



Stories of Paradise: What Is Home When We Have Left It?

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The Questioning

As a concrete remembrance of our being together, at the end of every term I like to collect writing from my beginning English as a Second Language students into a book. While most contributions are cautious ventures into this new territory called English with topics such as "Shopping" and "My Weekend," some students are immediately able to reveal who they are in their writing. As I typed up their stories on a cold, grey Nanaimo day in January, I was captured by the image of blueness in Duc's story about his dream house:

My family and many Vietnamese left our homeland. We were going to Canada, to America, and many nations around the world. Many people didn't ever leave and many people are still in jail. Why did we leave our country? Because we needed to find a land where we would be free.

Now my family lives in Nanaimo, a good life and freedom came to my family. I'm happy and like it very much.

But the house of my dream, I never think that I'll build it anywhere without my country. "Anywhere is never as beautiful as where we were born." I love my country, I'll be back and build my house in my old village, if my country doesn't still have Communism. The house of my dream, inside it'll look like the house of Nanaimo city but outside it'll have many differences because I'll be in the tropical sky.

The house in my dream will be built on the beach. The sky is blue, the ocean is blue and the trees are blue, too. I'll build the yard on top of the house. In my country we call it "yard up." When we sit on it, we'll see a wonderful landscape and get the breeze from the ocean. Every full moon night we'll tell about our life to my children and my grandchildren.

Later, as I distributed the books, the students excitedly leafed through to find their own stories. The excitement gave way to a contentment as they settled in to reading everyone's stories. I was observing, enjoying their enjoyment. I noticed Marta, also

from under the tropical sky but in Central America, reading Duc's description. Lifting her eyes off the page, she was drawn into a memory of warm blueness. Her eyes came back to the now; she sighed and read on.

Later, Marta and I talked about home. She is happy in Canada; her husband and children are here. Yet Guatemala is home: "When I think about my home, I have a sore heart."

Working with people who are not "at home," immigrants in a new country, causes me to wonder about home. What is home? Where is home? What is it to be "at home"? If you are not "at home," where are you? These questions also ask that I pause to reflect on myself and who I am in the world.

A Starting Place

How obvious yet how important it is to state that home is a place, a physical space, a landscape. You can leave it but it never leaves you. Who cannot describe with astonishing concreteness the neighborhood or street where he or she grew up? For me, home is the elm-lined streets of Montreal with its brick flats and winding, outdoor staircases. It is the maples turning red and orange in the fall as we shut up our cottage in the Laurentian Mountains. For Duc, it was the blueness of the sky, sea, and trees. Marta tells me of the violation of her house, of the door kicked in by soldiers. And yet, although her house was destroyed, its very *shelteringness* desecrated, she is quick to add that Guatemala, without politics, is paradise.

How can this be—that we yearn for hell and call it paradise? Perhaps we need to be reminded that the original meaning of home is the center of the world. Berger (1984) says that in traditional societies, home was where everything converged:

It was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead in the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys. (p. 56)

Leaving home is a dismantling of "the centre of the world" and consequently "undoing the meaning of the world" (Berger, 1984, pp. 56, 57). Not to be at home is to be displaced, to be uprooted. Yet is this not against our very nature to live in space, in nothingness, with no connection to the new place? If we listen

to Marta and Duc, we hear about homeland, a sense of lived space, which can never be smashed down like the door. The homeland, the landscape, the lived space is what we carved out of the place where we began and what became imprinted on our skins; it is what we now carry with us as we move on.

Thus to talk of space, we must, as Bollnow (1960) does, distinguish between the outer space and inner space of home. The walls of a home separate the space of danger from the space of protection. The border between the two grows thinner as the surround becomes more familiar, as it begins to “make sense” as the center of the world did.

I get lost easily in a new place, and so my first few days on campus at this university were disorienting. I couldn't find my residence, the cafeteria, my classroom, the library, or my car. Gradually, the landmarks began to look familiar because, after all, the concrete, stone, and wood buildings are not so different from the campus where I teach. Now I feel at home here, although it is a very temporary home. I have a sense of connection when I move from my room to the outside spaces of the campus. For Duc, the landscape of his new place held no such familiar points to orient himself. Where was the bamboo of his fishing village? Coming to a strange place caused a disconnectedness between the outer and inner space. Yet, through time, what was and what is begin to merge; thus Duc's dream house incorporates the interior of his Nanaimo home with the landscape of Vietnam. Is this not how we become at home—not all at once, but from the inside out?

