A World Awaiting: Musings on Why we Travel

It was 108 degrees outside, and at 8:30 am I was already sweating through my new light blue kurtha. At seventeen, I had moved to India for a few months to work at the Christian Medical College Hospital. Weaving my way through back roads and hidden footpaths, I could feel the beads of perspiration dripping down my back, ruining what I had hoped would be a good first impression. Ten minutes after leaving my apartment, I was standing in front of the hospital, but I had not counted on having to cross a six-lane highway first. Without a crosswalk in sight, I stood frozen on the side of the road, waiting futilely for a break in the traffic. Around me, people casually stepped into the street, ignoring honks and near-misses as they made their way across. Feeling like a deer preparing to face the headlights, I was saved by a girl in a hot pink sari.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a sweet, lilting voice. At my panicked look, she smiled, hooking her arm into mine, and told me her name was Priya. She was a medical student specializing in traumatic brain injuries, and I can say with great certainty that she will be an incredible doctor: there is no quality quite so valuable in medicine as being able to put your patients at ease.

Indeed, there is an incommunicable relief when doing something that scares you in knowing that you are not alone, and every time a new international student arrived to work at the hospital, I'd take them across the road, arms linked together, in a silent thank you to Priya.

Of course, it wasn't until I moved to Copenhagen that I got hit by a truck. It was three years later, and by that point I guess I'd forgotten all the street smarts I learned in India, because when I was cycling home at 11 pm on a cold November evening, a drunk driver came flying

down the road and tossed me off my bike into a wall. Not even hitting the brakes, the truck sped off, leaving me lying in the street.

For the record, I was totally fine, but that's not the point. The point is that immediately, several small groups of strangers had gathered around me, coming to my aid. My slightly mangled bike was pulled out of the road, and the two residents of the apartment whose wall I had been thrown into – young men with tousled hair, graphic t-shirts, and one not even wearing shoes – rushed out to help me to my feet, asking if I needed an ambulance.

It's easy to consider the irony of the fact that I was never in any real danger in a country known for its terrible driving and non-existent traffic laws, but when I moved to one of the safest places in the world, I was hit by a truck. But all I can really think about is how well I think Priya would get along with the rumpled boys from the apartment on Skindergade.

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I am not the first writer to consider why one travels. It is the sort of question that has plagued me on trans-Atlantic flights and on sleepless nights back in my own bed, but it remains rather unoriginal and uninspired. Asking why people travel is to inherently place oneself at the center of the narrative, making one's own answer the only answer. However, it is a slightly different thing to consider why *we* travel instead of why *I* travel. The self-satisfaction still comes through, as the writer places himself in the center of the narrative, now not only speaking for himself but also for the whole world of travellers. But this broader question leaves room for interpretation, for consideration, for alternative points of view.

And so it is this question that I will consider: why do we travel? I freely admit that this piece is coloured by my own ideas and ideals. The conclusions are my own. But I am asking the question in hopes that you will see yourself in these pages and so that you will consider another

point of view. The world is full of travellers, and full of cliches. Let yourself become only the former.

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I was twelve when I pulled Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* off my parents' bookshelf. It wasn't his name – one of the most renowned in travel writing – that drew me in, but rather the paperback cover, featuring a forest that was reminiscent of the fantasy books I was fonder of at the time. Settling onto the floor beside the fireplace, crisscross-applesauce, I perused the first few pages.

It was boring, so I went back to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

But a few years later, I returned to Bryson, this time fresh off a week-long yurt trip through Colorado's 10th Mountain Division.[1] And this time, I was hooked. I tore through his months-long trip down the Appalachian Trail,[2] voraciously devouring even the most mundane of details. I simply couldn't get enough. I made a vow that one day, I'd follow in his footsteps. I haven't succeeded yet, but I haven't really failed, either. I've just had a few other trips to take first.

