It all started with a move: Finding Home

By Renee Tougas

March 20, 2023

[Audio version here](#).

This is an essay about migration, specifically my own migration. It is not about global migrations, though I do tell one of my ancestor's global migration stories. This is not an essay about the contemporary migrant or refugee crises. In sharing my migration story, I make no parallels or comparisons to people displaced by war, famine, or environmental change. Though the ideologies and discourses that underwrite these disruptions are discussed.

Migrations are personal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Migration is movement within and beyond individuals, families, communities, and geopolitical regions. People migrate from places, and they migrate from ideas. Migration happens at the largest scale of our social and political interactions, down to the most intimate.

This essay explores all that.

Serendipitously, while working on this piece, I was introduced to the subject of Mobility Studies. I'd never heard of it before. However, a very brief read on this interdisciplinary field makes me think that what I've written here may belong to that area of study.

I wrote this piece, analyzing my own migrations, to interrogate the source of the "where is home?" question I have been asking myself for nearly 25 years.

"Where is home" belongs to the suite of existential "Who Am I?" questions of origin and identity: Where and who am I from? Where am I going? Where do I belong? What is my identity?

I don't know how long the question "where is home?" has been part of the human experience. But history might offer some clues. Maybe it started with the religious

and philosophical transformations of the Axial Age (500–300 BCE) when, as summarized by [John Halstead](#), "heaven and God became radically "other", while this world and everything in it became fallen, degenerate, or illusory."

Halstead quotes the scholar Shmuel Eisenstadt who wrote that "the Axial Age corresponded with 'the disintegration of the tribal communities and of construction of new collectivities and institutional complexes.'"

During this Age, Halstead writes there was "dislocation of rural peoples to fuel the growth of cities and the accelerating division of labor and accumulation of capital to fuel the growth of a class of religious and political elites."

It's easy for humans to assume their individual experience is *the* Human Experience. I don't want to make that mistake. And therefore, I won't make any statements about humans, at large and over all time, wrestling with their sense of home and belonging.

But what I'm comfortable saying is that it's very possible these questions arise not just out of human's migratory experiences, broadly, but more specifically are "a function of being human in civilization" (Halstead).[1]

Like every non-Indigenous North American, my ancestors migrated here from other places. My ancestors' migrations to the land now called Canada happened between the late 19th century and early 20th century as part of the agricultural immigration initiatives. My *greats* moved at a time when there was little hope or expectation of ever returning to their Northern European homelands.

One hundred years later, when I left central Alberta to move across the North American continent to the New York City metropolitan area of central New Jersey, it was a given we'd be back for the Christmas holiday. Migrations now are not what they used to be.

---

[1] For a definition of the word civilization in the context of the questions of home and belonging as discussed in this essay, see Halstead's [The Original Heresy: Homesickness, Civilization, and Transcendental Religion (part 1)](#)

Humans have always moved around, but colonialism, the industrial revolution, capitalism, the intense globalization of trade, not to mention the increasing human population, have accelerated and amplified human migration. These forces and discourses drove the technology that made migrations easier while also creating and hastening the conditions in some places that have made it an outright necessity.

My own migration and the existential questions of home and belonging fueled by that migration are rooted in a particular context.

My cultural context

None of us exist outside historical and cultural contexts. Full awareness of this fact is important because ignorance of the "macro" situation in our individual and collective experience renders us unable to understand the "micro" experiences of ourselves and others.

As a person who writes about personal experience, this contextual awareness and acknowledgment have become very important to me, as you will no doubt have noticed in the evolution of my writing.

I can identify a few dominant cultural influences in my childhood, from the micro to the macro: my family's religion which was infused into every aspect of our lives and family identity; the social, economic, and political stories of the western Canadian province where I was born and raised; and more broadly, the rise of neoliberalist-driven policies in the '70s and '80s.

All of these amplified a sense of individual agency and responsibility in my decisions. So much rested on me, the individual. In recent years I've been working to unravel this.

Five years ago Damien and I lost a house, and the equity we were told we'd build in that house, due to the fallout of the 2008 US housing market crash. We weren't irresponsible borrowers. We weren't in over our heads when we purchased it. We were living within our means.

So what went wrong? We bought in 2005 at the height of a hot real estate market. In 2011 when we moved back to Canada, there was no way we could sell the house

at its current market value, way below our mortgage. Because we were moving, we couldn't live in the house long enough to recoup the devastating drop in value. We rented it out to pay the mortgage, basic upkeep, and taxes.

This was not a money-making proposition. There were large maintenance outlays, and the whole thing was a lot of management labour for me. Tenants and property managers came and went until circa 2018, when the tenants just stopped paying the rent. There was nothing more we could do. We foreclosed, and we lost the real estate game, along with millions of other families.

A lot of what befalls us in life is not due to our mistakes, despite what your religion or neoliberal capitalism tells you, but due to inordinate greed and inhuman beliefs and systems whose machinations are antagonistic to human flourishing and well-being.

