DISCOVERING A NEW MEANING OF HOME

When I first came to the United States to study social work over a decade ago, I considered my entire being as German, including family, friends, and just about everything else of importance. While I had previously ventured beyond Germany, I never doubted that Germany was my home. Today, I have discovered a new meaning of home, which questions whether identity can ever be completely defined through nationality. This essay explores the evolution of my home from beginnings in early post-war Germany to the present, and how this process has shaped my outlook on teaching and practice.

By
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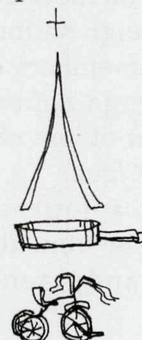
Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Perhaps then someday in the far future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

- Rainer Maria Rilke,
Letters to a Young Poet

"Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart"

Born in 1951, I grew up in Leutkirch, a small town nestled in the foothills of the famous Alps in southern Germany. As a young girl, I used to observe the Alps and ponder what lay beyond those snow-capped peaks. What did life have in store for me? Would I ever venture past that seemingly impregnable barrier of towering stone? The Alps projected a dual frame of reference: while the majesty of the Alps confined me to my hometown, they also sparked an incredible curiosity for undiscovered worlds.

Early post-war Germany fostered a keen awareness of class and gender. The profession and social status of a child's parent, usually the father, generally determined whether a child would go to the university or a trade school. The higher the social ranking of the parent's profession, the more likely the child would attend university. The gender of the child played an additional role in deciding how far the child would progress up the ladder of education. A girl simply had less possibility of attending university than a boy. Being one of three daughters and having a father who worked as a carpenter practically ensured that my lot in the world would be shaped by the famous three K's of German society: *kinder*, *kueche*, and *kirche* (children, kitchen, and church). However, this likely fate never appealed to me, and I continually harbored thoughts of trekking across the Alps.



The region around Leutkirch was predominantly Catholic, and the only other religion was Lutheran, a faith more prevalent

in northern Germany. A strict segregation existed between the two religions in the 1950s. Schools formed on the basis of religion, beginning at kindergarten. Parents frowned upon their children mixing with those practicing the other religion. Religion, however, did not create the only boundaries between peoples. War refugees from east Germany moved into the Leutkirch area and also experienced isolation, even though they were Catholic. It was not until the children of refugees and differing religions began associating with other children that the walls of separation began to crumble.

An inevitable theme confronting those growing up in post-war Germany was the Holocaust. What had happened to cause Germans to wage war against Jews and other groups? As a young person born after the war, I continually wondered what part older Germans had played in this horrible genocide. Were all Germans guilty, even those born after the war? Our questions were met with silence. Older Germans diverted attention away from these issues by minimizing their knowledge of Hitler's genocide. Schools failed to present classes about the Holocaust. This denial by Germans to accept personal responsibility or contribution to the horrors of genocide sparked unrest among German youth.

As their American counterparts did during the 1960s and 1970s, German youth rebelled against those in positions of authority. However, while many of the American protests were directed against the ongoing war in Vietnam, the clash of German youth with authority stemmed at least as much from a questioning of the recent past as the present.

Many young Germans, like me, personally felt much guilt for what had happened to Jews and others persecuted by Germans. Yet, it was my parents' generation that had actually participated in events culminating in the Holocaust. Did not the guilt rightfully belong to that generation? Without acquiescence in racist policies by older Germans, the Nazi government would never have perpetrated the murder of millions. Perhaps to compensate for the failure of many older Germans to acknowledge responsibility for the Holocaust, I, like many younger Germans, experienced sorrow for the victims. That sorrow frequently led to our resentment of German society and what had happened during the Nazi period.

"And try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language..."

Seeking a respite from the melancholic environment in Germany and yearning for an exotic undertaking, in 1975 I accepted a two-year stint in Malaysia as an administrative assistant with the German Volunteer Service, an agency modeled after the U.S. Peace Corps to assist less economically developed countries. When I first arrived in the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, or KL as the locals called it, the cultural differences overwhelmed me. Nothing appeared as it was back home. Architecture, clothing, food, customs, everything presented a new sensation. For the first time, I encountered diverse ethnic groups—Chinese, Indian, and Malay—all living together but not always in racial harmony. The Malays occupied most positions in the government and promoted policies that discriminated against Chinese and Indians.

In Malaysia, I experienced first hand the remnants of 19th century colonialism and the more subtle version of late 20th century colonialism. The former British masters of Malaysian society had left behind an elitist class structure built upon expansive rubber plantations, elegant hotels, and daily gin and tonics. Modern day colonialists from Europe and the United States introduced Malaysians to assembly line hamburgers, pretentious soap operas, and finely tuned sweatshops. Like their British predecessors, the neocolonialists extracted as much as they could from the locals, while endowing them with as few benefits as possible. Multinational corporations operated in Malaysia with neither environmental constraints nor organized labor, allowing easy exploitation of land and people.

