



Homesickness

Anne Winning

University of Alberta

The box sat in the middle of the room unopened. I was afraid to open it. I had to steel myself. I had to wait for the moment when I knew I felt strong enough. The box took me back to my living room, to that time when I still had a home in a house many thousand kilometers from here. I knew that I would feel homesick when I opened the box, that I would feel moved at the sight of familiar objects. But what is it to be homesick? It is not just the lack of familiar things that makes me feel homesick because the things are now here. Seeing them in this new place does not dispel the homesickness; instead I knew it was going to intensify the feeling. So does homesickness have to do with seeing familiar things in unfamiliar places? Do these call forth memories accompanied by nostalgia? If so, why do we tend to bring things from home to set around us in a new place? Surely to make us feel more *at home*, not homesick? So two questions arise that seem hard to separate: What is the nature of homesickness and what brings it about?

Indeed we speak of homesickness as a kind of illness. It does seem to come with a type of pain; perhaps it can even become debilitating. And if it is a sickness it must also have a cause, or a beginning, and it must have symptoms. In my case, tears are one of the symptoms. However, there are people who can have the sickness without symptoms.

In the experience described above, the occurrence of the feeling of homesickness happened with the arrival of things from home. Their appearance took me back to their familiar place which was in my home in Australia. However, the feeling of homesickness also struck on occasions which did not include the presence of things.

A few days later I found myself in a church with some friends. As they were talking to some other people I walked over to the bulletin board. There was an announcement about the pending appearance in Edmonton of Michael and Lindy Chamberlain.¹ A brief synopsis told the story of their conviction "in the most controversial criminal case in Australian history." It wasn't the

story that touched a sensitive spot. Rather it was the word Australia that compelled my gaze. Those simple letters evoked that unmistakable aching feeling. How is it possible that a type-written word can have such an effect? And what did this feeling consist of? Is it a lack? A longing? An absence? Australia, that word, that's my home, where I come from. I spent several seconds just looking at the word, letting it pull me into itself, as if it somehow allowed me to get closer to the place it named. Looking at the word seemed to remind me of *myself* as well as make me feel homesick. But homesickness is surely not just a matter of experiencing identity. My identity as Australian is with me all the time. And what is this place that the word Australia seemed to let me get closer to? Is it Brisbane? Holland Park? Or is it 30 Joachim Street, or the house with its familiar verandah and native trees?

The experience of homesickness also raises the question of what it means "to be at home." A clearer sense of at homeness is needed in order to come to a better understanding of homesickness. But in everyday life we do not usually ask the question of the meaning of home so directly. To the person who is living away from home the question of home most commonly asked is, Where do you come from?

Where Do You Come From?

When people ask this question of a newcomer, they acknowledge that there is a difference between living somewhere and coming from somewhere. Where someone comes from is home: "The home is starting point as well as terminus" (Schutz, 1971, p. 107). It is from the home that we begin our journey into the world beyond the immediate space of the house that we live in.

As young children, we are usually taught the address of our houses should the need arise to ask someone for help in getting home. If children are asked where their home is, it is this address they will relate. Our first sense of home is the space of the house. As we grow older and venture into the wider world, this sense of home seems to broaden. Bollnow (1961) speaks of the house as the means by which "man carves out of the universal space a special and to some extent private space and thus separates *inner space* from outer space" (p. 33). The outer space is the place of uncertainties, the place where one needs to be continually on the alert. The inner space of the house is where one can return, where one can heave a sigh of relief as shoes are shed for slippers, and find the right space to simply *be* oneself. The walls of the house can be considered the boundary of inner and outer space. Yet the notion of boundary should not be

conceived as “that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*” (Heidegger, 1964, p. 332). In other words, the home we come from is where our own being finds its genesis and belonging. It is the place that is intimately tied up into my sense of self, who I am.