Over the past nearly 25 years, I have mostly assumed I was haunted by the question "where is home?" because I had chosen to leave where I was from all those years ago.

And who's to say this isn't true? However, my overly simplistic and individualistic worldview has evolved into seeing that larger forces are at play in people's lives, in my life, than just individual choice. And it is these forces and discourses that can drive the question "where is home?" just as much as any personal decision I've made.

One of the big reasons I've wrestled with the question of "where is home?" is because of the Christian religious teachings of my childhood.

The influence of religion

I was raised with the message of personal salvation, which was secured by individual belief and doctrinal assent. This salvation was for a specific purpose. It was an exit strategy, an escape route from an Earth doomed to destruction.

We weren't meant to feel at home on Earth. Christians were "in the world but not of the world". Earth and the relationships here were not my home. Heaven was my true home. And all of human experience and history on Earth was just the selection round for who got in.

Any disorientation, displacement, or sense of things not being right and just in the world - politically, socially, economically, environmentally - were to be resolved in the belief that we don't belong here anyway. Here on Earth or here in our bodies. Essentially, the world is a messed up and broken place, but we have something better to look forward to, and it is our mission to try to get as many people on board the rocket as possible.

Written like this, I see a lot of parallels in the current 1%-initiated space programs, but at least religion is more equal opportunity. Everyone gets to go, not just the rich or those chosen by the rich.

I don't think religious belief as an exit ramp off of Earth is unique to Christianity. We see the origins of this idea in the cultural transformations of the Axial Age.

This sense of "in the world but not of the world" accompanied me well into adulthood, even after I had intellectually and spiritually rejected the teleological doctrine that the purpose of human experience was for the eventual end of heaven.

Here's the thing about human feelings of displacement, dislocation, and disorientation. Those feelings are real, and there are a lot of cultural, spiritual, physiological, psychological, and environmental reasons we might experience them.

These feelings can take root in us and will be amplified when we are disconnected and feel separated from ourselves, the Earth/land/nature, and each other.

Our sense of disconnection and separation amplifies the otherness of the stranger and can cause us to react at micro and macro levels with barely imperceptible aggressions at best and horrific exploitations and oppressions at worst. The experience of this pain builds positive feedback loops for further disconnection from Mother Earth and all her inhabitants.

Alienation, disconnection, a sense of separation, and positive feedback loops that amplify those feelings... it's no surprise that we say we don't belong or are not at home here on Earth. Religious doctrines are one way of naming the source of pain and finding a resolution. Political doctrines do likewise.

My formative religious experiences amplified the feelings of disconnection from my body, the Earth, and other people, specifically those outside my religion.

This might have been more harmful to me, as I have seen in many other people's experiences processing their religious backgrounds if I hadn't been nested in such a loving family and community.

I grew up in exclusionary religion *and* a nurturing and supportive network of extensive extended relations that constituted a community. My childhood home was stable and demonstrably loving. I knew nothing of displacement, dislocation, and disorientation as a child.

I might have felt like I didn't belong in the heathen world at large, but I knew I belonged to my family. I'm confident that this is partly because my identity conformed rather well to what was expected and normative in the community. But that acknowledgment doesn't negate the belonging I experienced.

I knew who I was. I was Renee Toews, beloved daughter of Karen and Derryl, sister to Brad, granddaughter of Betty and Eric, Lorie and Jake. I was a great-granddaughter, a niece, and a cousin. I was, and am, dearly loved and connected to a large web of the living and the dead.

As an adult, I've had to unravel the religious teachings of my childhood, much like a frogged knitting project, to yield a skein of yarn that I could knit into a different spiritual foundation. **However, as a child, I never wondered, "where is home?", nor did I feel out of place or like I didn't belong. Family was my home.**

And then I moved across the continent. And the rupture and the physical distancing from the people I came from initiated the question that has dogged me for almost a quarter century.

My husband Damien and I moved for adventure and opportunity. We wanted to explore, and the times we live in make it relatively easy to scratch that itch. It's worth noting that I would never have left on my own or in a relationship with a non-adventurous partner. But I did because of who we were together, and Damien's attitudes and perspectives contributed to my own growth and development. I have become who I am, with the experiences I have, because of who we are.

Beyond personality, individual desires, and the influence of a partner, my migration was made possible because of the technological advances of the time in which I was

born. It was undergirded by the economic, political, and philosophical discourses of our modern age, including progressivism, individualism, capitalism, and globalism.

As my story illustrates, these cultural discourses and systems contribute to people uprooting and relocating. Experiences that can amplify the individual and collective sense of dislocation, and disorientation, spurring the question, "where is home?"

Some people's answer to this question is, "if we all just stayed put we'd be better off."

This brings me to Wendell Berry, farmer, writer, philosopher, and localism activist.

Is localism the answer?

I've been reading Berry since the aughts. Those were the days of my "organic" and green awakening in which I thought I might become an urban homesteader. Short of that, I could make all my soaps, vermicompost in my basement, reduce energy consumption, cook all our food from scratch, and maybe even eliminate toilet paper from our lives. (Family cloth: Google it.)

