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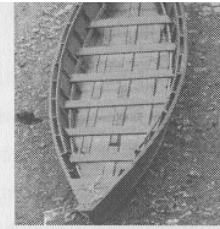
THE END OF BELONGING

Untold stories of leaving home and the psychology of global relocation

*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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CHAPTER 1 THE MISSING STORIES OF LEAVING HOME

In the literature on moving from country to country, the actual experience of the individuals involved in these migrations is largely absent. With the exception of a few evocative autobiographies, notable among them Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place*, the lived experience of migration has been neglected, especially so in the mainstream psychological, psychotherapeutic, and social science literature. The literature that does exist, including the autobiographies cited above, mostly focus on individuals who have been forced into exile by political and social circumstances, or pressed to migrate (as a child in Hoffman's case) in search of a better standard of living or advanced education (as in Said's case), rather than those who, *for some reason choose* to make themselves 'foreigners'. It is not uncommon for voluntary migrants to cope with a decreased standard of living as a result of leaving their homeland, demonstrating that their motive for departure is not primarily economic.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the individuals who *choose* to leave their homeland constitute a growing subgroup of those who leave home to live, even temporarily, in a foreign place. These individuals

are not refugees in the accepted sense: they could have stayed and they can return, at least from a spectator viewpoint. It is interesting that in the following stories most participants adamantly insist that they *couldn't* have stayed, they *had to go* (though as a result of internal rather than external compulsion) and despite significant hardship in some cases, not one person regretted their choice to leave. Yet it is unclear what motivates an individual to abandon their familiar place of origin, and in some cases comfortable standard of living, in favour of becoming in the words of the psychologist Harriett Goldenberg, 'a stranger in a strange land'.

In the few cursory glances at *voluntary* migrants, it has been assumed that their individual motivation is explained by their personal psychology; their leaving is symptomatic of how they have reacted to difficult relationships within the home environment. The 'mental health' difficulties that can arise as a consequence of migration are therefore thought of as 'problems' within the individual. There may be a modicum of truth to these speculations, more so in some cases than others. However, as an explanation for leaving, family dysfunction offers a woefully inadequate response to the depth of experience revealed in the excerpts of life recounted in this book.

The research study upon which this book is based was designed to systematically gather the experiences of voluntary migrants. It explores what provoked the initial leaving, what motivates those who return 'home' (or who long to return), and what happens to the person and their whole concept of 'home' during this process. I want to move beyond the surface appearance of the processes involved to concentrate on the deeper underlying psychology of these processes. In short, I want to explore whether these stories of leaving disclose something universal about human being. If so, this study should be potentially useful for understanding migration in general, including the experiences of refugees, economic migrants, issues of international business recruitment and retention, or maybe all of us if we notice

that the world is hurtling towards a global enterprise that may turn out to be the end of belonging itself.

The 21st century, with its emphasis on trans-national interventions and corporate globalization, is generating increasing demands and opportunities for a mobile workforce and therefore encouraging an unprecedented increase in the numbers of voluntary migrants. There is some evidence to suggest that these chosen cross-cultural experiences, while exciting and enriching, are not without struggle, pain, and distress¹. Because they are chosen rather than forced, the difficulty involved in such experiences is often not anticipated by the individual and rarely acknowledged in the public domain. As the number of people coping privately and individually with these issues increases, there is a growing imperative to understand the underlying meaning of this process and the effect it can have on those who *choose* to experience it. There is a corresponding need to understand the subsequent experiences of those who eventually attempt to return 'home': is it possible to settle back into an environment that is deeply familiar but subsequently, due to inevitable change over time in both the person and the place, also peculiarly unfamiliar? The existential dynamics of voluntary migration may unveil a more ubiquitous malaise underlying our 'post-modern' world. It may be that our contemporary capitalist structure is increasingly offering confrontations with the 'homeless' underbelly of the world, voluntary migration being one potent expression of this. If so, this is an unintended side effect of globalization and one that may produce unwanted repercussions. This constitutes a powerful rationale to attempt a deeper understanding and clear exposition of the experiences and choices that are now being made for the most part unreflectively.

We will see that focusing on these people who willingly seek out

1. Acculturation can be difficult, involving bereavement, confusion and distress, and this is seen clearly in the refugee and asylum seeker's experience but also in the experience of voluntary migrants. Though there are significant differences between the groups, it will emerge that the act of choosing to leave does not seem to reduce the turmoil of doing so.

the unfamiliar margins may also improve our understanding of common human themes such as belonging, home and security, diversity and convention, as well as acknowledging the positive aspects of not-belonging, not feeling at home, and human insecurity. As a psychologist and psychotherapist I began to expect that deeply exploring the phenomena of being a foreigner in relation to the concept of 'home' would have implications for general theories of psychotherapy and counselling. I envisaged that many common difficulties in living, evident in the consulting room, may harbour an implicit element of the struggle for 'home', a struggle that is perhaps inherently deeply human and thus perhaps not within the realm of what can be satisfactorily 'resolved'. As the interviews suggest, the acknowledgement that happens through dialogue itself, while not providing an answer, can be positively engaging, facilitating self-understanding and new choices. It is noteworthy that the research participants overwhelmingly found that the opportunity to reflect in-depth regarding their leaving home was a valuable and positive experience, and a peculiarly emotive one. They also felt in some way transformed during this exploration.

Since the interviews were very much like a psychotherapy session, I became intrigued by the potential applicability of this form of dialogue to working with immigrants and refugees, ex-patriot communities, anthropologists engaged in foreign fieldwork, as well as NGO, corporate, diplomatic, and media staff preparing for work in international locations. Also, supportive therapeutic groups for 'trailing families' of corporate staff relocating to foreign cultures, or perhaps any group of individuals having cross-cultural contact. Cross-cultural contact is often credited with the ability to shake life assumptions and to deconstruct our everyday taken for granted attitudes about life. Much of what we assume to be natural can be revealed as purely cultural, even arbitrary. Despite the experience of 'culture shock' and its unsettling impact, when faced with foreignness the voluntary migrants I spoke with seem to experience something

closer to my own experiences on the Calcutta rooftop – not shock, but relief, exhilaration, an alive and conscious awakening.