



Finding Home

A few weeks ago, I watched a TED video about a woman who talked about the many places she is 'local' to. Rather than asking where she is from — being born in the UK, raised in the US, with ancestral roots and family ties in West Africa — she prefers to be asked about places she is familiar with, the multiple places she can call 'home'. With connections and ties in several places, she claims to have multiple places to call home. She refers to a collection of specific communities that form her identity — places such as New York's Upper West Side, the southwestern suburbs of London, or the neighbourhood where her mother currently resides in Nigeria.

These geographical locations, more than just city names, simultaneously reveal specific details about who she is and also of how difficult it is to answer the simple question, "Where are you from?"

Rewind to the turn of the New Year 2015 when I found myself travelling to Paris to meet my dear friend from Azerbaijan. Let that sink in for a brief moment: an American-born, British citizen travelling to France to meet friends from Azerbaijan. Through the course of the short one hour flight, I discovered my seat neighbour was a Lebanese-born, Brazilian resident, traveling to France to meet up with his Austrian

girlfriend. This information was all brought about by that simple, banal four-word question, "Where are you from?"

Whether it is a TED speaker talking about her many localities or a plane partner sharing biographical information, both conversations turned on the concept of not just where you are from, but also where you call home. If it were simply a conversation of origins, then Kansas wins. But I've now lived nearly equal parts of my life in my birthplace and away from it, and every place leaves a stamp on my character. The question becomes 'Where do you call home?' And that



Setting wishing lanterns aloft; hopes sent to drift in the vast expanse of the sky.



Cabin Crew life: both fun and turbulent.



Taking a lesson from Dorothy at Madame Tussaud's wax museum in Hollywood, California: There really is no place like 'home'.

question, perhaps, is both easier and harder to answer.

When my seat mate posed the question in this way, I was stumped. Where *do* I call home? As a perennial nomad, it's hard to define a single place that constitutes home. And so, somewhat flustered, I answered, "Home is wherever my stuff is, I suppose." Which, for the conversation in question, meant seat 27D at 30,000 someplace over the English Channel.

But my seat mate did me one better. "Fair enough," he replied. "And that may be what many people answer in this mobile age." He paused, "But home, I reckon, is really anyplace where you are known."

Which suddenly explained a lot to me. With my millionaire's lifestyle of jetting across the globe, I often would sit on my jump seat, gazing out the porthole window at the world passing underneath me. Mostly I'd see vast expanses of sea and ice, the occasional twinkling light of an ocean liner giving away signs of life on the blue marble below. But sometimes, as we flew over land, I'd see tiny tracks that led to remote mountain valleys or desert

oases. Coastal villages hemmed in by rock and sea, or patchworks of agriculture dotted by miniature farmhouses. And as night fell in whatever part of the world I was flying over, those towns and villages would light up like pinholes in a stretch of black canvas — signatures of life in an otherwise empty space.

Watching the world go by like that left me feeling like life was literally passing me by. I'd sit and stare at all those remote places — maybe a mountain village in Pakistan or desert wadi in Egypt — and my thoughts would linger with them, miles after they had passed from view. Someplace 35,000 feet beneath this isolated metal tube in the sky people were celebrating birthdays and weddings. People were making dinner, making money, or making love. Couples were arguing, families were grieving, people were concerned about their projects, plans and futures. I would often wonder about the lives of these people — the goat herder in that village, the fisherman rowing into that port, the family gathering wild fruits beneath that canopy of trees. When did they feel the most happy? And did they ever wonder about my life in the

fleeting moments as I passed overhead, before the contrails dissipated into the deep blue sky?

The problem with my constant globe trotting — and by this, I mean the vastly accelerated version with the airlines wherein I was never anyplace for longer than 48 hours — was that it left minimal room for connection. The very thing that makes home 'home' is missing when you must always be saying goodbye. And as I hurtled across the skies, I was more than once wishing to parachute out that plane door and plant myself firmly in one of those remote, picturesque locations to live. Because life was passing me by, and I wanted to take part.

Because life happens in the connections where we are known. In this digital era, it seems all too easy to think we are connected through the casual medium of social networking. But theses sorts of connections, I once read in a report, account to little more than those old-fashioned 'over the fence' conversations with your neighbours. Casual, friendly connections — but rarely more. And while we all need those casual acquaintances to grease

the wheels of the daily grind; real life — the kind of meaning-making, depth-enriching, soul-touching experiences — happens where we are deeply known. In those unplanned, unedited moments of laughter and tears. In those unmapped conversations and impromptu visits. It's the annual cycle of birthdays and holidays, patterns of lazy Saturday mornings and ritual Sunday meals.

It's here that I felt I was really dying inside. Jet-setting seems sexy from the outside looking in, but the continual disruption to any sort of routine or pattern in life made these sorts of connections a bit thin on the ground. I would drop in for breakfast in Los Angeles, scheduling my lunch appointment that weekend in Baku, rounding off the week with dinner in Kuwait. I'm hardly the martyr for having seen the world; however, the word I've come to associate with being a flight attendant was *untethered*. Left to drift aimlessly in the vast expanse of blue. *Untethered*, as in having the mode of connection severed.

While I wouldn't trade my global experiences for anything, I do have a certain envy for people who have that tight-knit group of lifelong friends. My favourite university professor, who was well into his golden years, had a group of friends he met with weekly for breakfast. They called themselves 'The Bruised Camels' — an image that conjured up their existence as life-weathered old men who still banded together through thick and thin. I envy this kind of deep connection brought on by years of shared experience. I sometimes wish for that kind of community in my present life.

It is partly out of this envy that I threw in the towel on my flight attendant career and swapped it for the challenge of staying put. I have my days when I feel something akin to what an addict coming clean must feel: that sobering disorientation when a life operated at full tilt suddenly halts. And so it really is a tension I live with: on the one pole, this desire to be a freewheeling, independent globetrotter working to sate his wanderlust. On the other pole lies the desire to connect deeply through a rich web of community, to have my own herd of 'bruised camels'. It is a tension I may never fully resolve. For now, this Thanksgiving season, I send my apologies to you for the past two years where I've lived only the one pole of wanderlust at the cost of communicating with you — my many communities across the globe. For the sake of finding balance, I ask only one thing from you for this season of giving: help me stay 'home' for a little while longer. Home, where I am known.



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Writer, Traveller and teacher, Joel has spent the past 2 years flying the world as Cabin Crew for a major international airline. Currently, he is developing a small startup business based on his travel experience and cultural knowledge.

He lives in the UK.

Noteworthy references

Taye Selasi, TED talk — <http://tinyurl.com/taiye-selasi-ted>

Pico Iyer, TED talk — <http://tinyurl.com/pico-iyer-ted>

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* — <http://tinyurl.com/sherry-turkle-tech>

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