Berry's poetry, short stories, novels, and essays are a call to local community and local land. I love his writing for many things: his anti-war and anti-violence stance, his critique of capitalism, his staunch advocacy of familial responsibility and fidelity, and his love for land and place.

Berry is a moral philosopher who argues for particular axioms and practices of what constitutes a good life in his writing and living. And I happen to agree with many of them.

His well-founded criticisms of globalism and capitalism undergird a localism response to the question, "where is home?" However, I get the sense when reading Berry that he feels if people just stayed put we'd collectively and individually experience less dislocation. That "staying" would resolve the problems associated with migrations.

I disagree.

Berry's localist analysis and vision are woven throughout his work. Still, they are perhaps most explicit in his [2012 Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities entitled "It all Turns on Affection"](#). Borrowing the terms Stickers & Boomers from his mentor Wallace Stegner, another American writer/philosopher I also enjoy reading, Berry categorizes the American experience of migration and movement into a binary reality. There are those that stay, the Stickers, and those that leave, the Boomers.

"The [B]oomer [ostensibly looking for a "boom" in wealth] is motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and therefore power (note added)."

"Stickers on the contrary are motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it."

Unfortunately, according to Berry, "[b]y economic proxies thoughtlessly given, by thoughtless consumption of goods ignorantly purchased, now we all are [B]oomers."

Berry provides more context.

> "Boomer" names a kind of person and a kind of ambition that is the major theme, so far, of the history of the European races in our country. "Sticker" names a kind of person and also a desire that is, so far, a minor theme of that history, but a theme persistent enough to remain significant and to offer, still, a significant hope.

Although American and Canadian history is different, there's enough similarity in, and frankly, dominance of American culture in the North American landscape to apply this to the Canadian context also.

Admirably, Berry is a doer and a thinker of deep conviction who aligns his actions with those convictions. However, I am deeply skeptical of any binary accounting of human social experience divided into "this or that".

Neither Boomer nor Sticker narratives account for most of the motivations of immigration to North America. This fact, as well as the barely acknowledged discomfiting tension that Berry's own Kentucky homeland was secured in the not-so-distant past by the displacement of the original Sticker Indigenous inhabitants, constitutes my chief criticisms of Berry's positioning the Sticker

mentality as the morally superior answer to modern human settlement and migration.

Berry is saying that resource extractions, migrations, and land acquisitions of European peoples and their descendants, and the attendant Indigenous displacement within North America, were driven by a Boomer mentality. I agree that greed and the desire for capital, property, and power were underwriting influences of European exploration and expansion into North America starting in the late 16th century when Europeans started fishing for cod on Newfoundland's Grand Banks.

These motivations ring true on the macro level, where policies are enacted by monarchs, emperors, oligarchs, and nation-states. The narrative breaks down, however, in the lived migration experiences and motivations of individuals, families, and communities whose lives are often pawns on the geopolitical and economic chessboard.

One story from my own ancestry

My ancestry includes ethnoreligious Mennonites who arrived in Canada as religious refugees in the late 19th century.

The Mennonite religion emerged from the tumult of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Its leader Menno Simons was a Dutch Catholic clergy before founding this eponymous Christian sect.

This religion belongs to the Anabaptist tradition and is defined by a particular doctrine and confession of faith and includes a "literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, which teaches against hate, killing, violence, taking oaths, participating in use of force or any military actions, and against participation in civil government" ([Wikipedia](#)).

There is an explicit non-conforming *to the kingdom's of this world* imperative in this religion. These are my roots.

Due to their convictions to "not provoke or do violence to any man… even, when necessary" Mennonites faced regular persecution, including heavy taxation, and

were forced to migrate from their origins in German-speaking Switzerland and The Netherlands [(Dawson, 1936)](#).

Further, as noted by Dawson, migration was also a way to resolve "group crisis" and the frequent schisms of orthodoxy within the Mennonite faith. Communities would splinter along a conservative-liberal axis, and the more pious group would migrate en masse to a new location, physically removing themselves from the inroads of secularization in the existing community.

This pattern of moving to remain religiously pure continued into the 20th century for some Mennonite and other Anabaptist religious communities.

In the modern-day context, Mennonite is an Anabaptist-based branch of Christianity whose adherents or members come from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are Mennonite congregations worldwide that speak the local language and are constituted by the cultural and ethnic inhabitants of that area. E.g., Ethiopian or Indian Mennonites. But Mennonite is also an ethnic or ethnoreligious designation, defining a group unified by common culture, language, ancestry, and religion.

My Mennonite background is of the latter. In other words, it wasn't just a religious belief; it was an ethnicity. My paternal grandfather's ancestors were converts to the Anabaptist belief, and they made 3 migrations. First to East Prussia (modern-day Poland), then Russia (modern-day Ukraine), and finally to Southern Manitoba, Canada, in the late 19th century.