The answer to the question, Where do you come from? requires a response which involves an awareness of the place to which we belong, the place where we feel bodily, spatially, temporally, and socially “fitted” to the details of the life-world. The character Mole, in Grahame’s (1908) book *Wind in the Willows*, experiences this embodied affinity between self and home:

As he hurried along, eagerly anticipating the moment when he would be home again among the things he knew and liked, the Mole saw clearly that he was an animal of tilled field and hedgerow, linked to the ploughed furrow, the frequented pasture, the lane of evening lingerings, the cultivated garden-plot ... he must be wise, keep to the the pleasant places in which his lines were laid and which held adventure enough, in their way, to last for a lifetime. (p. 79)

In the same way as Mole refers to his “lines,” we often refer to our “roots.” This language discloses an awareness of our belonging to a place in a way that is like being tied to it, being connected in the deep sense of the word. The word *roots* has its beginnings in Old English, meaning source or basis. So the use of this word suggests that we branch out from there but we can’t get away from it without feeling “uprooted.” It is through our bodies that we feel this connection to the space, the time, and the others of our homes.

Heidegger (1964, p. 325) talks of *dwelling* and elucidates, through an examination of the original meanings of the word, that to dwell means more than an activity we do along with other activities such as working and traveling. Rather, to dwell means to *be*: “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on earth, is *buan*, dwelling.” He goes on to say that “dwelling itself is always a staying with things” (p. 329). In describing space, Heidegger shows that space is something that stays among the things: “Even when we relate ourselves to those things that are not in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves” (p. 334). The things from home and the space back home are connected and so can give us a sense of home. Therefore, we use the idiomatic phrase: There is a little bit of home in this. We bring things from home

to put up around us in the new abode because in the things themselves there is the space of home.

What Are You Doing Here?

A visitor is often asked, What are you doing here? It seems that in the question there is the suggestion that, because you don't belong here, there must be some good reason for you to be here. One can't leave home and just *be* somewhere else. People do leave their own homes for a variety of reasons: vacation, conferences, work, schooling, or resettlement. If they meet and get into conversation with inhabitants they are inevitably asked the purpose of their visit. We are all curious as to the reasons some people make temporary or permanent breaks with their home ties, perhaps with a sense of wonder regarding what would be deemed important enough to initiate such a violent separation of oneself and one's foundations.

Indeed, visitors too may privately wonder sometimes about their reasons for being somewhere, as did the Canadian woman who, while visiting the outback of Australia, suddenly came across a wild bull: "I stared at the bull which barred our passage on that dirt road. Its huge bulk seemed to rise out of the dust at me and say, 'What are you doing here?'" Is the answer to this question worth the discomfort, the feeling of homesickness that may accompany it?

Nevertheless, visitors often strive to overcome aspects of this strangeness by making a space of their own where they find themselves. The hotel room becomes the inner space to which they return after venturing into the city to take a look around. It seems that the establishment of home (even if it is a temporary home) involves not only the "carving out of chaotic space a definite area set apart from the rest of the world" (Bollnow, 1961, p. 34), but also requires that one has a place from which to set forth and to which to return.

The establishment of a place to which we can return and feel a sense of *ownness* is indicative of what is missed in homesickness. Even if we recognize something as being similar to that of home, we still do not feel the sense of home, the sense of *ownness*, or intimate familiarity. According to Schutz (1971, p. 113), "the longing for re-establishing the old intimacy—not only with persons but also with things—is the main feature of what is called 'homesickness.'" However, it is not enough to say that homesickness is a longing to reestablish old intimacies with things, space, and people. Home cannot be reduced to only

people, places, and things; and therefore, to miss home involves something more fundamental to our way of being-in-the-world.

How Long Have You Been Here?

Once people have established where newcomers come from and why they are away from home, the next question is usually to establish the length of time the person has been in the new country. Is the question merely a conversation piece or is there an awareness of the importance of time in the life of the newcomer?

