

Redefining Home

I have always wondered, "What is considered a Home?" For many people, they consider the old adage, "Home is where the heart is", as the perfect definition of Home. To many, their "heart" or their emotional connection is associated with a physical location, a group of people, or maybe even material things. However, hearing this phrase so many times makes me wonder: is such a thing really considered Home?

To me, Home is a vessel of memories inside me. Memories of happiness and joy, of boisterous laughter and mischievousness, yet there are also memories of tears, of fiery anger, of tight feelings of jealousy, and of oppressive silence and gloom. Home to me has no definite place on Earth, no location where I can point to on a map, and I can't physically describe how many floors it has or how many bedrooms or bathrooms it contains. While my Home is atypical, I believe that it is uniquely mine, and as long as I live, my Home cannot be taken away from me. It is because Home is Me, and I am Home. It's in my heart, and I can take it wherever I may go. Even when I travel far away from my family for university or even further in the future, I will always be Home. To me, Home can be miniscule whenever I am in a new environment, full of anxiousness, expectation, and cautiousness. Home can also envelop an entire building, or maybe the entire Earth if I tried, when I am in a place where I feel at peace, appreciated, and loved. Because Home is in me, I am never Homesick or lonely.

My Home inside me has gone through several major renovations, and each renovation coincides with my physically moving from a physical place of dwelling.

My first physical dwelling that I can remember clearly was a 2-story townhouse with a small garden in the back where guavas and tomatoes miraculously grew and a tiny concrete front yard with random knick knacks and overgrown weeds out front. The townhouse that we lived in was small and cramped, with only two bedrooms, a combined dining and dining room, and a kitchen the size of 10 freezers. While it was cramped, I made a lot of memories in that house (6 parts good, 4 parts bad), and I felt like it mostly shaped my personality today. My mother and father, who recently immigrated from Nigeria, Africa, to Houston, Texas, moved our family to this townhouse when I was 1 year old. For a short period, it was just me and my older brother accompanying my parents, but later our family expanded and I gained two younger sisters. Life in a townhouse in downtown Houston was not the best option for a young child who naturally wanted to run and play outside and explore nature, much less for three other children; however, my parents weren't left with many choices. Back then, Houston was usually in the high 90s, even in the winter, and downtown Houston was rampant with crime and alerts of kidnapping cases almost every day. Property prices were high, and finding a place that was relatively safe, close to a school district, close to work, and affordable was a lot to ask. A lack of space, a lack of safety, and a lack of money led to me and my siblings mostly staying inside; however, what we lacked, we made up with imagination, creativity, resourcefulness, and dreams of the future, which allowed us to make our own fun from basically nothing. The walls of the townhouse became canvases, stuffing from couches became materials for sewing makeshift clothes, broken hangers and bedsheets became makeshift ziplines, brooms became javelins, dustpans were our shields, our parents became our horses, and the stairs were our treacherous environment. Imaginative play with my siblings largely staved off boredom, but when I felt boredom lurking, I decided to fill those times with books and art. Thankfully, there was a large public library near where we lived, and on days we didn't have school, my siblings and I begged our parents to let us stay at the library. I was enamored by the selection of books, and at that

age, I was especially drawn to the comics and manga section. One of the first books I vividly remember completing as a young child was "Yotsuba", "The Kane Chronicles," "Dork Diaries," and many more. The other thing that captured my attention were the computers. I had never had access to a computer, and being able to play games like a normal kid was one of the things that allowed my siblings and I to remain in our childhood state for a longer period of time. I believe my exposure to books, art, and games largely influenced my hobbies today as an adult. My experience living in that townhouse taught me that Home is taking advantage of what you have in order to create an environment where you can find what you love and be free from worries.