My great-great-grandparents came to Canada as members of a group with a shared culture, language, background, and religion. **Their ties were not to a place but to a set of beliefs and practices that defined their identity.**

Macro geopolitical forces, including those that displaced the Indigenous people who used to steward Berry's Kentucky farm or the southern Manitoba land my ancestors settled, and sweeping changes in culture, like the Protestant Reformation or the Industrial Revolution, are forces that uproot individuals, families, and communities from their place of origin.

But these are not the only reasons people migrate.

The impulses and physiology that motivate and drive human behaviour are the same today as they have been for a long, long time. We haven't evolved from them, and transhumanism and genetic engineering have yet to take us there.

Humans have constantly been acquiring new views of ourselves and our environments, ways to manipulate both, and methods of communicating those understandings. Culture, tools and technology, and so much else have advanced. But we, as biological *Homo sapiens*, remain the same, for now.

And we need the same things our distant ancestors needed: security in group belonging, food, shelter, and stories to make meaning of the cosmos and our place in it.

We migrate because we are seeking security and resources. We migrate because we make up new stories that call us to new places. We migrate because we're curious and highly adaptive beings. This is the human way.

As a species, we push boundaries, sometimes in pursuit of exploitative accumulation of power; hello, colonialism. But sometimes, in the quest for new understandings or solutions to problems. We're always looking for new horizons to explore, new resources to access, and easier ways of securing our needs.

This does not automatically make us *Boomers*. It makes us Explorers.

Berry describes Stickers as having "an ethic of affection" for place. And of Boomers being motivated by rapacious greed. But there is way more to the story of migration than these two ideas. More to us, as a species and individuals, than one or the other.

Is conservation the answer?

In one of my recent [political series posts](), I talked a bit about a conservative mindset. In modern political parlance we frame being conservative as an expression of behaviour or belief along a particular fault line of issues. Conservatives think x about an issue, and Progressives think y. But conservative, as an adjective, [simply means you want to conserve the way things are](). It's an outlook independent of current political constructs and ideologies.

11

A conserving position seeks to conserve what is known. It is respecting of tradition, stories, and ideas from the past.

This is fundamentally important for human survival and thriving. We pass on knowledge so we don't have to learn afresh with each new generation.

The non-conserving position seeks to push the boundaries of what is known, both physically and non-materially.

This is fundamentally important for human survival and thriving. We move beyond established cultural knowledge and limits, including physical location, so we don't stagnate as individuals or populations.

The arch-conserving position is that we are bounded by outside-the-system limits that are ideologically based. There are some good reasons humans have constructed and appealed to these limits to keep other humans in check. But this position loses its credibility when it's ultimately abused by those seeking to exercise power over others and when people stop believing the particular story that scaffolds the ideology.

While writing this piece, I came across the most salient example of an arch-conserving position on migration in the Winter 2023 edition of Plough. The essayist Laverty writes, "God has marked out our appointed times in history and the boundaries of our lands, and commands us to remain as we were when we were called."

The arch-liberatory position is that there are no limits. Everything, every place, and every experience are for our taking, which leads to exploitation and a wake of destruction.

The conserving position's weakness is insular ideas and a cap on individual and collective flourishing because *this is how we've always done it*. On the other hand, a non-conserving orientation needs an ethic for limits, where and when are they appropriate, how do we decide, and who makes those decisions?

Migrations challenge the conserving position.

Let's imagine these scenarios.

Scenario one: A family, a clan, or a contingency of the clan sits around a table, a hearth, or a fire. They talk about a social, political, environmental, or resource problem they're facing. It's getting colder, or, it's getting warmer, the animals aren't coming in the same numbers any more, the crops aren't growing as well, etc. There's a debate amongst the group, with some voices saying, "This is where we've always lived. Next year will be better." Another contingent says, "I heard a rumor that the conditions are better in the east. We should go now."

Scenario two: A family, a clan, or a contingency of the clan sits around a table, a hearth, or a fire. Someone or someone's starts talking about social, political, environmental, or economic ideas that are novel to the group. Exploring or testing these ideas requires a certain openness to trying new things. There's a debate amongst the group, with some voices saying, "This is the way our mother's mother's mother's mother did it, and this is how we will continue." Another contingent says, "We need to explore this new horizon."

The problem, of course, is that we no longer live in the distant and not-so-distant past where perceived or actual greener pastures or virgin territory exists beyond the horizon, just waiting to be discovered and settled by disgruntled or simply curious groups of humans. We live on a populated and settled Earth.

Although the quest for differentiation and pushing boundaries and limits is innately human, the Enlightenment was like a starting gun, *ready*, *set*, *go*, for the race to maximize individualism. The technological advances of the past couple hundred years have been fuel on the fire.

Some people think this conflagration will be extinguished with societal collapse and crisis. Others believe we can "technology" our way out of it.

Can we live in mutually flourishing ways?

In his book, [This Sacred Life](#), Wirzba argues that "many of the world's dominant cultures have done a poor job of teaching their people to *live in their places in mutually nourishing ways* (emphasis mine)".

