
There's no place like where?

By Linda Brimm

The more you move around, the harder it is to know where home is - but the more important it feels to have roots. The international communities of Asia offer interesting lessons on resolving this paradox.

I've just spent several weeks in Asia, in particular, Singapore and Hong Kong, talking to Global Cosmopolitans. Multilingual, multicultural and internationally mobile, many of them had lived on different continents, let alone countries or states. But the concept of "home" still seemed supremely important to them.

Here I should probably declare my professional interest. I'm an American by nationality, a clinical psychologist, trained in three different countries, and have spent most of my career teaching at a business school in France. I run classes for today's generation of young, globetrotting movers (in the literal sense) and shakers (of tomorrow). My MBA students have not only global careers in their future sights but also, in many cases, international childhoods or mixed parentage in their past.

The topic, "Where is home?" becomes increasingly important to Global Cosmopolitans. It's also one of the issues I touch on in my recent book *Global Cosmopolitans*. Understanding the complexity of this topic for them, my audiences in Hong Kong and Singapore took it one step further. Not content with knowing where home was, they wanted to know how to define it. And of course, there's no single answer. They also understood that traditional definitions did not help – they had to find a creative and personal definition, knowing that the notion of home could change.

Here are some of the suggestions we arrived at together. But I'd very much like to hear others.

Home is emotion; it is where I grew up. One Frenchman was insistent about this. He said that his parents' house represented a physical connection to the

child he once was and his permanent emotional headquarters. He insists on taking his own kids there every summer, even though it's half way across the world from the home that they are living in now – and he throws everything into making sure they have a good time. “They call it the happy house,” he said proudly.

Home is where I'm based right now. Some people seemed happy to shift the concept of home every time they moved house. For them, home was simply where they were creating temporary roots and permanent memories. For a few, home was tied to where they worked at any given time. That might not be as sad as it sounds. If you're sent around the world or the country by your employer the workplace offers reassuring continuity in a changing landscape. The difficulty comes when you have a partner who moves around with you but doesn't have the same anchor...

Home is where my values come from. In this case, you may never even have lived there. One person in one of my audiences even said, “It's defined by the type of school I send my kids to.” He wasn't necessarily talking about sending his kids to the nearest American school but to the local Jewish institution.

Home is in the relational fabric of my life. Home is where my relationships are rooted. Maybe it's where your kids were born, rather than where your parents lived. Or perhaps it's where you met your partner and set up house for the first time. Some couples feel it's important to create roots in neutral territory – where they're both outsiders. Others are even happy to have multiple homes. One western guy had settled in Thailand with his boyfriend, the place they'd first met. But he was happy to move when his partner got a better job in Singapore. “Now we have two homes,” he said. “And there may be more to come.” Another audience member, an Indian woman, had lived in a condo in Singapore for years. “But it only started to feel like home when my sister and her family moved in,” she admitted.

Home is defined by other people – most notably by the annoying ones who say “It's great to have you home”, when you really don't feel it all!

Multiple moves create a need to define and redefine home, since the physical home keeps shifting. When there is no home to go home to, sometimes home becomes defined by the objects that move with you. Home is my books, home is having a place for my soccer shirts, home is my box of stuffed animals. It's my memories.

The definition does change, and sometimes the changing definition takes you by surprise. One woman in the audience was a successful businesswoman who had just sold her company in Hong Kong. “I never thought I’d say it,” she confessed, “but maybe I’ll go home to Delhi.”

However you define it, people inevitably like to go home when they reach a certain age. The strange thing is that so few of us see it coming!

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/theres-no-place-where>

About the author(s)

Linda Brimm is an INSEAD Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour.