

Texan to Oregonian: Navigating the Path to a New Home

An Interview with Emma Baker



*Emma (right) enjoys a waterfall on a hiking trail alongside friends.*

My friendship with Emma Baker began at the tender age of eleven. We were both awkward, nerdy sixth-graders who knew both far too much and far too little about the world. In the decade since then, I have had the absolute privilege of watching her grow into an incredible woman. She is my best friend. She is also one of my biggest inspirations. We leaned on each other through the tumultuous journey that is middle and high school in our small, southern town of Temple, Texas. Emma's endless joy and laughter, her unwavering support and generosity, and her earnest vulnerability guided me through some of my darkest moments and forged many of

the best parts of my own identity. High school, a trying phase for most, was made a little more bearable because of Emma's presence. I often ponder how much easier it might have been for everyone if they had an Emma by their side.

In Temple, Emma's dad served as a pastor. His church was designed and located to minister to low-income families, with a large percentage of the congregation living below the poverty line. Growing up in this environment taught Emma some key lessons about empathy and social justice, but it also put her and her family into the spotlight, as her parents were viewed as community leaders. She began to resent the feeling that everyone around her somehow knew intimate details of her life without her consent.

As our high school graduation rapidly approached, Emma was faced with the common but difficult decision of where to apply to college. One thing was clear: staying in Texas was not an option. Even moving to a bigger city in Texas, like Dallas, Austin, or Houston, carried with it a risk, however slight, of running into an old family friend at every corner. "Moving to a place far away was very appealing," Emma mused. She dreamed of a fresh start, somewhere where no one knew her name— or her father's. She yearned to sever the ties binding her to the South, sensing a growing incongruence between herself and the region she called home.

I had known that Emma wanted to leave Texas and go far away, but I was intrigued to hear her describe her unease. Her home in Temple, she explained, "never felt quite like where I was supposed to be." Thus, she set her sights far beyond the borders of her home state. Her college search included schools in California, Chicago, and more, as she set out to find a brand

new adventure. Lo and behold, she got her wish. The initial months in Newberg, Oregon, where she eventually landed, were nothing short of transformative. She herself labeled the experience as “very liberating,” saying she felt a “glorious sense of anonymity.” In Newberg, Emma had discovered not only a new academic journey but also a powerful sense of personal renaissance.

The physical environments of both places also played a significant role in Emma’s transition. In Central Texas, she admitted that “I was affected by the physical environment in that I didn’t really love to spend time outside and I didn’t know a lot of people who did.” The scorching southern sun and heat can be brutal. Cold and rain often come only in the form of dramatic and dangerous storms, offering little respite. The unforgiving climate paired with an expanse of concrete suburbia made it nearly impossible to spend extended periods of time outdoors. One has little motivation to go hiking when it is 100 degrees outside and the nearest decent trail is an hour-long car ride away.

In Oregon, Mother Nature turned out to be both friend and foe. Emma noticed that one of the starkest differences from home was people’s approach towards nature and the outdoors. Summers are pleasant and mild, and Newberg is comfortably nestled between breezy beaches and picturesque mountains, itself a sprawling green landscape. Lush vineyards and farms contribute



to local markets, and many embrace sustainability and environmental consciousness as central tenets. Most residents have ample access to parks, forests, and rivers. Emma quickly grew immersed in hiking, camping, and other outdoor activities. She found that she loved these things. Whereas Central Texas felt like a prison of suburbia, Newberg offered all the amenities of urban life, with its proximity to Portland, alongside all the beauty of the natural environment. Coming to the Pacific Northwest, she says, “felt like slipping into myself.”

On the flip side, the elements also challenged Emma’s mental health. “The rain was hard to adjust to,” she expressed, “I didn’t realize how sad I would feel.” As she spoke, I found myself nodding in sympathy. My decision to stay in Texas after high school was partly based on my own love of sunshine and warm weather. Constant rain brings with it a heavy sense of melancholy. In Oregon, Emma says, “The sun sets at, like, 4 pm... all the days feel dark and cold and wet.”

When asked about the cultural differences between Central Texas and Oregon, Emma described a sense of tension between societal norms. She emphasized a battle between the ideals of friendliness and hospitality in the South and the pressure to be seen as more “polite” in the Pacific Northwest. In the South, she explains, “you know, you just drop by and visit.” There is an expectation that new acquaintances will be welcomed with open arms and open doors. Small-town gossip flows freely, and there is always room for one more at the table. Because her parents worked in ministry, this expectation was amplified. “My parents were very involved in my community,” Emma explained. She went on to describe how relative strangers were frequently met with warm hugs and invited to stay for a meal, and how she and her family often could not go out to dinner or to the grocery store without being stopped by a friend to chat and

catch up. She went on, “Sometimes that felt nice and good to be known, and sometimes that felt oppressive.” One of the primary factors motivating her move to Oregon was a growing resentment toward this expectation of hospitality. “I was a little tired of everybody being up in my business and I needed something different.”