I couldn't agree more, and this statement contains cause and remedy for much that ails us individually and collectively. We don't live in mutually nourishing ways, human to human, human to other beings, human to land, population to population.

We deny our interconnectedness. We use power advantages, including technology, to exploit the other.

The answer to this is not a commandment to "stay or live in your place", a position justifying untold abuse and exploitation of other humans when human relations are conceived in hierarchical power structures.

Nor is the full answer, as advanced by Berry and others, to have such a love for place and its life that you commit to preserving and maintaining it. That's a piece of the answer, but not the whole.

It's not just an affection for place that keeps people in a location but knowing they belong to that place even if their ideas challenge the bounds of community norms. Human communities must make room for new understandings, developments, technologies, and ideologies. This is how humans solve problems and grow as individuals and as a species.

Throughout the ages, humans have resolved the conflicts of conserving vs. non-conserving viewpoints through not just physical migration but ideological migrations. And ideological migrations are sometimes only made possible by physical migrations.

We can go back to my Mennonite ancestors for an easy example. If a person is born into a very conserving ideology or belief system - this is how we've always done it - the only way to explore and express a non-conserving point of view is to leave. Whether it's the Catholicism from which Menno Simons splintered or the Mennonite sect he founded, both groups want to conserve their beliefs.

For some individuals, the status quo position is religiously, economically, ideologically, or otherwise oppressive, exploitative, or just not a fit for who they are. And the only way to find flourishing is to leave.

It's true that we can no longer live as if there aren't limits, as if there is still terra incognito on Earth. But if we're making an effort to live connected to creatures and places, we must be honest about the need for an ecological reality, not to mention spiritual and political, of *diversity in place*. A mutual flourishing ethic allows for and is, in fact, dependent upon this diversity.

Human cultures draw limits around the diversity tolerated in a particular place. Establishing those limits based on mutual flourishing is a very different approach than upholding limits based on tradition. Although most cultural practices start as a means to ensure the group's thriving, these traditions must be scrutinized when they fail to consider out-of-group flourishing, don't account for human development and evolution within the group, and can't sustain diversity.

There is angst in the zeitgeist, a collective handwringing about what we should do about rootlessness, alienation from place, and people feeling dislocated and displaced through modern migration. A simplistic and arch-conserving answer points to those that leave as the problem. A more accurate and nuanced answer points to the discourses that drive modernity, including individualism, globalism, and capitalism, as the problem.

Localizing [social change movements](#) abound in response to these discourses. And there is a lot of hope in this answer. *But only if these localizing solutions are clear-eyed about the problems of communities accepting diversity among their members.*

Those trying to affect a cultural change where people are committed to place will need an openness to human diversity that allows for growth in situ.

Natural dissonance and disagreements occur at all levels and between all members of a place, human and other-than-human. What is the principle or ethic by which these are resolved? Humans have a long history of subjecting one another to artificial limits based on non-material reality (i.e.: ideology) and our growth as a species and individuals has required pushing against these limits. What is the principle or ethic that defines the boundaries of acceptable ideas?

In an Enlightenment-influenced and technologically-enabled world, a commitment to live in place in *mutually flourishing ways* requires an openness to diversity that challenges human institutions and social structures.

Berry's affection for place is not the whole answer to migration and its attendant rootlessness. **Our commitment must be to the flourishing and nourishing of all the beings in that place. And beings, by their very organic and biological nature, grow and evolve, individually and collectively. Places and communities need to**

either hold space for and accommodate this or we make accommodations for migration and movement.

In summary, migration is not the problem of our species. It's how we act in the places we inhabit. And how we act depends on what we believe about ourselves, our identity, and our relationship with everything around us.

My own migration story

Going on an adventure

I grew up in a place. Like all places, this place had its own history and cultural stories of meaning and purpose, from the micro to the macro level.

I left as a young adult on an adventure with my husband. And in going, I discovered, as all travelers do, that there were other cultural stories of meaning. We happened to like those stories better. And we liked the physical landscapes of those stories. So we did not feel drawn back to the economic, political, and social narratives of our upbringing. And we didn't feel drawn back to that particular piece of land, the Central Alberta parkland, either.

This may be because we are children and grandchildren of immigrants. Migration is our family story. And unlike our grandparents and great-grandparents going many generations back, Damien and I have never worked the land as farmers.

We like going to new places and meeting new people. We love to travel. We're interested in different ideas and ways of doing things.

Damien and I are both thoroughly progressive in that we don't believe in holding to tradition just because it's tradition, in keeping to old ways and old understandings because that's how it's always been done or that's how it used to be done before our modern experience. Traditions, tools, and technologies must be able to justify themselves in our own space and time, which includes the personal context of our marriage and family life.

My husband, in particular, does not seek domination over others, and the nature of his being has encouraged the growth of my own desire to live in non-exploitative,

mutually flourishing relationships.[2] We have critically evaluated and discarded the traditions and beliefs we inherited that don't support mutual flourishing within our own relationship and family culture.