As a White European, I

often experienced a privileged status because of the lingering social castes implanted by years of colonialism. For example, Malaysians in charge of restaurants, transportation, and other services would frequently motion me to the head of a long waiting line of locals, all because of my skin color. This special treatment made me uneasy and created an automatic separation between local residents and me. While I did not feel that I occupied the role of an oppressor, I recognized that, from the viewpoint of locals, my mere presence frequently placed me in the category of the rich, White European.

Gender considerations added another layer to the social structure. Malaysians promoted marriage much more than Germans did. For instance, if a young Malaysian woman chose not to marry, other Malaysians would often view her as an outcast and look down upon her. At that time, single women in Malaysia also felt inhibited to venture out alone in the evening for fear of being seen as prostitutes.

During my two years in Malaysia, I experienced a unique interweaving of elements: ethnicity, class, gender, colonialism. I gained a clearer vision of how one group can exploit another, regardless of place. Not only did I view the West as economic oppressors of Malaysia, but I also saw how one class or gender could dominate another within the same society.

Upon my return to Germany in 1977, I encountered an unexpected lack of interest about my experiences in Malaysia. People did not want to dwell on neo-colonialism and Malaysian culture. Yet, the lack of response to my Malaysian experiences helped to alter the way I now viewed my homeland. I realized how economically developed countries, such as Germany, exploited less developed countries as a means of maintaining their high standard of living. I also felt that my own home had as many, if not the same type of, social problems as Malaysia. Why should I travel to some exotic place to help solve or even contribute to problems when perhaps I could play a more constructive role at home? I wanted to work toward social justice and decided to become a social worker.

In 1978, I enrolled at the School of Social Work in Mannheim, Germany where the curriculum emphasized law, policy, and community organization. At Mannheim I gained inspiration from Paulo Freire, a Brazilian who taught that social work education and practice are not neutral. According to Freire, the client is the expert on his or her environment. By listening to the client describe the environment, the social worker gains specific information that can be used in developing a particular program.

Using Freire's concept of involving the client in developing a program, I participated in an adult illiteracy program where clients who could neither read nor write lived in government housing projects. No textbooks existed with which to teach the clients, and our goal was to develop written materials from discussions about the group's experiences. One Gypsy woman talked about her life in a German concentration camp and liberation by the Americans. A single mother talked about her struggles in making ends meet. After listening to clients, we incorporated their stories into written exercises to help the group learn how to read and write.

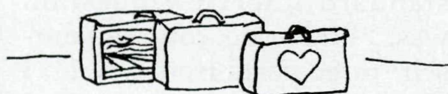
Upon completion of my practical studies in Mannheim, I looked at the job market in Germany, which had recently undergone severe cutbacks in social programs. Hiring of social workers was low priority and I recognized that employment prospects were not favorable. One day, while making my regular round at the school bulletin board dedicated to job announcements, I spied a poster advertising Fulbright scholarships to study social work for one year in the United States. Reflecting upon the limited employment outlook in my homeland, I applied for the scholarship. I had no definitive objective in mind when applying for the scholarship; I simply wanted the opportunity to travel abroad and see how another country dealt with its social problems.

When I received the Fulbright scholarship and learned that my destination would be the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UT), my mind drew a blank. The only images I had about Tennessee were Elvis and Memphis. I had not even heard of Knoxville. On August 31, 1983, I landed in

Knoxville, with three pieces of baggage: a suitcase of clothes; feelings of excitement, curiosity, and fear; and memories of home.

"Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them."

My initial impressions of Knoxville and its amazing contrast to Germany overwhelmed me. Not expecting the stark cultural differences that I had experienced in Malaysia, I was caught off guard. Taking in my new surroundings was like



learning a new language. People had a different way of communicating than people back home. They seem to talk more slowly and place more emphasis on politeness. Architecture and the layout of buildings also differed greatly from what I was used to in Germany. I found the concept of drive-through banks and fast-food restaurants alien. Why did people not get out of their cars and walk? The very idea of drive-through restaurants and huge shopping malls in sprawling suburbs floored me. In Germany, aside from not having the facilities and space for such monstrous creations, we simply lacked the mental state even to dream up these inventions. I wondered, too, why there were so many new buildings, with older ones demolished or left to deteriorate. Outside Knoxville, in rural Appalachia, I also saw economic poverty unknown in Germany. Poverty anywhere is disturbing, but is even more so in countries such as the United States where an abundance of wealth exists alongside the poverty. I was unaccustomed to the subtle messages contained in political speeches, films, conversations, and advertising that all Americans could attain wealth if only they worked hard enough. Poverty was the fault of the individual because he or she had not tried hard enough to escape economic deprivation.

