

Reflection on the “sense of home” and belonging during COVID-19

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As humans, we share the experience of wanting to belong and feel at home. Feeling at home is a subtle and subconscious notion that is shaped by individual and collective acts of remembering and, through such acts, a sense of national or cultural identity that we may experience as “belonging” (Ahmed, 1999).

Geography provides a framework for understanding “belonging” through people’s relationship to place. Place often determines our experience of home and belonging, since this is usually tied to a specific geographic location where we live or have lived. Yet people’s individual sense of home is not straightforward as it may be experienced as a physical structure, a geographical location but also as an emotional space (Seiden, 2009).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the concept of “home” came to the surface when citizenship suddenly defined people’s experience of belonging. Citizenship determined which rules and regulations applied, where people were able to go and their eligibility to receive certain supports and securities – regardless of how long they had lived in a particular place. Some people who were not citizens were even asked to leave the country that they had made their (temporary) home.

COVID-19 disrupted internal and external structures and questioned values and concepts held by individuals but also by society. Ordinary and precious things like hugging a friend, shaking hands, or seeing someone face to face were suddenly forbidden. From one moment to the other daily life demanded new structures and asked for new meanings and internal reflections. How do we find stability in times like these? Where do we find a sense of home and belonging when everything falls into pieces?

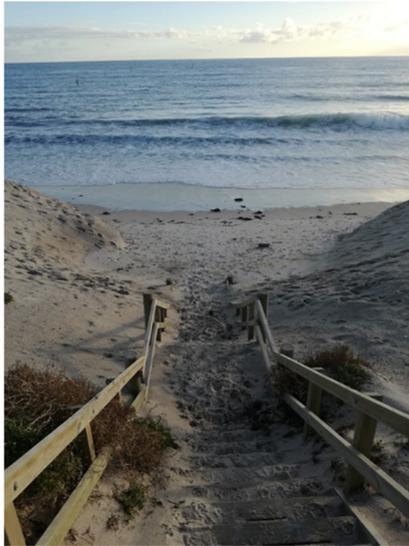
As a researcher of German origin living in Australia, I became painfully aware of the geographical distance to my roots and home country when borders closed, airfare stopped, and all travel was cancelled for the near future. For me, this raised questions about what happens to the feeling of belonging when social distancing limits contact to family members and partners. How do we connect with friends and colleagues when they need to keep a safe distance? Social interaction suddenly became precarious and awkward, being dominated by the struggle of finding the balance between behaving responsibly and sharing connection with others. COVID-19 has challenged our quest for safety and integration – both fundamental values that underpin our sense of home.

When I miss “home” and a sense of belonging, I look up into the sky. I see the same bright full moon in the sky that was shining when my dad drove me to the airport. I hear the music that played in the car. Soft piano sounds. A female voice singing. Sometimes powerful and strong, sometimes soft and sensitive. I hear my father asking me if I can see the two faces in the moon. “They are kissing each other”, he says. I look and look, try to spot the kissing faces. Sometimes I see them, sometimes I only see shadows.

COVID-19 provided us with an opportunity to cultivate a “ecology of attention” (Citton, 2017). This involves paying attention to nature, re-defining our sense of belonging in it, and connecting to our deepest roots. By doing so, we may find a sense of “home” that is “being but no longing” (Persram, 1996, p. 213).

For me, when I look into the beautiful night sky here in Australia, I see the same moon as in Germany.

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Tonight, she is slightly smaller – a waning moon, but she is the same.

We all experience day and night. Sunrise and the sunset, a waxing and a waning moon. The tides. The seasons. Ever changing. After the dark moon, there will be a full moon again, after the winter there will be spring, after the low tide the high tide will eventually come. This will always be telling us that summer and winter, dark and light, high and lows belong together and that an end is always the start of a new beginning.

This is the stability in instability, consistency in inconsistency. No matter where we are geographically. No matter what happens.

References

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