These interests, traits, and questioning nature are who we are, as a couple. They drove our own migration and are the orientation and perspective we bring to community life.

Honesty about accounting and risks

After we left Alberta, family was the only thing that called us back. But travel and communication technologies bridged that gap. As a middle-aged woman with young adult children, I've gained the life experience to see it was probably painful for our families to see us go. Our actions also contributed to the conditions that deprived my children of the tight-knit, close community familial connections I had as a child.

None of that makes it any less true that Damien and I loved the adventure of it all.

We feel rich in experiences and immensely proud of our most important accomplishment: raising our children and building a close and connected family where individuality is honored in the framework of an unconditionally loving family community.

Our decision to go off on our own, even in this mobile age, is not exactly normative. We've repeatedly moved to places where we knew no one and had no connections. We put almost all our eggs into the basket of our nuclear family. A position supported by the conservative and religious teachings of my childhood and young adult years.

We left the village and depended upon one another. This carried a risk that may have sunk us. It didn't, mainly because of our inherited social, spiritual, and cultural capital. We had models, skills, practices, and patterns of behavior from our

---

[2] You can rightfully infer from this that his non-dominance over others has helped reveal my own desire for control over the actions of others. Damien's example has helped me interrogate that drive to control (Where does it come from?) and also choose different ways of relating to people that are more aligned with the way I truly want to live and what I actually value.

upbringing that resourced us well for generative partnership and child-raising. And we had the education and skills to acquire the necessary economic capital to cushion us somewhat from calamity, something the village would otherwise provide.

We've had a very good life, but the question of "where is home?" has haunted and persisted through the years.

This is not a question my husband ponders, which is one of the clearest indications to me that not everyone will wrestle with the same existential questions in life.

Answering this question has been a journey and an evolution.

Religion

When I left the place (as in the region) of my childhood home, I defined home in my religious beliefs. My willingness to pick up and move across the continent and then move again to Maine was directly proportional to my assurance of finding particular churches in those areas.

I knew that if I could find a church, I would find community.

Christianity is not an inherited religion. Your membership in the group is not tied to any lineal affiliations - where you were born, your ethnicity, your parentage, etc. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Particular beliefs, doctrinal assets, and practices are the portals of entry to the Christian community. Where you come from has nothing to do with it, except for how your background has or hasn't exposed you to these ideas.

For years after leaving "home", I defined home as belonging to the Christian faith.

Additionally, a sense of home was found in my relationship with and commitment to Damien. Ironically and incongruously, this was well-supported by both specific passages of Christian scripture and the elevation of romantic love and attachment in the modern psyche. Cue [Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros](#).

We moved back to Canada in 2011 because the process of immigrating to the US through various work visas was too fraught and protracted. We didn't move back because Canada defined our idea of home, but by virtue of our place of birth, it was our place of citizenship, which conferred certain rights, rights we didn't have in the US as resident aliens.

Parents

In our transition back to Canada, we lived with my parents, who had moved to Nova Scotia a few years earlier. Their new house, which [my Dad had just built the previous year](#), couldn't accommodate sleeping our family of five. And so while the [kids slept in the house, sharing one room](#), Damien and I used the camp trailer that my parents had lived in on the property while they were building.

I was welcomed home, without condition and with much accommodation, and the entire experience reminded me that part of my understanding of home was and would always be rooted in my parents. *Living in Nova Scotia with them was not returning home to "a place" I knew as a child, it was seeking shelter in "a relationship" I knew*. A relationship that both parties had actively nurtured despite the physical distance of the intervening 12 years since I had left Central Alberta.

It took me some time into adulthood because of the aforementioned religious and romantic notions before I became cognizant that my relationship with my parents as their child was an immutable piece of my identity. I would never lose it, as I would never lose my identity as a mother. My identity as Damien's wife could be lost in divorce, death, and remarriage. But my position as a child of Karen and Derryl was unchanging.

And as that knowing dawned on me, I realized that part of my sense of home would always be found in my relationship with my parents. Not necessarily to the place they lived or the house they inhabited, but to them in particular. Their relationship with me became part of my answer to the "where is home" question.

But I wanted more than that relationship. Both Damien and I wanted our sense of home to be defined by particular experiences and places, specifically mountains. So we moved to the Gaspé peninsula to make that reality.

Topography & Land

I feel a kinship with mountains. Mountains move me. [They call me](). I want to live in them.

I was not born in them. I was not raised in them. The eastern border of Canada's magnificent western mountain ranges was a mere 5 hours away from my childhood home, but they were not part of my life. They were an "outside the system" experience. They were summer vacation and winter ski trips. I loved visiting them, but my childhood sense of home and my attachments were to the prairie town where I went to school and church, my grandparents' farm, and all my many relatives contained within this circle.

I choose not to carry regrets, there is literally no point; but my most pressing alternate-trajectory-life question is, "what if Damien and I didn't move all the way east in our adventuring, exploratory phase but moved west instead?" I sometimes dream of the life that would have been possible from that theoretical choice.

