

## Existential Migration, a workshop by Greg Madison, PhD.

In English at least, there are many sayings that highlight the unique significance of the experience of home. *'Home is where our story begins'* *'Home is where the heart is'* *'My home is long ago and far away'*. Instigate a discussion about home and it quickly generates deep feeling. Despite its unique importance, many of us eventually choose to leave our original home place. A few of us even prefer far-off foreign and unfamiliar lands over our own origins. What impulses are at work when a person forgoes their home in order to seek the adventure of new experiences, with strangers and foreigners, leaving familiar routines, family and friends, long behind? At an ontological level these choices raise questions about *why humans are even capable of experiencing* being-at-home, belonging/alienation, homesickness, and other strands of what Heidegger names as 'the unheimlich', the existential not-at-home?

Cross-cultural migration is one way to live a life wherein these questions are made explicit and constant. There are no adequate general theories for why some people leave home to live as foreigners in a new country. Phenomenological research into the experiences of voluntary migrants unexpectedly revealed that some of these people use migration to express a deeply felt existential 'call'.

Robert\* left his native Texas six years ago when he graduated with a BA in history, and after a year of travelling through South America, he settled in Mexico City where he met a local girl and found work in a restaurant. After a few months Robert could feel the faint stirrings of the excitement of wanting to move on, but having saved a little money he decided that this time he would stay put and try instead to understand himself a bit better. He arranged to meet a counsellor, thinking inner exploration might be a good substitute for his incessant external restlessness. In the first session, the counsellor found Robert to be an intelligent, curious and insightful, ambitious young man with a passion for travel. He was proudly self-sufficient and valued his independence, so the intimacy of counselling sessions was a challenge for Robert and soon his demeanour began to expose a slight air of melancholy. As the counselling progressed, Robert felt increasing agitation; frequently announcing this session would be his last. He started feeling homesick for family and friends back home and resisted any decisions that would make his life in Mexico feel more permanent.

Through counselling Robert disclosed that while growing up he had always assumed he would leave the United States. In fact he had never felt at home in the conservative matter-of-fact culture of small town Texas. But this is curious, why would this young man not feel 'at-home' in the only home he had ever known? What made him stand apart from his friends and family and the culture surrounding him?

Looking back, Robert gradually realised that he had always felt different. He was shocked when he discovered that many of his friends had no plans to leave Texas but instead were happy to plan their lives around friends and family and the familiar streets where they had played as children. In contrast, Robert always remembers being attracted to anything foreign. He experienced the familiar home environment as overly conventional, too homogenous, boring and even suffocating. Though he had good relationships with his family and a good social network, he always felt life would only begin once he left his homeland. But here in Mexico City, Robert's current experiences reveal his long-standing

dilemma regarding the attraction and repulsion of belonging and settling in one place. If he stays anywhere too long he begins to sink into the everyday routines and boring expectations that seem to suck the life-breath out of him. He lives with ambiguous feelings regarding home, a deep longing to finally belong somewhere, coupled with the panic of having to conform to cultures of the everyday that he finds meaningless and dull.

Robert's story illustrates a process of voluntary migration that has not previously been recognised or understood. Unlike economic migration, simple wanderlust, or variations of forced migration, 'existential migration' is conceived as a chosen attempt to express or address fundamental aspects of existence by leaving one's homeland and becoming a foreigner. These individuals move cross-culturally, sometimes repeatedly, in search of self-understanding through mobility and confrontation with difference. These individuals are actually seeking to express and address questions such as 'who am I', 'how can I fulfil 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 anywhere in the world, a sort of 'homelessness' that includes a complex mix of inconsolable loss as well as restless excitement and self-discovery. These individuals raise interesting questions about assumed definitions of home and belonging. Is home where we are most ourselves or is home the very thing that exiles us from ourselves?

Research revealed that this process often includes themes such as, the importance of following a call to authentic living and self-fulfilment, the need for freedom within belonging, openness to experiences of mystery and the valuing of difference and foreignness as a stimulus to personal awareness and broadening perspectives. Among these migrants there is a marked preference for the strange and foreign and a consistent contempt for the conventional and easy life of the settled community.

The concept of existential migration fits well with themes in existential philosophy, especially Heidegger's concept of the 'unheimlich', which points to the foreign and unfamiliar heart of human existence. Heidegger suggested that our primordial way of being in the world is to feel *not-at-home*. To feel at home is seen as a fall into an inauthentic form of life, an attempt to tranquillise the anxiety and insecurity of human existence.

Discussions around issues of home and belonging tend to be difficult and poignant for most of us. Yet research has shown that being able to talk about such deeply human experiences with another 'explorer' is valued and at times transformative. Existential therapy, with its emphasis on a philosophical, non-pathologising dialogue between equals, is well suited for exploring themes that connect and unite the shared experiences of client and therapist.

'Existential migration' offers a re-thinking of many taken for granted theories in migration studies, psychology, and psychotherapy, which have an unexamined 'settled-centric' bias. This research also warns that through globalised capitalism, we may be creating a world where no one really feels at-home anywhere anymore, signalling the end of belonging. The study of existential migration reinforces the Heidegger's tragic question, 'What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the *proper* plight of dwelling as *the* plight?'

*Greg Madison is an existential psychologist, psychotherapist, and supervisor. He is a senior lecturer on various university post-graduate trainings in Europe and North America. He maintains a private practice offering home-world dialogues, psychotherapy, coaching, mediation, and supervision sessions in London and internationally through skype. There is more information about existential migration on his website: <http://www.gregmadison.net>*