It takes time for transplanted roots to become established. When a plant is transplanted its roots initially serve the function of maintaining life in a tentative manner; there is always a period when we wonder if the plant is going to survive. Its life is in limbo. The etymology of the word limbo reveals that it comes from the Latin word *limbus* meaning hem, selvage, or fringe (Hood, 1986). It is "a place for people and things forgotten, cast aside, out of date" (Barnhart, 1988). It has also been used to refer to the region on the border of hell. Early life in a new country can indeed possess an element of being in limbo, a feeling of being on the fringe of things as expressed by a Canadian woman who lived in Australia for a while:

When I woke up to my first morning in Julia Creek I could hear the voices of the nurses going to and from the showers as they got ready for the dayshift. I couldn't understand a complete sentence of their exchanges even though it was English they were talking. (Still half asleep, I glanced at the mosquito netting on the desk and wondered what it was for.) Their language was just as strange after having been introduced; my attempts to join the chatter were met with alternating sympathetic explanations and outbursts of laughter. I felt like an extraterrestrial being after a while, and listened in mute horror, not understanding, to their stories.

Time is required to feel established. Initially our roots are not deep; they have not woven themselves into the fabric of the society. So when people ask newcomers how long they have been here, perhaps they are trying to gauge the extent to which the person has become familiar (part of the family) with the ways, the spaces, and the people. Time is also required to feel comfortable with others. At home we know what to expect of people; we know the appropriate behavior for given situations. However, this sense of safe familiarity is left behind when we leave home; the "intimacy" with others is changed.

The term intimacy is used here in a particular sense; it “designates *here* merely the degree of reliable knowledge we have of another person or of a social relationship, a group, a cultural pattern or a thing” (Schutz, 1971, p. 113). Lacking this sense of familiarity can be “sickening,” making us feel homesick. For example, I felt homesick when a person made a comment about my accent because I couldn’t make myself understood. Homesickness hit me like a fist in the stomach as I suddenly tired of lacking immediate familiarity. I wanted to be at home where people don’t strain to understand me, don’t listen to the *sounds* of my words, where I belong in the “accent community.”

Furthermore, when we live our daily lives at home we know where we are going and we know this through our bodies. We can walk around our home blindfolded. We know the direction we have to travel. Our bodies can get us from point A to point B while our minds are occupied with other matters. We *inhabit* the space of the home:

My flat is, for me, not a set of closely associated images. It remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I still have “in my hands” or “in my legs” the main distances and directions involved, and so long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it. (Merleau-Ponty, 1961, p. 130)

However, when we arrive in a new place it takes time to know our way around. We don’t usually feel at ease with where we are going until we know the directions so well that our bodies tell us the way to go, until our legs can lead us in the right direction. Perhaps part of the question, How long have you been here? is, Are you bodily here yet?

In addition to the role that time plays in our coming to know the place and the people, there is another aspect of the importance of time in our sense of home. Van den Berg (1970) suggests that lived time is experienced in the things themselves:

If the color of things remained constant, time would stop with respect to those things, and no one could know that time flows with respect to them. If the light of the day did not change, that is, if the sun remained in the same place in the sky, no one would still know what time is.... I don’t divide the day into parts, but indicate the division which the day itself offers. All I really do is assign names. (pp. 106-107)

Lived time of home manifests itself in the colors, the temperatures, and the landscape of home. I know when it is exam time at the universities; the blossom of the jacaranda trees tells me of this. I know when to wake up at home; the cheerful call of the

kookaburras always starts my day. Away from home, the time that is in the colors, the temperature, and the landscape is different. At home I know when Christmas is approaching; the heat of the days, the humidity of the nights tell me of Christmas; I *feel* Christmas time approaching without needing the calendar to tell me. Here in Canada I know it is nearly *that* time of the year, but I know this only because of the date and because there is the familiar hysteria of consumerism. It doesn't *feel* like *Christmas time*. One of the most commonly heard complaints of people who move to Australia from the northern hemisphere is that they "don't *feel* like it is Christmas." Jim said he felt particularly homesick on Christmas Day: "It didn't feel like Christmas. It was hot and we went to the beach. That's not Christmas to me. I remember sitting on the beach and tears came to my eyes as I thought of home, of snow and fireplaces and skiing."² The lived time of Christmas was wrong for Jim in Australia. This aspect of strangeness is often described by people living in a new country. Living with strangeness may cause homesickness; however, strangeness is not quite homesickness. One may well like the new and strange aspects of the country. One may find them intriguing or consider them to be positive aspects of the country in comparison with one's own.

