

EXISTENTIAL MIGRATION: HEALING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN HOME AND ABROAD

Leaving home changes the course of our lives forever. **EMILY YATES** seeks a deeper explanation of the “inner call” to migrate.

I’ve often wondered if migrants grow to have a divided sense of self.

As expats, we delight in the freedom of the foreign space – the chance to remake our identity in the flow of constantly new encounters. There are few experiences as thrilling as being alone in the world, where the fact that no one knows you seems to imply; anything can happen.

Yet, this thrill is possible precisely because we left our “home” persona behind – that sense of being we once had when life seemed mundane, and we felt with the impression of certainty the experiences our days would bring.

With thousands of miles between our lived communities, the passage of time so often leads to a sense of alienation from home. As life moves on in a foreign land, our memory of home remains frozen in time, and is unlikely to match what we encounter when returning after years abroad.

Existential Therapy – the value of telling our stories

The experience of voluntary migration remains largely unexamined in the field of psychology, and where it does appear, limits itself to the pathologies arising from the experience (severe cases are often diagnosed as “situational depression”). It’s easy enough to accept that “mental health” issues can result from the trauma of being uprooted, but how often is the discussion expanded to include the reasons we migrated in the first place?

My research into migration studies led me to the World Congress of Existential Therapy in London earlier this year. Existentialism has always been an open and non-hierarchical

field of discussion; one that values the uniqueness of individual experience above the classifications that so preoccupy Western psychological practice. There seemed to be no better school of inquiry to address the complexities of the migrant experience, and redeem the importance of telling our stories.

My point of interest was Dr. Greg Madison’s seminar on “Existential Migration” (www.gregmadison.net). As a practitioner of focusing-oriented psychotherapy, his approach is one that prizes the mindful contemplation of experience on the part of both therapist and client. The approach makes it possible to work with a deeper intuition – something the philosopher

Eugene Gendlin calls “the felt sense”. This, according to Dr. Madison, is “a gut sense that emerges as the client’s own teacher, asking to be integrated”.

My questions regarding the migrant’s divided self did not lack answers for long. Dr. Madison’s discussion reflected deeply on a range of existential dichotomies, including home and not-at-home, freedom and claustrophobia, mystery and the mundane, independence and loneliness, and yearning

and loss. As central themes to the expatriate experience, they seem to hold tensions that most of us are unschooled in navigating.

Answering the “inner call” to travel

The discussion centered on Dr. Madison’s 2006 study on existential migration, which reflects on twenty in-depth interviews with voluntary migrants and the commonalities running throughout. The interviews began with an enquiry into the biographical

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Dr. Greg Madison

circumstances of leaving home, receiving the sort of answers that most expats are well-practiced in giving. With the question “why do you think you *really* left your home?” participants began to reveal their inner motivations, shifting to a deeper kind of storytelling.

The notion of an irrepressible “call to leave” came through strongly at this point. The response of one participant, Peter, is typical: “I think I would have gone mad (laughs). I can’t imagine not leaving... part of it was beyond my choice really; it was just inevitable.” This “inevitability” of leaving emerged as a theme in the study, where following the inner call to leave was seen as a self-protective choice or even an act of survival.

Viewed in this way, the act of leaving has overtones of a mutual rejection – the idea that home and the familiar impinges on one’s sense of self, while the unknown promises freedom and the chance to self-create. Home was felt to be limiting and claustrophobic,

with only the unknown promising the freedom, independence and physical space so highly valued by participants.

Though it may seem paradoxical, an insecure mode of living can become the very thing to provide migrants with a sense of security and personal consolation. According to Dr. Madison, this is part of a wider philosophical and spiritual outlook, where the voluntary migrant holds a clear preference for mystery over the mundane, conscious living over the habituated, and the uncanny over the familiar.

The final part of Dr. Madison's interviews elicited a great depth of feeling, as participants reflected on their feelings towards home and the possibility of return. One participant said she "didn't dare think about it", while others mentioned they felt alienated, in exile, or that returning home seemed impossible. The sensation of being in limbo between worlds,

or in exile from loved ones, is understandable expressions of melancholy for an un-lived life – the path left behind that seems lost forever.

Despite the study's deep reflections on the experience of nostalgia and loss, however, not a single participant answered "no" to what was perhaps the most vital question: "Would you make the same choice again?" They were aware of the life they could have lived – perhaps even mourned it – but all seemed sure that their call to migrate could not have been suppressed.

Existential migration – "a migrating concept"

Dr. Madison presents his work in a way that refuses categorization. He seems quite conscious that voluntary migration occurs in a world of rapid globalization – in the context of a global wealth gap that gives only a privileged few the option of making

such a choice on purely existential factors. Such considerations are behind his thoughtful qualification; existential migration is itself a migrating concept – he is interested in the phenomenon for the value it has in illustrating a deeper *human* experience.

Of the trends emerging from Dr. Madison's research, it is clear that voluntary migration most often occurs as a solitary choice. This, interwoven with notions of mutual rejection, nostalgia and loss, makes it unsurprising that so many of us falter when returning home – we simply do not have the language with which to talk about it. The words of one participant, Inez, are most poignant: "The language of transition is never anywhere... this language that describes this sudden shift in experience."

If one lesson is abundantly clear, it is this. We need to find the words to talk about our transitions, in a way that makes us feel understood. In attempting to do this, we can start to build a language of our own, while navigating the poles of home and abroad that form a relational dynamic unique to every human experience. If the migrating instinct is to be truly understood, we need to be able to tell our stories. ■

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