Now, of course, I know that Bryson's is perhaps one of the most widely known names in travel journalism. So when he wrote about why he travels in his introduction to the 2016 edition of *The Best American Travel Writing*, I figured it was time to listen up. Basically, his explanation of the themes of travel writing can be distilled into three central points. We travel because (1) travellin' ain't what it used to be, (2) the world just isn't as interesting as it once was, and (3) the art of travel writing is doomed. He wraps up the eight-page introduction with a deeply

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[1] This is absolutely and entirely beside the point, but I strongly encourage you to Google the 10th Mountain Division. The basic gist is that they fought the Nazis on skis, founded modern skiing as we know it, and were total badasses.
[2] Be very aware: though you will hear it almost uniformly pronounced as "App-uh-lay-shuh," the locals are clear. The mountain range, and the trail, are pronounced "App-uh-latch-uh." As in, "Don't mess up the pronunciation or I'll throw an apple atcha."

compelling anecdote about arriving at Japan's Shinjuku railway stations, and it seems to me that his basic conclusion is that he can't put his finger exactly on why he travels. But the moment on your trip that makes you realize why we travel is rather like pornography: you know it when you see it.[3]

Bryson introduced me to travel writing, but it was Thomas Swick who hit a chord for me in the anthology's 2014 edition: "Loving the unloved, you assume the feeling is mutual. You may be wrong, as travellers often are. But it doesn't change the nature of your affection, or your relationship with the people you get to talking to at the post office who invite you into their home, cook you dinner, and refill your glass and tell you stories of life under a dictatorship. At the end of the night, they insist on escorting you back to your hotel, where you exchange phone numbers and email addresses. At that moment the place stops being just the site of your vacation, it becomes the home of your friends. It takes on a significance, and enters your heart."

How can you read that and not want to travel?

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I was extraordinarily lucky to grow up in a family that spent its money on trips. Only a few months after I was born, we hurtled across Europe from our home in England to the southern tip of Greece to spend a week on Kefalonia. Since then, we've been from Montepulciano to Minneapolis, from Puerto Vallarta to Paris, from San José to San Sebastián. Our bucket list is long, and it's a source of constant conflict. My dad would sooner die than go back to Russia, and my mum can't bear it if she doesn't get to see Carthage. If the travel bug is genetic, I've got it.

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[3] This comes from the fascinating 1964 court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. Nico Jacobellis had been charged and fined for possessing and showing an obscene film at his movie theatre. However, he continued to appeal the case until he reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where the lower courts' decisions were overturned on the basis that the First Amendment forbids censorship and that even obscenity is Constitutionally protected. Justice Potter Stewart, in his concurrence, wrote about hard-core pornograpy: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

But at the same time, the concept of home is a bit challenging for me. I grew up in London but moved to the U.S. at a young age, and I spent my childhood longing for a place I didn't really remember. Judith Viorst's charming book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, voiced my struggle: Alexander has, as the title suggests, the worst day ever, and maintains that things would be so much better if only he lived in Australia.

I was not really that cute of a kid - I had long, tangled brown hair, unflattering glasses that gave me a rather owlish look that was not helped by the presence of a big nose and the fact that I always had said nose stuck in a book. I felt misunderstood by my peers, and I couldn't shake the feeling that things would be better had we only stayed in England. Add to that the fact that I loved books about English schoolgirls getting into hijinks at their posh private schools, and you can see why I felt so much for Alexander. But I had wonderfully supportive parents who encouraged all my weirdness, and on the rougher days, my mother would remind me of what Alexander's mum had told him: "Some days are like that, even in Australia."

I, of course, am not the only perpetual traveller to struggle with the concept of home. The hero's journey is a thread linking centuries' worth of the search for meaning and belonging, and one such commentary that has stuck with me is Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi's piece "Reading *The Odyssey* Far From Home." In it, she writes, "Given the disorienting cartography of my life, there isn't a singular *home* for me to return to. I am from nowhere, or, perhaps, I am from a constellation of places whose habits and social codes violently contradict one another, leaving me empty handed. That emptiness, though excruciatingly painful, has also allowed me to cultivate emotional and psychological dexterity, to embrace digression, and to comfortably linger on the shores of foreign cities on my impossible search for a place to call home."