Do You Like It Here?

People are often interested in whether a newcomer likes the country; they are keen to know if their country is appreciated. However, to say that we like the new country is not synonymous with saying we can appropriate it as our own, that our ties and appreciations of home can be forgotten. How is it possible to like a place but still be susceptible to a type of sickness because of being there? So the question remains, What is the nature of this sickness?

Because we call it a sickness, we should ponder the significance of this term. A sickness has causes, symptoms, and duration. Is homesickness like a viral sickness which requires that our own antibodies overcome it? Indeed, we must "antibody" the old space of our lived experience of home and acquaint our bodies with the new place. For a period of time our bodies still inhabit home; I continue to look the wrong way before crossing the road, and it is said that even after a driver has become accustomed to driving on a different side of the road and has been doing so safely for a long time, there is, especially in a moment of crisis, the tendency for the body to return to the old direction.

In yet another way homesickness has elements of a virus. It lies dormant for periods of time and then, quite unexpectedly,

strikes, causes pain, and then retreats until the next time. Nevertheless, how do we catch it? Or rather, how does it catch us? Does it catch us when we are more susceptible in particular circumstances? Does it catch us through the things of home? Mole, in *Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 1908), experiences the pain of being unexpectedly caught by the smell of home:

Meanwhile, the wafts from his old home pleaded, whispered, conjured, and finally claimed him imperiously. He dared not tarry in their magic circle. With a wrench that tore his heartstrings he set his face down the road and followed submissively in the track of Rat, while faint, thin little smells, still dogging his retreating nose, reproached him for his new friendship and his callous forgetfulness. (p. 86)

Homesickness caught me unawares through the likeness here of something very familiar to me at home. I caught sight of it and I saw a view of my home. It disoriented me for a moment. Momentarily, I felt the familiar ache associated with being away from home.

Like other sicknesses, homesickness does seem to have causes, symptoms, and duration. Consequently, as with our common-sense understanding and empathy with sufferers of physical sicknesses, we commonly seem to have some kind of understanding of what it means to be homesick. The need for a sense of home for our total well-being is sufficiently understood that we can be aware of what it is like for others to be apart from home, just as we can be aware of what it is like to suffer from a disturbance in physical well-being. Is this because it lives in everybody's body as some kind of precondition?

Missed intimacy with people is often a cause for homesickness. We are more susceptible to the sickness when we are lonely, when we miss the presence of our closest friends and relations. One of the most vivid times of the occurrence of homesickness for Yatta was when she was in hospital in England while she was there studying:

No one came to visit me. The only people who ever spoke to me were the doctors and nurses. I felt a stabbing pain in my heart each day at visiting time as I saw all the other patients receiving visitors. The nurse brought me a bunch of flowers from a classmate. I was aware that flowers meant a lot to people in the western culture but the violets meant nothing to me as an African. What I would have treasured most would have been a visitor; the friendly face and smile of someone who cared. No one

came until I was discharged. In that strange country I was all alone.

Yet missed intimacy is not all there is to homesickness. We do not only miss the people dear to us when we feel the pain of homesickness. I may miss being close to my family every day of the week, yet this feeling is not always accompanied by homesickness. I am longing to see them, yet this does not constitute the sickness. In addition, missed intimacy is not merely associated with missing people. It can occur in the midst of people when what they say or do strikes us as strange or incomprehensible, and we are confronted with the awareness of being different and therefore separate. Celebrations can be such occasions as they may have a significance peculiar to a particular country. Jim told me of his feelings of homesickness during celebrations in Australia:

The day of the Melbourne Cup was about the longest day of my life. These guys stopped working about 10:00 a.m., and we all went to the bar to get drunk and watch this horse race on the television. The drinking and the buildup on the TV before this race seemed interminable. I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about, and I just wanted to get out of there.

