



Moving Around Without Losing Your Roots

Big questions always strike unexpectedly, when our guard is down. I was watching my toddlers splash in the pool last summer when a fellow dad plunged me into revisiting the meaning of home in a globalized world.

He didn't mean to. He just asked where we were from.

"We live in Boston," I started, "but we're from Europe. How about you?"

I learned the name of his hometown, where he owned a business, and prepared myself to tack towards our common ground next — the children's age, the local weather, the economic climate. Not quite yet.

"Where from in Europe?"

Fair enough, it's a diverse continent.

"I am from Italy, my wife is British, and we live in France. We are in the US for a year, for work." This explains why the children speak Italian with me, and a very British English with my wife, while sporting an American accent with their little friends — which is what usually sparks these conversations.

"Did you meet her in France?"

I felt the impulse to lie and get it over with. (Isn't Paris the perfect setting for a blossoming romance?) I let it go.

"We met in Switzerland when I worked there." And there it was, the subtle shift in look. My interlocutor had moved me, in his mental filing cabinet, from a folder labeled 'foreigner' to one marked 'stranger.'

I didn't just hail from a different place. I had a different kind of life.

Those conversations always make me pause. Especially when they involve someone from back home. A relative, a high school classmate who remained anchored there while I moved around. I don't even need to meet them. A Facebook picture of an old friend's kids on the same beaches where we grew up can be enough to spark that vague unease, the feeling that our bond is made of blood

and history but no longer of shared habits, context or enterprise. It is in those encounters, where I am not even a foreigner, that I feel most like a stranger — a misfit by choice.

For many years now, I have spent my days in circles where careers and families like mine are the norm. The school where I work, my fourth employer to date, has campuses on three continents. My colleagues hail from 46 countries and have lived, worked and loved in many more — as have my students. Compared with most managers I teach, I have moved infrequently, and not that far.

"These are my people," one told me recently, pointing to her classmates. "I feel more at home with them than I do where I was born." I hear that sentiment often, in those oases and breeding grounds for nomadic professionals that business schools have become. It comes with the realization that for all their transience and diversity, people who find their way there have much in common.

They are as eager to broaden their personal horizons as they are to expand their professional prospects. They do not expect or desire to spend their career in the same organization or country. They enjoy mobility and view it as necessary to gather the experience, ability, connections and credibility that will turn them from nomadic professionals into global leaders.

I think of them as a peculiar tribe. A tribe for people unfit for tribalism.

Their unwillingness or inability to settle — to embrace and be defined by one place only — draws them to each other. It makes them restless and curious. It helps them develop the sensitivity to multiple perspectives and the ability to work across cultures that are indeed hallmarks of global leadership. It also comes with a price.

That price is struggling with the question of home and its troublesome acolytes: identity and

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belonging.

The struggle is neither an Odyssean longing for the comfortable mooring of a home left behind, nor the pathetic moaning of privileged neurotics who romanticize a simple life that doesn't exist in the real world. It is not *just* those, at least.

“The trouble with moving around and falling in love with new places,” a colleague once shared, “is that you leave a piece of your heart in each of them.” That resonated with my experience. In Italy, professionals working abroad are described as “runaway brains.” My brain, however, never ran away. My heart just took it elsewhere.

This is why I worry when senior executives tell aspiring leaders that membership in global elites requires sacrificing an existence grounded in one place. Framing the struggle for home as a private reckoning with loss is simplistic and dangerous. It makes global elites more isolated and disconnected, less intelligible and trustworthy. It puts them in no position to lead.

No one wants to follow a stranger. Without some sense of home, nomadic professionals don't become global leaders. They only turn into professional nomads. Leaders need homes to keep their vision, passion and courage alive — and to remain connected both to the people they are meant to serve, and to themselves.

To forego the possibility of feeling at home, or to make do with the surrogate of a dispersed cohort of fellow nomads is to give up the possibility of intimacy, of commitment, of trust. It is all that it takes to give up being human and become “human resources.” And once we do that to ourselves, it's a short step to viewing everyone else as such.

Yet home need not always be a place. It can be a territory, a relationship, a craft, a way of expression. Home is an experience of belonging, a feeling of being whole and known, sometimes too close for comfort. It's those attachments that liberate us more than they constrain. As the expression suggests, home is where we are from — the place where we begin to be.

Rather than learning to live away from home or do without one, global leaders must learn to live in and between two homes — a local and a global home. Become familiar with local and global communities, and use neither to escape the other.

This takes physical and emotional presence. It requires staying put long enough and traveling a fair amount. Spending time with those who live nearby and staying close to those who are far away — showing and being shown around. Leaving a piece

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of heart with people and places, and keeping them in your heart wherever you are.

Hard as it may be to reconcile local and global homes, it is a privilege to have a chance to inhabit both. A privilege that we must extend to others. That is, ultimately, the work of global leaders — connecting those homes within and around them.

We must embrace the struggle to make a home that feels our own. The unease that goes with it is a reminder of how important that work is, and what is at stake. Without a local home we lose our roots, without a global home we lose our reach.

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