

THE END OF BELONGING

Untold stories of leaving home and the psychology of global relocation

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*Why spurn my home when exile is your home?
The Ithaca you want you'll have in not having.
You'll walk her shores yet long to tread those very grounds,
kiss Penelope yet wish you held your wife instead,
touch her flesh yet yearn for mine.
Your home's in the rubblehouse of time now,
and you're made thus, to yearn for what you lose.*

Andre Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (1994)

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Dedication:

This book is dedicated to those of us who alternate between the wayward and the defiant, whose deeper motivations for leaving home have been misunderstood or silenced. The writing of this book would be worthwhile if even a single reader finds herein some acknowledgment of the significance of their need to leave, and thereby, even fleetingly, felt the possibility of belonging.

The book is also dedicated with appreciation and love to my father and my mother, who didn't have to understand my decisions in order to support me, and who withstood many painful moments at airport departures without ever trying to stop me.

Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

VIEW FROM A CALCUTTA ROOF

This book is based upon individual stories of leaving home; autobiographies of homelessness by unsettled people who move from place to place, country to country, in search of fulfilment. I am one of those people, both fortunate and unfortunate, as perhaps are you. There are many like us, increasingly many all around the world, who share this deep invisible affinity. We are a community that lurks on the edge of community, without a sense of belonging, a community that shuns its own existence. We are an alternative human history, unrecorded and unacknowledged even by ourselves, until now. These are our haunting accounts of life, adventure, longing, and loss. Within these stories is an implicit warning to a world that seems on the verge of destroying its capacity to be a home for us, to offer us any sense of belonging.

The *existential migrant*, the term I use to describe us, chooses to leave his or her homeland, pushed out by deep questions that can't be answered at home, pulled into the wide world in order to discover what life is. We are living paradoxes. We need to feel at home but have never done so, we need to belong but renounce opportunities for belonging, we venture out into the unknown in order to experience the homecoming that will finally settle us, but doesn't.

The substance of this book was uncovered quite by accident during intensive interviews with twenty people who had chosen to leave home to live in a foreign country. The content of those interviews has subsequently been confirmed by numerous other voluntary migrants, some of whom are also psychology or migration researchers. Those initial twenty interviews were part of an original research project that took place in London at the turn of the 20th century and culminated in the new term 'existential migration' which will be described later. This book is not the result of abstract theories or post-modern speculation. This book is based upon the actual accounts of leaving, arriving, staying, returning, and the better understanding that those people gave me of my own restlessness, wandering, and longing. Whether you have left home, are desperate to leave home, never found home, have been unexpectedly unsettled by moving to another culture, or have accidentally found yourself lost in the world, I hope that reading these experiences will offer some succour or at least encourage you to speak about your own experiences of leaving and not belonging.

Before I started research into the experience of voluntary migrants I had already spent a year researching the experience of young doctors working in an inner city London hospital. The radical turn in attention, from studying medical staff to exploring voluntary migration, crystallized during a two-week visit to Calcutta and Kathmandu; two weeks which instigated a profound and transformative shift in me. It is worth mentioning some specifics of that trip since it somehow drew to the surface a nascent experience of 'homelessness' that had been formulating un-thought within me over years. In retrospect, I realize that the profound issue of not-being-at-home has always been a powerful undercurrent in my life, guiding much more than the research project and this book.

In spring 2001 I took a break from the stressful confines of my hospital work and travelled to Asia at the invitation of a friend who was temporarily living in Calcutta. I was excited to travel to a place that I

anticipated would be deeply foreign and unfamiliar compared to the life I was then leading in London. My first glimpse of India shocked and inspired me. Waking early on the first morning after my arrival, I wandered onto the roof terrace to gaze upon the city that I had seen only through the darkness of my arrival the night before. That arrival itself was eventful, my friend and I were threatened at gunpoint by a troop of drunken police officers who had flagged down our taxi on the road from the airport into town. After extricating ourselves from that rather bizarre and quite frightening episode, my friend and I continued along the dark road into Calcutta, past countless open fires dotted along the ditches all the way into the nebulous city centre. The scene created, for me at least, a very atmospheric, opaque dream-like feeling, enhanced by the disorientation of jetlag and the adrenaline of having just had a revolver in my face. The next morning on the roof garden, I was half confirming that the evening before had in fact occurred; that I really was waking up in this alien world of Calcutta.

As I searched the morning skyline, I was unable to draw upon much in my previous experience that could reference what I observed. There was *something* in this colourful and chaotic foreignness that enthralled me. I had dreamed that perhaps someplace so utterly alien still existed on earth; it was an unexpected *relief* to be surveying a city so totally *other*; not even a Coke sign to betray that it belonged on the same planet as the western world I had left behind; but why *relief*? At first my responses, being mine, seemed quite unremarkable but after some reflection with my friend, who had similar responses to travel, we both began to wonder why we felt what we felt and began to realize that not everyone would feel what we felt sat on that Calcutta rooftop.

Thus commenced a two-week contemplative-adventure, deep and authentic travel, characterized by an incessant dialogue with my friend regarding the allure of the foreign, the compulsion to explore the diversity of the world, and the strange experience of travelling

through liminal spaces like airports and border crossings. These attractions were superimposed upon a distinct undercurrent of repulsion regarding conventional settled life. I returned to London with the conviction that the question of home; the motivations for leaving home to live in foreign places, and the underlying question of being at-home in the world at all, constituted the appropriate topic for my research. I realize now that these questions have imbued most if not all of my major life choices; a phenomenon that with even a little contemplation became totally perplexing. I did not approach the topic with a hypothesis regarding *why* people chose to leave their homes to live in strange lands, rather I genuinely wanted to discover whether there was anything to investigate at all in this act of leaving. It was possible to me that I, or perhaps my friend and I, were the only ones who floundered upon inscrutability at every attempt to understand our restlessness and our fascination with the unfamiliar.

I was somewhat apprehensive that we were overlooking something obvious, yet every obvious explanation, including the elaborate psychological theories, seemed to unravel when compared with our own lived experiences. In discussions with my friend the mystery had deepened, not dissipated, and during our second week in Kathmandu I was already tentatively observing fellow travellers trying to identify which ones were engaged in what I later came to call 'existential migration' and which were short-term tourists in the more conventional sense. I felt that somehow I could make speculative judgments about membership of this unacknowledged 'tribe' – he or she tended to sit slightly apart from the crowd, favouring the 'authentic experience' over the beaten track, gazing into an 'inner distance' while eager to be unobtrusive and nearly invisible, preoccupied by the internal responses to the foreignness all around them. Some of these initial intuitions seemed consistent with what later emerged from the research interviews.

PART ONE
DISCOVERING A WAY OF BEING