Times of familiar celebrations may also cause homesickness as both Anna and Yatta recalled. Anna spoke of the time when homesickness hit her at a shopping center because of their Christmas decorations. She felt she should be home with her parents. It was at this time of the year that Yatta again felt particularly homesick:

It was my first Christmas in England. I looked out the window and saw the beautiful snow and heard the Christmas carols coming from the small radio in my room. Was there no one I could talk to? I burst into tears.

Bollnow (1989) speaks of the significance of celebrations in our lives:

The festive celebration is more than a mere outer adornment of life or a break after a period of hard work. Rather, we need to grasp the notion of celebration in its deeper significance, as a necessary function in human life. We experience it best in the results of the mood of celebration, in the festival itself ... in its relationship to the world and to other people.... The human being moves out of the isolation of his or her everyday existence into a situation of great bliss and finds himself or herself accepted into a new communion. It is not just that the experience of this communion brings the person into deep happiness; it is, on the con-

trary, that the enhanced mood of the festive situation allows him or her to experience this communion. (pp. 69-70)

Because celebrations are so closely related to our lived experience of others, to our sense of belonging in the community, they become a time when our sense of separateness from the significant others of our lives is enhanced. We cannot experience the joy of the celebration because we do not feel the sense of communion with the group who is celebrating. As Bollnow says,

It cannot be experienced passively. It requires a spontaneous participation. Only through one's participation can one submerge oneself in this special mood which is so different from the consciousness of everyday life. (p. 72)

It seems that the joy of Christmas and such celebrations comes through the participation and sense of communality which they enhance. However, people who are away from home at this time feel their "outsiderness" more acutely; they are not "of the family" of this celebration, either because the celebration is not *familiar* as in Jim's case with the Melbourne Cup, or because they are not with their families as in the case of Anna and Yatta.

Even without the intention to stay, home can be missed. Many children are acutely homesick on their first experience of being away from home, and adults too speak of homesickness when they know that their stay is not indefinite. Are we as *dwellers* in the Heideggerian sense of the word, predisposed to this sickness? Can it be controlled and should it be? Or is it a necessary condition which spurs us on to making a new home? Whether homesickness can be either overcome or managed may determine the length of time a person willingly stays away from home.

How Long Will You Stay Here?

What is the significance of this question? It is a question of the future. The answer to it has something to say to the inquirer. In the answer is the extent of commitment one has to the new country. Are you just passing through or are you going to make some concerted effort to make this country your home?

When people at home initially asked me how long I would be staying in Canada I could not give them an answer. It required too much detachment from home to say that I would be away for at least three years. Like Mole, I felt that my home might reproach me for my callous forgetfulness. This persisted when I first arrived here. I would only answer that I did not know. How can one deny one's own life history that is one's home? To admit

of leaving for an indefinite time is tantamount to saying that this history is of no significance to your life. To speak of a future away from home is to deny home and its future. So we have a question of the future, yet the lived time of homesickness is a mode of living in the past because when we are homesick we look to the past as we think of home.

However, homesickness differs from nostalgia. Nostalgia is fond remembrance of things, people, or places past, but it is not accompanied by a feeling of sickness. Nostalgia can make us smile warmly, maybe even with a tinge of longing or fond sadness for the past, but it is not experienced as a sickness. When I am back home I may look back on my time abroad with nostalgia, but I won't be homesick. What makes me homesick is looking to the future without the assurance of home.

The lived time of homesickness is a special mode of time. It is a futureless experience of time. We cannot envisage a future in a place which is so unfamiliar; we have lost the future of home and now are living time differently. It is truly a marking-time of time; just as soldiers mark time and go nowhere as they wait for time to move forward, the lived time of homesickness seems to hover in that momentary pause as each leg is held in the air in anticipation of its return to earth. The sense of not knowing when we are going to move forward can indeed be sickening because the lived present of everyday life has a future which comes to meet us in the present:

The future is: *that which comes, as it comes to meet me now*. The future is "*to come*"... Past and future are not two absolutely separated regions touching at a highly remarkable zero-point, the name of which is the *present*. Both have a *present* value, they lie contained in the present moment. The past is that which was as it appears to me today, the future is that which comes as it comes to meet me now. (Van den Berg, 1970, p. 71)