I did not stay in the townhouse for long; once I transitioned into my first year of middle school, we also transitioned to a new dwelling. It was a big two-story house with not only a green backyard and a front yard, but there were also enough rooms in the house for everyone to have their own. It was a huge change moving from a cramped, shared room to a room I could call my own. Not only did our living space change, but our outside environment changed as well. We moved from busy, traffic-laden downtown Houston to a smaller and quieter Sugarland. My school also changed; the people I knew for all my life from kindergarten to 5th grade were replaced as I moved to a bigger middle school an hour away. With our move, I also became more aware of things I was shielded from. I became aware of my culture: that being Nigerian American in Texas was not the norm, and just because of where my parents are from, people would treat me differently. I also became aware of the concept of privilege, that for some people, having their own room was standard and nothing to be celebrated, that people usually had enough shoes for every day of the week, and that they bought new clothes instead of getting hand-me-downs. My parents worked very hard for years to move our family to a better position and a better environment, and while we did reach the "American middle class" and achieve some parts of the "American Dream", many of the privileges that came with that achievement

were withheld from us. For a long time, I felt inadequate and ashamed of my childhood, of what I didn't get to experience, and of the aspects of my life that made me different from others. My school didn't make it any better, with people who looked like me being the minority. There was covert racism, as well as covert sexism and biases in academics, relationships, and other areas of my life. The number of times that I found out there were opportunities in school for me to participate in that my counselor or teacher conveniently forgot to tell me were countless, or the excess and unnecessary praise I received for performing the same as my peers who were of a different race than me, was also numerous. They had no expectations for people like me, and at first I didn't know why, but as I became more aware, I started becoming more introverted and withdrawn. I would have remained like that if I hadn't met people just like me—African Americans and people of color—who wanted to be treated as themselves without prejudice and pressure to conform. Through our close relationship, which lasted until high school, it made me realize the importance of community, as it helps foster a feeling of solidarity and helps gain you confidence that makes you think, "Yes, I deserve respect; I deserve to live and exist as my truest self; and I am a human and should be treated as such." I remained in that school until I graduated high school and withstood slights and feelings of alienation, while increasing those as I considered my community and letting them into my Home. The experiences I went through as I moved for the first time allow me to define Home as a sacred place where you shouldn't let anyone unworthy trespass; it's a place where you could let your hair loose and be yourself, despite how unfriendly your neighbors may be.

My most recent move was from Sugarland to Texas Christian University, and in some aspects, it was similar to my second move. While I was making this move by myself instead of with family, I felt like I was prepared enough mentally to hold my own in a place that I knew would be primarily white and primarily rich, which I did not classify as. I am no stranger to being the minority in a place, as that has been my story for most of my life, whether it be the only

African American, the only woman, or the less financially stable one. Coming to TCU, the feeling of not belonging was amplified to a massive degree. The first time I stepped on campus was on orientation day, and out of 300+ students there, there were only 3 black people there. As we continued with orientation in small groups, I was the only one who didn't go outside of the country for vacation, the only one who didn't golf or do tennis as a pastime, the only one who didn't want to pledge a sorority, and the list of "the only one" got longer. I felt minimized, silenced, and like an alien. I did not belong there, and any conversation I tried to initiate or join was deflected. The outside environment threatened to swallow me whole. My Home was shaken badly by earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, and more assaults from the outside environment, and I could see the walls of my Home crumbling under the pressure and stress. In those three short days, the confidence I built over the years was stripped away from me, and I reverted to the time I was in sixth grade, tiny, minimized, and scared. When I headed back to Sugarland, I was ready to run. I felt such a harrowing feeling of loneliness and fear when I was at TCU. I felt unsafe. I felt unwanted. I felt hated. For the first time, my Home, which I painstakingly built over the years to be strong and impenetrable, has failed me. When the Home that I built within me crumbled, I withdrew deeper into myself than I ever had before and tried to piece back the rubble and remains of my Home into something presentable. However, it was the people that I let inside that home—my friends, family, and some teachers—that ended up supporting me and helping rebuild my Home from the ground up. Two hands are better than one, and a community is better than one person. That summer, before I entered TCU as a freshman, my parents, loved ones, siblings, and friends poured into me goodness and love; they became my support and also my determination and resolve. So once I moved into my dorm freshman year, said my goodbyes to my family, and was officially by myself at TCU, I felt truly okay. In fact, I felt more than okay. I knew that a house that stood by itself was weak, but my Home was built by several hands, and it was filled with not only my strength but the strength of family and friends. I knew that I would be able to thrive at TCU. I would create an environment

where I could be myself and feel safe; I would find my community; I wouldn't let anyone who was unworthy of me dictate how I felt about myself; and I would learn and grow stronger from experiences just like I always have. I wouldn't try to run away again because I am safe because I am at Home. Because my Home is Me, and I am my Home.

End of this Chapter