For me, home is watching my mother roast a whole chicken in our warm, light-wood kitchen. She is wearing an off-white apron with splashes of different red wines across it, each one neatly labelled. My father is sitting on a stool nearby, plucking a Neil Young song on his guitar, glasses slipping down his nose as he squints in concentration. But I have lived in so many places and stumbled into the lives of so many people that I cannot shake the feeling of cosmopolitanism; surely I cannot be restricted to just one home. There's a Chinese legend that a red thread of fate connects two soulmates. The string can get knotted up or stretched out or all tangled, but it can never break. No matter what, this person is your destiny, and you're going to find them whether you like it or not.

I'm studying biochemistry, so the STEM part of my brain makes it challenging for me to buy into things like religion and fate. But I'm getting a degree in history, so I also can't deny the lengths that people will go to for what they believe in. Look at Perseus and Andromeda, or Cleopatra and Marc Antony, or Tristan and Isolde, or Marie and Pierre Curie, or Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King.[4] They crossed mountains and seas and called on the gods and started wars and lived and died for the people and the things they loved. I see the world as a million interesting red threads, and I'm pulled in all different directions by them: to my parents and my brother, to my best friend of fifteen years, to the group of surfers I paddled out with every morning in France, to my backpacking buddies in the Rocky Mountains, to my host family in the northern suburbs of Copenhagen. My home is in a million places around the world. There are pieces of me in Tamil Nadu and Tel Aviv and Crete and Copenhagen and everywhere I've been

[4] If you ask me, the greatest love story ever told is recounted in Sarah Ruhl's remarkable volume *The Clean House and Other Plays*: "There once was a very great American surgeon named Halsted. He was married to a nurse. He loved her – immeasurably. One day Halsted noticed that his wife's hands were chapped and red when she came back from surgery. And so he invented rubber gloves. For her. It is one of the greatest love stories in medicine. The difference between inspired medicine and uninspired medicine is love."

and everywhere I have yet to go. I am a mosaic of all of the people I've known and loved, and the me that is a traveller is a constantly evolving being.

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So, why do we travel? It makes me a little ill to say it, but we travel because of a Danish TV2 commercial. The producers bring different groups of people into a room, announcing them with titles like "those who live in the countryside" (cue a group of people in workwear) and "those who have never seen a cow" (a group of young people with edgy haircuts and graphic tees enters). Each group stands in a designated box marked by tape on the floor, neatly categorizing them. Then, a presenter reads out a number of statements and asks that anyone who identifies with them step forward to the front of the room. The questions range from the easy – "Who in this room was the class clown?" – to the funny – "Who has had sex in the last week?" – to the heart-wrenching – "Who has bullied someone else?"

At one point, the presenter asks anyone who is bisexual to step forward. After a pause, a young man with shoulder-length blond hair and glasses steps out of the crowd, meandering to the front of the room as his flannel flaps behind him. He stands alone, and there is a breathtaking silence as he stares out at his countrymen. But as he walks back to his assigned square, his fellow participants applaud his bravery, and I am left wiping away tears.

The commercial ends with the whole group standing together as the presenter announces, "And then there's all of us who just love Denmark. So maybe, there's more that brings us together than we think. TV2 Denmark: all that we share.

This marketing team deserves a raise.

TV2 Denmark has got me hook, line, and sinker, because I genuinely believe that we travel because we want to know that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We want to be in a café in Marrakech and have a stranger sit down across from us, saying hello and

introducing themselves. We want to hold a baby in our arms as its mother finishes knitting a scarf she's making for us in Patagonia. We want to be pulled into a dance, spinning and whirling with the rest of the crowd as everyone's hearts beat together to the music. We want to order a beer in a hidden bar in Berlin and turn around and see our soulmate sitting there, waiting for us.

We travel for connection. We travel to find that we are not so different from the Amazonian tribespeople or the little Russian ladies waiting at train stations or the stylish Italians expertly navigating their Vespas down cobblestone streets, dark hair and scarves flying behind them. We travel to find out that Priya and the boys from Copenhagen are cut from the same cloth. This search for connection opens us up to all kinds of pitfalls. We run the risk of turning the people we want to meet into zoo animals, waiting for them to perform their tribal dances for us and purchasing handicrafts at a fraction of what they would cost us in a boutique at home. But I maintain that this genuine hunt for interaction, for meeting people who are not so different from us or from each other after all, is at the true heart of travelling. The world is wide and wonderful, and it's out there waiting to be discovered. Your people are out there. Go find them.