

‘There’s no Place like Home’ ... if only we can locate our inner maps.

“Through our maps, we willingly become a part of their boundaries. If our home is included, we feel pride, perhaps familiarity, but always a sense that this is ours”.

Debbie Lee Wesselmann, Trutor & the Balloonist

In traditional communities, a sense of belonging to a place is most obviously defined by physical landscape. This was probably true for most people 100 years ago. Today, we have the gift of worldwide networking, communicating with each other across the globe through objects no larger than the palm of our hands. We can be anywhere at any time communicating with anyone about anything. Through digital technology, we are able to travel freely, interact anonymously, and remain unfettered by this notion of ‘place’.

Those who promote cultural globalization claim that the idea of a national identity is on the decline. We have become citizens of the world, no longer, it seems, strongly identified with our community and with the place of our birth.

In the days of sabre-tooth tigers, the sense of belonging and the need to be part of a group was vital for survival. In tribal cultures this group conscience still operates, as of course it does in the animal kingdom where creatures such as starlings and ants appear to have a perfectly attuned sense of belonging, enabling them to move in complete alignment with one another.

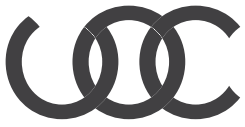
Many of us seem to have relinquished a conscious need to belong in favour of greater personal freedom and independence. Sometimes, however, a vibration shivers to

the surface and we experience a sudden and acute longing for something that appears to be missing from our lives.

In my role as a systemic family therapist in London schools, I developed an exercise I have called ‘The Stones of Belonging’ which encourages children to consider, amongst other things, their often complex cultural heritage. When I ask a West Indian child the question: ‘Where are you from?’ the response is invariably: ‘I’m from England’. Upon closer questioning, it is revealed that the child’s father may be from Grenada and the mother from Jamaica.

I am an Irish citizen through my grandfather, an English one through my father. In 1986, the Swiss government changed the law, enabling the offspring of Swiss mothers to apply for citizenship. My mother urged me to do so immediately and so I acquired my third passport.

I like having three passports. I enjoy the luxury of choice as I leaf through them before I leave for the airport. My husband is American and for several years he lived in Boston. When I flew in to Logan Airport, I was always Irish; I would hand over my passport with the beautiful gold harp on the cover and watch as the eyes of the unsmiling immigration officer grew softer: ‘Which part of the Old Country are you from?’ he would ask. This always threw me slightly. Was it Virginia, County Cavan, or was Cavan in Virginia? From my baggage label, he would then notice that I had just flown in from London. Finally, there was the place of birth registered in my passport – ‘Biel, Switzerland’. So, not ‘real’ Irish, after all.



The trouble is I'm not 'real' Swiss either. Although I speak Swiss German fluently and apparently without an accent, there's a lot I don't grasp about Switzerland. I was born there, I spent time at school there, I worked and paid taxes there, our children spent their primary school years there, but only half of me is genetically Swiss, and it's that non-Swiss half that sometimes leaves me on the outside, puzzled by expressions, confused by rituals, forgetful of social niceties.

Although only a quarter of the blood in my veins is English, it is to England that I feel most connected. I was raised here, educated here. This is where my roots are. Until that is, I see a car on the motorway with Swiss number plates and I have an instinctive desire to wave; or I hear an Irish accent and I find myself gravitating towards it and asking its owner: 'Which part of the Old Country are you from?', aware too that this is exactly what my father used to do when he heard the Irish lilt.

How can we understand this concept of belonging to a place? How does it define who we are? We inherit our nationality through our parents. We have no choice in the matter. How connected are we, unconsciously, to the countries we inherit through our ancestors?

As I grew up, I unconsciously and continuously juggled my landscapes, my language, and my traditions. It gave me a certain elasticity of mind and attitude. As a child, I had the role of translator, enabling my Irish grandfather and our Swiss au pairs to communicate with each other. In Switzerland, I translated for my father, who spoke no 'Schwyzerdeutsch'. His German was good, but Swiss people generally dislike speaking in what they refer to as 'High German' and, especially at informal gatherings, they naturally and rather quickly revert to the dialect.

My paternal grandfather, Henry O'Connell, left Ireland during WWI to join the British Army. He never returned to his homeland and lived in England until his death in 1969. In 2006, I made contact with my family in Ireland and they gathered a group of O'Connells for a reunion. In a quiet moment, one of my grandfather's nieces approached me and said: 'We've been waiting for you. We knew that one day, you'd come.' So, there appears to be a quality of incompleteness which is felt not only by those who leave, but also by those who are left behind.

In the late 19th century, my maternal great-aunts, Elise and Bertha, emigrated to America from Switzerland, leaving

behind their much younger brother, Ernst. Although my grandfather never saw his sisters again, my mother had enormous affection for her Wisconsin family and, throughout her life, made a point of attending weddings and reunions in Milwaukee whenever possible.

My own deep love for all things American has been with me since I first visited the United States when I was twelve. What I feel upon exiting the sliding doors at any American airport is akin to what I feel when I land at Zurich or Dublin. It's a powerful sense of recognition, of suddenly being lined up correctly. I belong, in a way that I don't belong when I land in somewhere like Milan or Edinburgh.

As well as three passports, I also have two names - the Irish, 'Una', and the Swiss, 'Suseli'. I have tried over the years to 'lose' one in favour of the other, but those who know me as Una find Suseli strange and vice versa. Attempting to prioritize my cultural heritage is not, it seems, up to me.

Last year, as a result of a random coincidence, my husband and I got married in Wisconsin.

Acquiring an American passport is not, I understand, an option open to me and this offers me an odd sense of relief. A fourth passport might just be one too many. On that day in Southern Wisconsin my gifts were many; they included the completion of something started long ago - the presence of my grandfather's great-nieces at our wedding. The day also marked a beginning in that I became part of a new family. On reflection, all that means a great deal more than being the holder of a navy blue passport stamped with a golden eagle.

As I sit in primary school classrooms, surrounded by children who can claim membership of so many different ethnic communities, I consider the uniqueness of each one of us in terms of family history and cultural heritage. At the same time, we share something that is universal and which allows us to feel supported in our overlapping circles of belonging.

Una worked for many years as a teacher in the UK and Switzerland. In 2001 she trained in Systemic Family Constellations at the Hellinger Institute in New York. Una now works freelance, providing workshops and trainings for educators, school therapists and social workers on the subject of 'Family Conflict, Family Loyalty - navigating the path between the two'.

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