Home is Recalled Through the Senses

I walk through a wooded area with Ali. The crunch of the leaves underfoot, the few maples turning colour, the smell of the pine trees fill me with joy. “Isn't this wonderful!” I exclaim, remembering my childhood Septembers. Ali says, “It smells like death,” and I understand that along this path there are no smells of Libya, his paradise.

When we remember home, we remember a place, a family, a happening. But is the embodiment of these memories not in the senses? Is it not a common experience to hear a few bars of music, see the sky a certain color, or smell a spice from our past for home to come flooding back to us? Maria speaks of lilacs:

I was sad when I came here but it was better for my children. I am happier now. We are all learning English. I have some Canadian friends, Jozef is working a little. We haven't lived in Rumania for two years—one year in Austria and one year here. I was for-

getting about home. Last week I smelled lilacs and I felt like I was outside my mother's house again. That night I cried just because I almost forgot about home.

I am at a potluck party, surrounded by the foods of many countries, many homes. I wonder: Is this not part of how we show who we are when we cook traditional dishes? Food is of the senses—the sight, the feel, the smell, the taste. When we are sick, at a vulnerable point in our lives, don't we want something that Mother used to make? I want porridge, you may want chicken soup, another may want rice. If we are in a strange place, new food could well be part of the adventure. However, if we are threatened by the strangeness of the place, we will more likely seek out food from home. Food is comfort, home, who we are.

As I sample Punjabi roti, Vietnamese spring rolls, and Guatemalan enchiladas (different from Mexican enchiladas, I'm told), I understand food is more than eating; someone's home is embedded in each dish. In our offer of food to others, we offer what our world is. Perhaps in our prepackaged North American culture we are only too forgetful of this. When we are far from home, is it a wonder that it brings us great pleasure to share food and stories of food with others?

Home Belongs to Our Past

When we think of home, we think of the past. In leaving home, we break the continuity of the past-present-future. When we grieve for home, is it not for the time that we have lost, the generations past with which we have lost touch? As Schutz (1964) points out, to live in a land of strangers is to live in a place where their past and ours do not cross—as if we have no history (p. 97).

I bring photographs of home to my new house: formal portraits of grandparents, weddings, and graduations; black and white snaps of my childhood; later photos of my children who are growing only too fast. These record the passage of time for me—my past and a past even before mine. And what of Duc, fleeing by fishing boat one moonless night, tossed on the open seas for 10 long days and 10 long nights? Where is his history? Where are his photographs? Are these not the stories of his life, of affirmation, that he will tell his future generations every full moon night on his “yard up”?

In my photographs and Duc's stories, do we not say about ourselves, This was the me that was? If Duc could go home to paradise, what would his family see—the Duc of the past or the

Duc of the present? How would Duc see his home? Would he see it as he tells it now, in Canada, or would it be through a different lens because he has changed? Where is the “real” Duc? Who is the “real” Duc?

In our storying of home we lock it in the was and allow our stories to grow to legends. Surely paradise does not exist in every corner of the world! Yet, if that corner was home, when it is distanced in time and space, it becomes that for which we yearn. Nostalgia, what we think of as excessive sentimentality, is rooted in *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, to survive (Webster, 1969, p. 576). Thus in the return to home through our stories fixed in time, our identity—who we are in the world—survives.

Home Is Being Ourselves with Others

It's time for me to go home after my first week at summer school. I am tired—exhausted tired from so much reading, emotionally tired from being put in touch with so many feelings, and sick tired with a raging sore throat. I love the stimulation of the class; however, the intensity of being in an academic environment, of not being at home, wears me down.

All week I have been considering the question of home and as I drive, I continue to think about it. We have been in our house for only a month and this is my first “homecoming.” Will it feel like home? I am surprised at the weariness of driving 50 miles. I drive, following the highway, forcing my eyes to stay open and then I snap to alertness, “Welcome to Ladysmith”—I'm almost home. I become more and more aware of my surroundings—the colours of the bay, the sailboats, the rose bushes, the arbutus at the end of my street. Relief spreads through me as I turn in my driveway.

The house is uncharacteristically quiet—no one is home. I walk around the house, still carrying my bag of books. I am very pleased with this house—the elegance of its age, the wideness of its hall, the serenity of its view. Yes, it is becoming home. I smile as I notice the few signs of life—the cereal boxes on the counter, the *Buy and Sell* strewn on the floor, laundry flung around the bedroom. My book bag slips slowly from my hands. I sink onto the bed and into the sleep I had so craved on the drive.