In the Pacific Northwest, things are just different. Emma described the culture as “less personable.” In contrast to the closeness of Southerners, Oregonians largely keep to themselves. They intensely value personal space and respect for boundaries. They feel pressure to be polite, independent, and unintrusive. At the same time, some of the traditional manners I was taught as a Texan are less valued in the Pacific Northwest. When I visited Emma, several months after she had moved, I noticed the hesitation and weird looks I received for saying “yes, sir” and “thank you, ma’am.” When I first arrived, I met Emma in a coffee shop a few blocks from her college campus. Immediately upon seeing her, we ran into each other’s arms and hugged for a while. When we pulled apart, I could feel the stares from other patrons. Looking back, it’s clear to me now that this kind of display of affection was simply unusual to them. As a young college student seeking to make connections, Emma struggled to adjust to this new way of life. She described feeling “very lonely,” and drew specific attention to the fact that, despite living there for over three years, she had yet to enter many people’s homes.

Adding to this sense of separation was the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emma moved to Oregon in 2020, meaning she was attempting to make new connections at the height of social distancing rules. It was difficult to forge new relationships when smiles were hidden behind masks, meetings were happening only in digital formats, and new friends were kept at

least six feet away. Many of the people Emma met were hesitant to hug, or even to share a meal because masks would be removed. “It wasn’t personal,” she says “but I experienced it as very personal.” I experienced similar feelings during the pandemic, as I know many others did as well. My own freshman year at TCU involved all online classes and little interaction with many new people. However, I noticed that the rules at George Fox University, Emma’s school in Newberg, had much stricter social distancing guidelines. Students were not permitted to be without a mask unless actively eating, whether outside or inside. At mealtimes, no more than 3 people could share a lunch table. Students also could not visit living areas outside of their own dorm rooms. These rules made fostering new relationships and establishing a community feel unattainable.

Still, it’s clear that she does not merely live in Oregon now; she has made it her home. She emphasized that she still holds her loved ones in Texas dear, but the ties binding her to the South are loosening more and more with each passing day. “Coming home to those people feels like home, but... this is the place where my body feels like I am home.” It’s a sentiment that reflects the intricate web of emotions she has woven around her new life in the Pacific Northwest. She told me a story of driving around suburban streets in our hometown and thinking to herself, “That looks miserable!” or even “I could never be a parent!” I myself remember these moments well, as I was often in the passenger seat on these drives, as we meandered through back roads and reflected on everything we wanted to change about ourselves and our lives, as soon as we graduated and had the freedom to do so. Now, however, driving around and seeing families simply living their lives brings a new, almost opposite, feeling for Emma. She frequently sees a mother hiking with her young children, or a family roaming through the aisles

of the local grocery store, and thinks to herself, “I want that!” She realized that it was not that she didn’t want a family, but that “I couldn’t see a future where I was.” The transformation she’s undergone in Oregon has shifted her perspective, unveiling a path to a future she once believed lay beyond her reach.

As Emma delved further into her life in Oregon, I couldn't help but marvel at the incredible journey she had undertaken. It wasn't just about changing locations; it was about undergoing a profound transformation, both internally and externally. She had transitioned from the scorching heat and sprawling suburbs of Central Texas to the lush landscapes and temperate climate of the Pacific Northwest. She had shifted from a culture of warmth and hospitality to one that valued personal space and independence. The decision to leave Texas, her lifelong home, and venture into the unknown had been a bold one. It's the kind of decision that forces you to confront not only external challenges but also your own internal fears and insecurities. As Emma recounted her experiences, it became evident that her journey was about more than just geographical relocation; it was a journey of self-discovery and personal growth.

“I don’t think I’m a Pacific Northwesterner in every sense,” Emma says, acknowledging that her connection to her new home may forever bear the imprint of her Texan roots. Living in Oregon, she's aware that she won't experience it in the same way as someone who has spent their entire life there. Indeed, she may feel a pang of nostalgia for the Texas sun each time the rain starts to fall.



But when I first asked her what “home” means to her, she answered, with a powerful authenticity, “I feel most myself when I’m in Oregon for sure.” To Emma, home isn't solely defined by a map or a set of coordinates; it's the profound sense of self that she has discovered in the embrace of the Pacific Northwest. The comfort and freedom of feeling most authentic and aligned with her true self have become the cornerstones of Emma's concept of home. It's a place



where she's not confined by external expectations or the weight of familiarity but rather liberated to be her most genuine self. In essence, Emma has found a profound sense of belonging in Oregon, one that transcends the boundaries of geography, and it's a feeling that she holds dear as she continues to navigate the intricate tapestry of her life's journey. And if the comfort and freedom of feeling most oneself isn't home, I'm not sure what is.