After beginning classes at the University of Tennessee, I discovered that the focus of instruction was not on community organization but clinical social work. This emphasis on clinical social work did not exist in Germany and conflicted with what I had previously learned as the mission of social work, which was casework and community organization. In Germany, psychologists performed the bulk of clinical practice, and I was unsure whether social workers should also be doing clinical work.

Compared to universities in Germany, UT was vastly different. At UT, professors carefully structured classes and taught precisely by a plan. In Germany, a more independent system of study prevailed. Students usually had more freedom to determine their own study. For instance, professors frequently allowed students to choose a topic of interest and write a paper for the class grade, with no intervening exams. However, professors at UT were much more accessible than those in Germany. Students here could converse with professors and find a mentor. In Germany, professors kept their distance from students.

While I appreciated many aspects of UT, I missed the political discussions to which I was accustomed. I felt students here were hesitant about voicing opinions on political issues to the extent we did in Germany. As a social work student during the Reagan presidency, I had expected students to be more outspoken against the anti-welfare policies promoted by President Reagan. In Germany, students expressed their views on everything imaginable and often demonstrated against unpopular policies.

Different cultural backgrounds also played havoc with my emotions. When someone would ask me, "How are you?," and I honestly responded how I felt, I discovered that some people would walk away. I soon learned that the socially correct answer was to say "fine," whether I felt fine or not. Initially, I found this disappointing because I wanted to express how confused, scared, and homesick I felt. Another unpleasant experience would occur when Americans shared their knowledge of Germany with me. I wanted to talk about the Germany I knew but found that Americans generally knew only about beer halls in Munich, cuckoo clocks, and World War II.

I soon realized that to Americans I represented a stereotyped image of Germany. Often in conversations, talk about the war seemed to appear out of the blue. We could be discussing ice cream and then a comment would be made about Nazis. I could only guess as to why the person raised the topic because the subject arose out of context. In many cases, I did not know whether an American harbored animosity, blame, or simply curiosity when he or she started talking about the Germans and the war. Naturally, the topic of the war was not new to me. However, in Germany, the context of discussions about the war differed significantly. My generation carried the burden of trying to come to terms with what our homeland had done to others. Our conversations examined the evils of war and how Germans could have participated in genocide. Americans with knowledge about the war frequently commented briefly on Hitler or, if someone had actually been to Germany, about the great job Germans had done in rebuilding war-torn cities. Americans seemed unaware of the immense emotional turmoil occurring among my generation because of the war.

Aside from their superficial comments about the war, some Americans ventured forward with their versions of what Germans were like. One acquaintance told me that she thought Germans were domineering, stern, and humorless. The director of a rape crisis center told me that I could not counsel clients at the center because of my accent.

Fortunately, during my first year at UT, I had a mentor who listened, validated my experiences, appreciated differences, and encouraged me to overcome a strong urge to return home. I appreciated this support, which helped me cope with occasional feelings of futility when interacting with Americans.

To counter feelings of homesickness, I sought those from other lands to exchange experiences about living away from home. As "internationals," we discussed existing in two worlds, being part of both but not completely part of one. We initially fell into the trap of comparing our home country to the United States, but soon realized that this sort of comparison never seemed to capture the essence of what we were seeking.

As time passed, I experienced a growing fondness for the Appalachian region. The spectacle of tree-covered countrysides and hazy blue mountains cast a fascination upon me. I admired the community and hospitality of people in Appalachia, who always seemed to manage with few material resources. I now wanted to stay longer in this intriguing land, so different from home.

I had already extended my one-year Fulbright scholarship to two years so that I could finish my master's degree. After having received my master's degree in social work, I applied to the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service for a visa that allowed "limited practical training." It permitted me to work in the United States for one year as long as the job corresponded to my field of study. However, after the one-year term of the visa, I would most likely have to return to Germany. Under terms of the Fulbright scholarship and U.S. immigration law, I was legally required to return to my home country for two years after practical training. Because of that limitation on my expected stay in the United States, I found interviewing for jobs difficult. A standard interview question was, "Where do you see yourself three years from now?" I answered honestly, "In Germany" which certainly did not help me obtain work. Because I could not find work, I grew desperate and hurriedly applied for entry into the Ph.D. program of health education at UT. By enrolling again at UT as a student, I was allowed to postpone the two-year home residency requirement.

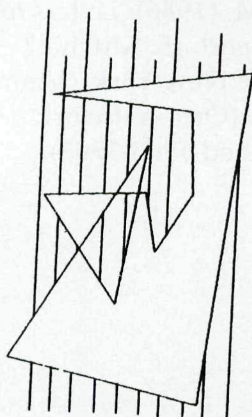
Putting to rest my visa fears for a while, I reflected upon my decision to enter a Ph.D. program. In the entire genealogical history of my family, I would become the first woman to graduate from a university and obtain a Ph.D. I had never imagined that this would be an outcome of my originally planned, one-year stay in the United States.