Outside of my dreamless sleep, I hear a car coming up the driveway. Footsteps come running into the house. They are unmistakably Christopher's. At 15, his body is becoming a man's but he retains the energy, the enthusiasm, the bounce of a boy. In my half-asleep state, I feel a growing happiness. He is running

through the house, looking for me. I hear him in the kitchen, outside, downstairs—running steps in a hurry to find me. Then he checks the bedroom, takes a flying leap onto the bed beside me and bursts out his news, “Hey, Mom! Guess what? We got a canoe!” Out of the depths of weariness, I know that I’m home.

For me, home is inseparable from family. It is within the fold of the familiar that I am allowed to be me. It is where I don’t need to explain who I am. It is also in the being looked for, being important in someone else’s world, being named. There are many homes in my lived experience. There was home with my parents and sisters, home in the academic world, home in the pedagogic world, home in small communities, home with my husband and children. In these places separated in time and space I was (and am) Christine/Tine/Miss Chapman/Mrs. Norris/Mommy/Mom. I have been called different names but it is in the calling that I can be who I am.

In the place where we are not at home, we have no name. Duc feels the pull of the acceptance of his people, the ones who know him for who he is, and the otherness of being among people who see him as different. “Welcome to Canada”—these were the first English words addressed to his family as they landed in Nanaimo. Yet can he be welcome, from Old English *welcuma*, a desirable guest (Webster, 1969, p. 1011), in a land where he is always the observer, always looking for rules? Where is the meaning he knew when he lived at the center of the world? Just as the outer realm has a sense of unreality for him, so too do the other people. To be not at home is to be unable to get one’s bearings in the strange, perhaps even hostile, place.

Marilyn, a social studies teacher, tells of going to a native Indian potlatch:

I was invited by Joanna, my friend way back from high school. Her uncle was the chief and she placed me beside him. She told me a few rules—stay here, don’t talk—and then joined some dancers. I was so aware that there were rules that I didn’t know. There were a few ceremonies happening at the same time—a memorial service, a naming ceremony. The family of the memorial service was especially unaccepting of me. I felt they were watching, waiting for me to step out of line. Yet, through all this I couldn’t help but think that this must be exactly what native Indians feel all the time.

Marilyn’s story gives us some insight into the experience of otherness, of not belonging. A sense of belonging gives us comfort, security, an identity. Not to be at home is a longing to belong, a longing to be where we can be ourselves. Marilyn was

the observer, watching for the boundary of what was acceptable. Her "thinking as usual" (Schutz, 1964) was suspended. In his essay, "The Stranger," Schutz says that the foreigner is no longer able to take things for granted. His basic assumptions about being in the world with others are called into question. All that before was unquestionable is now questionable; thus a person is a reflective observer, not himself or herself. He or she is looking for the key to belong, to pass in the world of others.

In Duc's world, there are two kinds of others. The other of the outer world makes him self-aware and does not allow him to be himself, does not allow him to be at home. The other of the inner world, the familiar, allows him to be himself. The other of comfort and security starts with family and moves in an encircling path to community. Within this public world, Duc is carving out a private world where he can be at home. He feels at home with the Nanaimo interiors. He has made them his with things that speak of home: calendars from Saigon, his daughter's drawings, delicate teacups from Vancouver's Chinatown. The mellifluous language of home fills his apartment as does the pungent smell of fish sauce. He has new Vietnamese friends. He is proud of his young daughter's acceptance at school—she is a talented artist, the kindergarten teacher says. From this safety zone, he lets go of the past a little and looks to the future. He and his wife are hard workers. They'll get jobs in Toronto. Maybe they'll come back to Vancouver Island to retire, he jokes. Has Nanaimo become part of his past? Will this be part of the home he misses when he is in Toronto?

Stepping to the Outside

Slowly, through the passage of time, Duc feels more at home here. His homeland is still home but at the same time he has multiple homes: He is building a new home, new relationships, new memories, a new future here. He has a name here, is at home with more and more others. He is not only "one of those people," a particular example of a generalized immigrant. He is also Duc, the guy who painted Fred's house and the neighbor who pulled Bev's car out of the ditch. In this way, he is moving from the inside to claim part of the outside as his own. The connectedness of the inner and outer realms allows him to be himself more frequently. He came to Canada to find freedom and now he is finding home.

This is not to say that Duc will ever be completely at home here. He is visibly different; there will be incidents of prejudice. He is a man of great depth but will never adequately express who he is in English. He will continue to observe the rules of life here

and no doubt get weary of always being the one having to adapt. And yet, if he can look to the future with hopefulness, he can reconnect the past-present-future in the story of who he is.

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