

Settling for Homelessness

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A Sunday stroll down the beautiful South Lanes in Brighton City Centre makes it clear how international the city has become. This is the new global reality, but what is the driving force behind fellow citizens choosing to leave their homelands and become foreigners abroad, either for a year or two or continuously, place after place, over years? Apart from the obvious economic reasons, is there anything else motivating these people to choose to become 'strangers in a strange land'?

Recent research has identified a style of relocation called 'Existential Migration' underlying the choices of voluntary migrants; movement into new cultures provides an opportunity to explore issues of personal identity and questions about how one should live. Below Dr Madison shares his findings with *CTBrighton*.

It is usually assumed that the motivation for living and working abroad is financial. People move to make a better living or to earn money to send home. Some move for career progression. We all know this to be true. However, it turns out that this is not an adequate explanation for why all people leave home to live as foreigners in a new country. Close examination of the experiences of people who choose to migrate has unexpectedly revealed that some of these people are actually moving internationally in order to express deeply felt personal needs. These 'existential migrants' discover more about themselves and feel more alive when confronting unfamiliar cultures. But by exposing themselves to a vast range of different people and foreign places they consequently end up living with questions about the meaning of 'home' and 'belonging' in the world generally. With contemporary global economies people are increasingly expected to live around the world as part of their work. These research findings help us to understand the deeper significance of living abroad, including new perspectives on culture shock and cultural adaptation.

Alan is a manager in an investment bank in the City of London. Six years ago as a recent business graduate, he left his native New Zealand to 'seek his fortune'. After a year in Australia and two years in the Netherlands, he arrived in London where he's worked for the past three years. Alan is an intelligent, curious and ambitious young man with a passion for travel. He is proudly self-sufficient and independent but this is mixed with an air of melancholy. Alan talks to his friends about an increasing feeling of restlessness at work, mixed with a recurring anxiety about his plans to buy a property in along the seafront in Brighton. For the past couple of weeks Alan has been feeling homesick for family and friends in New Zealand but also increasingly preoccupied with the idea of moving to New York, where he spent an exciting three-week holiday last summer.

It may be tempting to simply view Alan as typifying a breed of young international executive moving around the globe according to the demands of

21st century capitalism. However, even a superficial examination of Alan's motivations for leaving home begins to offer another story. An exploration of Alan's life reveals that while growing up he had always assumed he would leave New Zealand, in fact he never really felt 'at-home' there. This is curious. Why would he not feel 'at-home' in the only home he'd ever known?

Looking back, Alan gradually realises that all his decisions, including education and career choices, were designed to hasten his departure from home and increase his ability to live in other places. This was such a natural longing for Alan that he was shocked when he discovered that many of his friends planned to build their lives around family and friends and the familiar streets where they had played as children. In contrast, Alan always remembers being attracted to anything foreign. He experienced the familiar home environment as too conventional, predictable and even suffocating. Though he had good family relationships and a good social life, he always felt different from those around him and longed for the adventures he would have once he left his homeland. He remembers thinking 'life begins when I leave home'. Alan's current deliberations reveal his long-standing dilemma regarding the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of settling in one place. He lives a deep contradiction of wanting to belong somewhere but his contempt for familiarity pushes him to move and start over and over again.

Alan's story illustrates a process of voluntary migration that has not been recognised previously. Unlike pure economic migration, simple wanderlust, or forced migration, 'existential migration' is a choice to address fundamental aspects of life by leaving one's homeland and becoming a foreigner. These individuals move across cultures, sometimes repeatedly, in search of self-understanding and to remain 'fully alive'. These individuals are actually seeking to express deep 'existential' questions such as 'who am I', 'how can I fulfill my potential?', 'where do I belong?', 'how can I feel at home?' Most of these individuals leave their home cultures because they never felt 'at home' in the first place. For some, the choice to leave can eventually result in not being at home in any culture, leaving these individuals to live within a sort of 'homelessness', a complex mix of inconsolable loss as well as perpetual adventure. These individuals raise interesting questions about our assumed ideas of home and belonging and our conventional bias that the settled life is somehow the ideal.

The research that revealed this process took place four years ago in London and identified consistent themes within this experience. Themes include the importance of self-fulfilment, the need for freedom and independence, accepting that anxiety is part of life, and a high value on 'kicking oneself alive', as one research participant put it, by confronting strange and unfamiliar people and places repeatedly in order to guard against a mundane life lived in dim half-consciousness.

The concept of existential migration fits well with themes in existential philosophy, especially the idea that we must create ourselves and one really knows him or her self. To feel at home can be seen as an attempt to tranquillise the anxiety and insecurity of our existence. *Rather than home as they place*

where we are most ourselves, it can also be the place that exiles us most from ourselves.

Until now psychological theories have not acknowledged how the deep and unexpected upheaval from exposure to different cultures is related to existential and philosophical issues. Even if an individual has relocated solely for business purposes, he or she may find that what they had taken for granted in life is challenged because it is done differently in the new culture. Upon return to the home country, that revelation is not always convincingly 'papered-over', and this can result in a restless questioning of what was previously unquestioned. Suddenly the person is not so at-home at home anymore.

The research shows that these voluntary migrants, often educated and successful, value the chance to talk about these experiences of home and belonging, even though these discussions tend to be deeply emotional and poignant. Paradoxically, the voluntary migrants who participated in the research found that openly discussing their experiences of leaving home, often for the first time ever, resulted in feeling just a little less restless.

These ideas require a radical rethinking of the consequences of the globalised world that is being marketed as an unproblematic evolution of international commerce. A kind of global 'homelessness' may be on the horizon; perhaps we are heading towards a time when no one really feels at home anywhere anymore, an *end to belonging*. It is exactly these deeper issues that the study of existential migration has revealed as issues for us all.

Greg is a Psychotherapist and Chartered Psychologist lecturing on a doctoral programme in London. He maintains a private practice offering *home-world dialogues*, existential psychotherapy, coaching and mediation, in London and Brighton.

There is more information about existential migration on his website:
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