

WHAT IS “HOME”?

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Where are you from? Where is home?

This is a question I have grown up dreading. When faced with this question, my mind races with an endless number of questions for how I could respond. Where am I from... Um... Where do I live now? Where did I live the most years of my life? Where is my extended family from? But that is not really what I consider home... Where do I consider home? What is most familiar to me? ... There is a long silence, and I find myself weighing how much to explain or trying to determine how interested the person really is. Will this be a point of connection or disconnect? Will it be a conversation catalyst or termination?

My parents worked as humanitarian aid workers in Cameroon. Growing up in a country that is different from my passport country has made this question incredibly difficult and confusing to answer. No answer is able to fully encapsulate my reality. I have found that where I consider home to be has changed throughout the years, making this question even more complicated to answer. Home has been dynamic and changing. As I reflect on the nuanced meaning of home, I regularly ask myself:

What makes home, home?

I have found that my definition of home has come to look like pockets of spaces where I feel safe and seen. In these pockets, I am able to fully be myself. These pockets are woven through intentional conversations, shared experiences, thoughtful questions, and gracious challenges. These pockets have also been created from thundering rainstorms, fried plantains, and salty ocean air. Trying to answer the question of where I am from still holds tension, but I want to choose to embrace the tension. Not having a clear cut answer for this question is okay. Leaning into the question and the answer it brings may give way to a deeper conversation which may lead to a profound connection.

Humanitarian aid workers are faced with many transitions due to the nature of their work. Aid workers may have to move and regrow roots multiple times in their career. This process can feel disorienting and lonely. Research shows that aid workers frequently experience symptoms of anxiety and depression. Many aid workers do not have a home base, and go from field posting to field posting. This constant movement, and struggling with the idea of home, may lead to feelings of anxiety and depression.

How can you cultivate a sense of home where you are? Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs shows that after an individual’s physiological needs are met, safety, belonging and love are the next necessities of basic human health. The latest neuroscience shows that a feeling of safety, and having mental safe spaces and environmental safe spaces, are essential for balanced wellness.

What are the spaces where you feel most safe? This can be environmental, an activity, or a person or group of people. Developing these pockets of safety can help in the transitions faced as a humanitarian aid worker, and in the tension of being a global nomad.