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The Psychology of Home: Why Where You Live Means So Much

JULIE BECK | DEC 30, 2011 | HEALTH

TEXT SIZE



There's a reason why the first thing we often ask someone when we meet them, right after we learn their name, is "where's home for you?"



My house is a shrine to my homes. There's a triptych of sunsets next to my bedroom door, dusk forever falling over the small Michigan town where I grew up, the beach next to my college dorm and Place de la Concorde in Paris, where I

spent a cliché but nonetheless happy semester. And that's only the beginning. Typographic posters of Michigan and Chicago hang above my bed, a photo of taxis zooming around Manhattan sits atop my dresser and a postcard of my hometown's famous water tower is taped to my door. My roommate and I have an entire wall in our kitchen plastered with maps of places we've been, and twin Ferris wheels, one at Navy Pier, one at Place de la Concorde, are stacked on top of one another in my living room.

I considered each of those places my home at one time or another, whether it was for months or years. When laid out all together, the theme to my décor becomes painfully obvious, but why it was more important to me to display the places I've lived rather than pictures of friends, or favorite music or books, all of which are also meaningful, I couldn't initially say.

Susan Clayton, an environmental psychologist at the College of Wooster, says that for many people, their home is part of their self-definition, which is why we do things like decorate our houses and take care of our lawns. These large patches of vegetation serve little real purpose, but they are part of a public face people put on, displaying their home as an extension of themselves. It's hardly rare, though, in our mobile modern society, to accumulate several different homes over the course of a lifetime. So how does that affect our conception of ourselves?

When you visit a place you used to live, these cues can cause you to revert back to the person you were

when you lived there.

For better or worse, the place where we grew up usually retains an iconic status, Clayton says. But while it's human nature to want to have a place to belong, we also want to be special, and defining yourself as someone who once lived somewhere more interesting than the suburbs of Michigan is one way to do that. "You might choose to identify as a person who used to live somewhere else, because it makes you distinctive," Clayton says. I know full well that living in Paris for three months doesn't make me a Parisian, but that doesn't mean there's not an Eiffel Tower on my shower curtain anyway.

We may use our homes to help distinguish ourselves, but the dominant Western viewpoint is that regardless of location, the individual remains unchanged. It wasn't until I stumbled across the following notion, mentioned in passing in a book about a Hindu pilgrimage by William S. Sax, that I began to question that idea: "People and the places where they reside are engaged in a continuing set of exchanges; they have determinate, mutual effects upon each other because they are part of a single, interactive system."

This is the conception of home held by many South Asians and it fascinated me so much that I set out to write this story. What I learned, in talking with Sax, is that while in the West we may feel sentimental or nostalgic attachment to the places we've lived, in the end we see them as separate from our inner selves. Most Westerners believe that "your psychology, and your consciousness and your subjectivity don't really depend on the place where you live," Sax says. "They come from inside -- from inside your brain, or inside your soul or inside your personality." But for many South Asian communities, a home isn't just where you are, it's who you are.

In the modern Western world, perceptions of home are consistently colored by factors of economy and choice. There's an expectation in our society that you'll grow up, buy a house, get a mortgage, and jump through all the financial hoops that home ownership entails, explains Patrick Devine-Wright, a professor in human geography at the University of Exeter. And it's true that part of why my home feels like mine is because I'm the one paying for it, not my parents, not a college scholarship. "That kind of economic system is predicated on marketing people to live in a different home, or a better home than the one they're in," Devine-Wright says. The endless options can leave us constantly wondering if there isn't some place with better schools, a better neighborhood, more green space, and on and on. We may leave a pretty good thing behind, hoping that the next place will be even more desirable.

In some ways, this mobility has become part of the natural course of a life. The script is a familiar one: you move out of your parents' house, maybe go to college, get a place of your own, get a bigger house when you have kids, then a smaller one when the kids move out. It's not necessarily a bad thing. Even if we did stay in one place, it's unlikely we would ever have the same deep attachment to our environment as those from some South Asian communities do. It just doesn't fit with our culture.

But in spite of everything -- in spite of the mobility, the individualism, and the economy -- on some level we do recognize the importance of place. The first thing we ask someone when we meet them, after their name, is where they are from, or the much more interestingly-phrased "where's home for you?" We ask, not just to place a pushpin for them in our mental map of acquaintances, but because we recognize that the answer tells us something important about them. My answer for "where are you from?" is usually Michigan, but "where's home for you?" is a little harder.

If home is where the heart is, then by its most literal definition, my home is wherever I am. I've always been liberal in my use of the word. If I'm going to visit my parents, I'm going home and if I'm returning to Chicago, I'm also going home. My host parents' apartment in Paris was home while I lived there, as was my college dorm and my aunt's place on the Upper West Side, where I stayed during my internship. And the truth is, the location of your heart, as well as the rest of your body, does affect who you are. The differences may seem trivial (a new subculture means new friends, more open spaces make you want to go outside more), but they can lead to lifestyle changes that are significant.

Memories, too, are cued by the physical environment. When you visit a place you used to live, these cues can cause you to revert back to the person you were when you lived there. The rest of the time, different places are kept largely separated in our minds. The more connections our brain makes to something, the more likely our everyday thoughts are to lead us there. But connections made in one place can be isolated from those made in another, so we may not think as often about things that happened for the few months we lived someplace else. Looking back, many of my homes feel more like places borrowed than places possessed, and while I sometimes sift through mental souvenirs of my time there, in the scope of a lifetime, I was only a tourist.

I can't possibly live everywhere I once labeled home, but I can frame these places on my walls. My decorations can serve as a reminder of the more adventurous person I was in New York, the more carefree person I was in Paris, and the more ambitious person I was in Michigan. I can't be connected with my home in the intense way South Asians are in Sax's book, but neither do I presume my personality to be context-free. No one is ever free from their social or physical environment. And whether or not we are always aware of it, a home is a home because it blurs the line between the self and the surroundings, and challenges


the line we try to draw between who we are and where we are.

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