speed for sometime and all along I felt as if I was watching my own reality show, wondering what I had let myself into and where I would end up. After a considerable time I happened to see the entrance of my hotel from the car window and only after a certain number of bumpy jolts I managed to indicate to the driver to stop, turn back and deliver me to my destination.

I often tell this story to friends, because they usually find it hilarious. But apart from the funny side of it, something has been left suspended in me when I think back to that experience. The intriguing fact is that all along inside that wrecked taxi, I felt perfectly at home. I should have been terrified, yet I somehow enjoyed every bump of that ride in a state of excitement because I felt that I had finally arrived home.

I have recently had the opportunity to reflect about the issue of feeling at home and feeling homeless and the meaning of migration. I feel at home when I sit at a bar in my native town, watching the world go by and enjoying the historical landscape. Equally, I feel at home sitting in my local coffee shop back in London, watching that other world passing me by. I may feel at home when trekking up in the mountains, when I sit to rest and, out of breath, I look around at the tall peaks, the stillness of the glaciers and the perfection of the environment. I feel at home when I switch the phone off and close the door of my therapy room, eager to be taken on a voyage into the life of my clients. Most of all I feel at home in the arms of my beloved.

So where is home? What is it that brings that special feeling on at certain times and in certain places? I can identify two different elements in the concept of *home*; *feeling-at-home-in* and *feeling-at-home-with*.

Feeling-at-home-in is not linked to one specific geographical place. It is a state of mind where the goal is to do nothing, to simply be part of the environment. I don't need to change anything, nature is perfect as it is and through my look it comes to life. I don't need to conquer it but I try to be there, to be at one with the surroundings. It allows me to be a contemplative, if not passive, part of it.

In the taxi in Kathmandu in an opposite, yet similar way, I could not do much apart from keeping my eyes open and be transported into the unknown. There was a sense of life taking me along and me not resisting the events, letting go and allowing experience to take over. There was also a sense of faith, that somehow something will happen and I needed not fear or fight against it.

When I left my country of origin, I did not think about all this. I was young and it simply happened. I followed the events and I now find myself having stayed away for over thirty years. What kept me away from my family? A sense of independence, adventure, wanting to go back at some other time, later, not now. I did not plan to stay, nor did I stop to wonder about it. Recently I have started to contemplate moving back. I am starting to fear ageing away from my family. I do not want to die in a foreign land.

Feeling-at-home-with relates to people who make feel known and accepted. People who have followed the soap opera of my life from the beginning or who may have come at a certain point but made sure they learned about the previous episodes.

When the two feelings come together, I am definitely at home. There is a sense of wholeness and well-being that indicates that I am in the right place, at the right time with the right person. But it is a rare occurrence.

Wondering if I should return to my country of origin, I perceive my old and potentially new home with different eyes. I now visit more often, and every time it is apparent that I do not belong there. I speak the same language, but mine has not evolved in the same way. I cook in a traditional Italian way, that which my mother taught me, but people there now eat in a different way. I walk along my childhood streets, but they are not quite the same as they were then. When I tell local people about me, it transpires that to them I am nothing but a foreigner. It seems that my return home is another journey into the unknown.

I feel at home in many different places and in different situations, yet the reverse is also true, that wherever I go I am a foreigner, I don't belong. If it is true that the world comes to life through my senses, and that I can sometimes induce ways to feel at home, why is it so difficult to trust that I will be able to do that if I returned to my original land?

I fear that by going back I will lose the possibility of home being everywhere, which makes me at once at home and homeless everywhere. It seems that returning to my roots will take away my homelessness. Paradoxically I feel that in order to feel at home back there I will need to feel homeless, a foreigner in a known land.

All throughout life we are travellers, we are born finite and death is a destination we all have to reach. We may get the illusion of being grounded and settled, yet we will have to leave one day. Is the search for feeling at home a way to escape my finitude? And is the acceptance of my homelessness a more existential attitude towards my own death?

Not all migrants are moved by the same needs. There are those who have always known they wanted to leave. Those who left without knowing why, those who would love to leave but can't. Those who wanted to stay but were forced to leave.

I wonder what it may feel like to be home and to be content with that. While I spent my life away in order to prepare for my return, I must have missed out on a different quality of life, on the enjoyment of family and friends who have known me always, who would have witnessed the continuity of my development and whose love perhaps would have been there no matter what.

Perhaps staying at home would have been easier and safer. Even so, there is migration inside me all the time as I change and develop. My body may have stayed in the same country, but at the same time I would have travelled an internal journey. So I am experiencing the duality of being *me* in different places and different *me's* in one place. There is change and continuity living within. My personality is a busy to and fro of different *me's*.

In literature the *Hero's Journey* is always a tale of travels, dangers and challenges, until the hero is ready to go back home. The journey makes the hero a wiser human being, and it also prepares him for the return to a place that has been kept alive in his memory. Yet home has also changed while the hero changed. The final and biggest challenge is to find the courage to abandon the fantasy of home and accept its new reality.

As a seasoned traveller I keep my wondering between the old, the new and the possible homes that have been and may be. When I go abroad I sometimes have access to the airline VIP Lounge. I feel very much at home here. The chairs are comfy, there is free food and drinks, pristine toilets, even a spa and showers. In one corner computers, newspapers, television screens. I could stay there forever. Looking at the departure screens, the world is my oyster. I feel that I could fly just about anywhere in the world.

I sit there or move around but nobody really sees me. The paradox of airports is that everything about me is checked; where I am going, when I am coming back, what I carry in my hand luggage, my documents... yet nobody cares about who I am, what I feel and what I want. They worry about my security, but not about my personality. I can observe others, yet I do not have to interact with them.

Sometimes I chat with another traveller. The conversation can become very intimate, because we know it is only a temporary relationship and we don't belong to each other's social network. Soon we will depart and probably will never meet again. This makes the talk deeper, more honest. It resembles the way we talk in therapy. It's good to talk at the airport. I could open my little therapy room there. It may be very short-term therapy, or longer term for frequent flyers.

I feel at home in a transient environment. Airports are a metaphor for life. We are all wonderers, moving about from one home to the next, waiting for our final destination.

“Not all who wonder are lost.” (JRR Tolkien)