[If I knew at 24 what I had learned about myself by 34](), I would not have moved east but would have told Damien to look for job offers south and west of Alberta. Recruiters and companies from both California and Washington state had been in contact with Damien. A move to either would have set our life on a completely different trajectory. One more likely to have landed us in one of my dream lives where we live in the Columbia mountain range of British Columbia.

(In that life two of our children would not have been born so I don't want to go back and choose differently, but I do wonder.)

I didn't know a lot of things at 24. Including that one day, my spirit would say, "seek the mountains", and I'd be on the other side of the continent from where the most spectacular North American mountains are. Mountains that were practically in my backyard as a child.

This is also why I don't appreciate the simple "have affection for the place you live" remedy for migration. It doesn't account for people's lived experiences of belonging, attachment, and kinship for geographic regions different from where they are from.

You may be lucky enough to be born into a region you love and to know a kinship with it because of long-standing land, cultural, or familial connections. But if, like me, your sense of connection and kinship is to other places, what then?

Opportunities

After a few years in the best mountains we could find east of the Rockies and close to Nova Scotia, we came to the realization that the Gaspé Peninsula would not provide what we wanted for our kids in finishing their formative years and launching them to young adulthood, namely post-secondary education options and cultural diversity found only in large populations.

We foresaw that the lack of both in the sparsely populated and definitively francophone Gaspé region would limit our children's growth and opportunity. This is not to say these realities are de facto limiting, but they were limiting for our Christian, anglophone, homeschooled children. Our kids needed to see themselves and their family life reflected in their community. And to not feel like they were the only people "like them" in a place.

So we moved to find those communities. We chose Montreal specifically for its cultural diversity, arts and technology opportunities which aligned well with our family and who we saw our children becoming, and affordable post-secondary schooling options.

Living in Montreal with no family, no mountains and no purchase of a property to anchor us, the question of "where is home" became insistent, especially after I [lost the religious beliefs of my childhood](#).

Finding home

Revelations

Five years ago, I was seeing a Spiritual Director for a while. My faith was in active crumble mode, and I was wondering what, if anything, would be left. The kids were teenagers, and I was wrapping up my years as a homeschool parent, trying to figure out what to do with my life post-childraising. We were losing the house in Maine. We were in a financial crunch.

I really needed a whole support team, including a financial advisor, a therapist, and a career counsellor. But the Spiritual Director was free.

I meditated in those days to help manage [my anxiety](#) and as part of my spiritual direction exercises. During one of those late winter meditations, I had a vision of my fundamental interconnectedness to the entire Earth and to the Cosmos. I was inextricably connected to everything else, regardless of where I lived.

Home was *here* – wherever I was – in my body, on Earth, connected to all things.

By calling it a vision or revelation, I don't want to overstate its metaphysical nature or amplify its meaning for anyone else but me. It was a knowing. And it still is.

I remember the season acutely because [my grandmother died that spring](#), and the knowledge of my connectedness helped carry me through that loss. I would always remain connected to my grandmother and family, regardless of distance or shared beliefs.

Revelations can be lost or diminished. Our interpretation of them can change. If a revelation is helpful to our spirits, it needs to be remembered. And so I keep that particular knowing close because I don't want to forget it.

My fundamental interconnectedness is settled in me, and I have been viewing the world through this lens for some time, starting before this "vision". But I still have to live somewhere and express my connectedness in a place, on particular land, in a specific culture and community.

And where that gets incarnated right now is in Montreal.

Economics

A part of the "where is home?" puzzle has remained economically unsolved for years. Since leaving the United States in 2011 and then losing our Maine property, we haven't owned a home. Despite being solidly middle class in income, in our 26 years of marriage we've only lived in a house we owned for 6 of those years. Other values and interests guided our decision-making through the years: location-independent work, freedom, experiences and adventures.

In capitalism, home ownership theoretically contributes to one's financial well-being (it didn't work for us last time) while also securing a place to live. It's supposed to be a win-win. But it presupposes some other conditions and values, like staying put.

The drive to own houses and land is a cultural story. That discussion is beyond this essay, except to say it's our collective belief that land can be owned that makes the concept real. There's no material reality to it. It's a story we believe, and thus it's true.

Because this is the story we all believe, what I've learned in my experiences of North American house ownership and non-ownership, is that ownership of a piece of land or a house, in addition to being a financial investment under our economic system, confers a different sense of home than non-ownership. In this story, home ownership cultivates a particular responsibility and security.

Therefore, securing our own home is important to Damien and me. And so, during our sojourn in Montreal, we've been asking ourselves, where do we buy a home? Recognizing, with what we've learned from previous house ownership and economic downturns, that where we buy, we need to stay. We can't take the kind of risks we were willing to when we were younger and had a longer runway to work with.

Finding home is not just about identifying where and what you love and where you feel connected. It's a search with economic constraints in a culture of currency and housing markets.