In this state of uncertainty we take ourselves back home, or it calls us back through its things to remind us that it is still there and may still offer us its warmth:

He saw clearly how plain and simple it—how narrow, even—it all was; but clearly too, how much it all meant to him, and the special value of some such anchorage in one's existence. He did not at all want to abandon the new life and its splendid spaces, to turn his back on sun and air and all they offered him and creep home and stay there; the upper world was all too strong, it called to him still, even down there, and he knew he must return to the larger stage. But it was good to think that he had this to come

back to, this place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome. (Grahame, 1908, p. 100)

Perhaps this need for the certainty of home is a precondition for making the effort to get over homesickness. All sicknesses have to be either cured, controlled, or managed if they are not to kill us. There is no medical talk of curing homesickness, so sufferers must find their own ways of coping with the sickness.

Can I Stay Here?

Can I overcome this sickness? Can it be cured? I have heard many stories which describe the sudden unexpectedness with which homesickness takes hold of its victim. One can be fine for weeks, even months, and then homesickness will strike. A novel by Vanderhaege (1989) called *Homesick* tells of an elderly man who, after living in Canada for 40 years, suddenly returns to wearing his fedora in the house as he relives experiences of his home country. So, although the sickness may be absent for a length of time, it seems as though it is merely dormant. We do not get cured of attacks although they may become less severe and less frequent.

Can it be controlled? In one sense, definitely not. All the stories of homesickness tell of its dominance. It descends unexpectedly. It can take one unawares, and when in the grip of homesickness one has to succumb to it. It is not within our power to control its arrival. However, as we all learn to live with the flu virus and do our best to keep it at bay, so we can learn to manage homesickness. For a time we have to give in to homesickness and let it run its course through our bodies. We may go to a quiet place and cry for a while, or we may take out photographs and indulge ourselves in feeling sad. These strategies seem to play a necessary part in cleansing ourselves of the ailment. Then we can move on, move forward. We can keep ourselves busy with work and social events; we can try new activities. We can arrange our lives to avoid the loneliness that is often inviting to the homesickness bug. When I first came to Canada it was important to get a timetable organized so that the *week-time* of the new environment had my own schedule built into it. The timetable also meant I had organized some future for myself. There must be a future. As Langeveld (1975) said,

we have then to accept an orientation also to the future and not only to "what happened" and "where we are now," though we must not ignore the facts of every day reality. (p. 11)

It is not likely that a cure exists; however, homesickness is a condition that each person must cope with in his or her own way. It seems that it can go into remission. Yet there is no definitive numerical value for when remission can be termed cure.

The meaning of home as a totality of familiar landscapes and people to which we feel the sense of belonging and community struck me when I opened the calendars that arrived from home. The beauty of the varied landscapes, the uniqueness of the animals dealt me a dose of homesickness as they showed their special quality—special in geographic and zoological terms, yes, but special for me in a different significance. I felt the thread of my ties to this country and felt the ache as they tugged at me over the distance. Those photographs *recalled* me, brought me closer to the meaning of home which, to borrow a term from Greene (1978), is to be “landscaped.” To be at home, to dwell authentically is to be *incorporated* into the landscape of home which is the place from which we have our sense of who we are. Without this totality of well-being we may become sick, homesick.

Notes

1. Michael and Lindy Chamberlain’s nine-week-old daughter disappeared from their tent while they were holidaying at Ayer’s Rock, a tourist attraction in the Australian outback. The parents claimed that the baby had been taken by a dingo, a native dog. At first, an inquest upheld their claims but new forensic evidence caused the case to be reopened. The parents were then charged with murder and Lindy Chamberlain spent some years in jail. Some three or four years later further forensic evidence raised doubts concerning the validity of the earlier forensic tests. Five years after the disappearance of their daughter, Lindy was released from jail and she and Michael were exonerated of all charges. To this day the body of the baby has not been found.
2. Grateful thanks to Jim, Yatta, Anna, and others who shared their stories with me.

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