Over the years, we asked ourselves where we wanted to live after our commitment to our children was finished in Montreal. Do we stay here? Can we afford to buy here? Where *can* we afford to buy?

We considered moving back to the [mountains of the Gaspé](#), an area we love. We thought about the Eastern Townships. We looked in the Laurentians.

If an international border did not divide us from Northern Vermont, all things being politically and economically equal (which they are not), I would have purchased there in a heartbeat. Since moving to southern Quebec, I discovered a place I would love to call home on my trips across the border to the better mountains.

Nothing felt right to both of us. And the time hadn't yet come for us to direct our effort and resources into a more refined search.

And so the question of where we would go remained unanswered, bothering me more than Damien.

As we considered our options and talked about our realities, another piece of the puzzle started to take on more significance than it had in the past, my relationship with my parents and my responsibility to them.

Relations, Social Capital & Constitution

I had decided some years back that when my parents reached the life stage where they needed help for daily living, I wanted to be that person. Care for my parents is not something I was raised to feel obligated to provide. And it's certainly not part of modern Western cultural expectations. But I knew I did not want my parents navigating their elderly years without the daily support and connection to their children.

Much about North American culture does not reflect my values, and the bureaucratized and institutional care of both young and old is just one of many sources for my cultural dissonance. And when I saw how the institutionalized elderly were treated during the pandemic, my resolve to not be a part of that system only strengthened.

A return to my parents was in the cards for me because of how I'm wired and what I value. But it wasn't clear to Damien and me where and how that would happen. Would we go to them? Would they come to us?

Then it all became rather obvious.

By virtue of their individual personalities, upbringing and families of origin, generational context as Boomers, their faith and ethics, and couplehood being greater than the sum of its parts, my parents are Community Builders with high social capital. They are more connected to and conscious of the natural and human resources where they live than some of their born and bred Nova Scotian friends.

My parents know people. They connect people to other people. They host the neighbourhood parties. My dad's work (still going at 69) entirely depends upon community connections. They're established in a place after uprooting in their mid fifties from where I was raised.

We, on the other hand, live in a francophone province with an increasing political discrimination towards and reduction of resources for the anglophone minority. Wherever we might want to live in this province, other than small pockets of Montreal, would not be a place we could bring elderly anglophones.

We don't have the same community connections or social capital as my parents.

We're the adventurers and explorers, the migrators without property. We've built flexibility into our lives and our work. We would move to them. *We'd sail the boat of our family life into the security of their port.*

And the question of what piece of land, what property, what "place" will be our home was settled.

I have found and experienced home in particular places and land, ideas and beliefs, specific communities, and my own body. *But home will always be defined by the people I'm connected to, specifically my children, husband, and parents.* These relationships are where I find my most grounded sense of home. It's always been this way.

Home is where my people are.

As a child, all my people were in one place, and home was easily defined and bounded by those bonds. Then I left and made a life with my husband and children, and my daily and intimate connections with them defined home. They are my home.

I am made into who I am by who I am in relationship with, who needs me, and who I need. There is no "me" or "home" independent of these connections. My relations are most obviously my mate, offspring, kith and kin, but are also land, nature, and place.

I am constituted by my relations and my materiality; by my ideas, personality, and desired ways of being in the world. The places where those things come together,

where I embody relationality at multiple levels of human and non-human kinship in ways that align with my ideas, personality, and desired ways of being in the world - all of that is what I call home.

Moving home

Next year when I'm done with my coursework, we'll move home to Nova Scotia. My parents subdivided their property, and my dad has already built my parent's new house to specs that will allow them to age in place. Across the driveway from their new home, Damien and I will take ownership of my parent's existing home, the [one my dad built](#) with all the love, attention, and details you put into your own house, thinking it's your last build.

I will be moving into a gift on multiple levels.

We'll be next-door neighbors and ready companions for everything that life has in store for the coming years.

The children, now adults, will remain in Montreal, a city that meets their needs and desires as young adults seeking affordable schooling, work in their fields of interest, and not-yet completely unaffordable housing. Montreal is an excellent fit for who they are, just as we had thought it would be.

For the first time in 25 years, I will no longer have close physical contact with my children. I never thought it would be me that would leave them. After all, it's the children that go to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

I don't know how "home" will feel without the children's steady physical presence.

In the same way that I don't believe in an *inevitable* forward and upward movement of human progress and enlightenment, I don't believe that our individual lives ferry us steadily onward and upward. We cycle. We move in fits and starts, resets and quasi-resets, ups and downs, and loopdeloos.

Having said all that, I believe in bending the arch of our individual and collective development in an overall positive direction, not because it's inexorable and bound to happen, but because a belief in this direction produces action in this direction. And action produces results. And so I believe to instantiate the possibility.

This next migration is bending the arch of our family story in directions that will shore up familial security, resiliency, and fidelity, the foundation from which future explorations and adventure will undoubtedly be launched.

We circle back. We continue forward. To be with the people who bound my being and constitute my identity is how I want to continue on this journey.