In 1989, I received my Ph.D. and reached the six-year

mark of my stay in the United States. I seriously questioned my sense of belonging. Did I belong in Germany or the United States? Where was home? I no longer felt so certain that Germany was home. I experienced feelings of sadness, betrayal, guilt, and confusion. I missed family and friends in Germany. Whether I stayed in the United States or returned to Germany, I would suffer incredible loss and could not bear the thought of either. The more I explored the question of home, the less certain I was of where I belonged.

"And the point is, to live everything."

Deciding against a return to Germany, I once again applied for the visa status of practical training, which also allowed me to postpone that seemingly inevitable return back to Germany. This time,



however, I had wised up when responding to the customary question by a prospective employer: "Where do you see yourself in three years?" Instead of responding, "In Germany," I simply told the interviewer that I wanted to work as long as I could for that employer. This slightly more sophisticated response seemed effective. I soon had full-time employment with the social service agency called Project Against Sexual Abuse of Appalachian Children (PASAAC) in Knoxville. This state-funded project provided counseling and treatment for sexually abused adults and children and perpetrators of sexual abuse. Clients generally had few financial resources and lived in rural areas of Appalachia.

In group therapy, survivors related what had happened to them, sometimes with words and sometimes with designs and images. Some clients drafted poems to help convey the magnitude of harm afflicted upon them. However, some clients were better able to express their stories initially in picture form. By using images, clients often were better able to grasp the meaning of their experiences, which could not always be stated in words. For example, one client first described sexual abuse in pictures that reflected different roles of family members, the milieu of the home, and actual incidents of abuse.

As I listened to their stories, I found myself asking, as I had previously in post-war Germany, "Why does evil happen?" Answers were as elusive as they had been in Germany. For instance, a client might show a picture of her family that had severely abused her. No outward trace of evil appeared in the picture. Yet, behind the facade of nondescript faces lurked a dark and ominous force. Clients sought understanding and meaning as to what had happened. Where was justice in life? Why had these things happened to them?

As the group sessions progressed, I used an exercise that aided the clients to reflect upon the past, the present, and the future. This exercise prompted them to speak about the hellish past of sexual abuse, the profound effects of that abuse on their present lives, and their desires for the future. While I had not experienced the same past trauma as my clients had, I realized that certain experiences harbored universal themes, especially loss and search for meaning in a person's life. This common ground began to form the basis for a new meaning of home, one that no longer separated people into an us and a them.

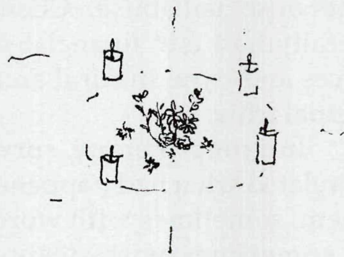
"Perhaps then someday in the far future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

In 1994, after having recently suffered a deep loss from the breakup of a close relationship, I felt a need to change my environment. I applied to universities for a teaching position and, within a short time, accepted a position as assistant professor at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Packing my few material belongings into a U-Haul truck, off I went into the unknown world of

Southern Illinois.

A short time after I began teaching, to my surprise the question of whether I would stay in the United States or return to Germany lost significance. I saw home as something completely different than a geographical location. I now viewed home as a composite of many emotions and ideas. Home refers to a state of mind intimately linked with the person, not a specific place. I can be at home with friends, in places of nature, in sacred spaces such as cathedrals, or in bustling cities. Home does not require the concept of always and forever, but of now. Home allows a person to embrace differences in people and places, without feeling required to choose a particular group or location over another. Home has no nationalistic borders. For instance, at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing held in 1995, women from every corner of the world gathered to celebrate and communicate shared struggles. In the midst of this diversity, I was at home.

I now feel more able to apply my experience to teaching. As a person from a different country and culture than my students, I try to convey in my classes the importance of viewing social work from different perspectives. Last summer, I established a class in international social work for my students that I taught in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. A primary goal of that class was to instill into students the benefits of learning about other ideas and places and to free social work from its cultural myopia.



Through my links with social work educators in other countries, I am further involved in the area of international social work education. In Lithuania, I recently collaborated with colleagues in presenting a seminar on child abuse. I am also working with a colleague from the School of Social Work in Mannheim, Germany, on a comparative study of policies and practice toward child neglect.

I am now in my third year of teaching at Southern Illinois University. With the help of colleagues, I survived U.S. immigration, which graciously provided me with the coveted "green card" and resident alien status, all without having fulfilled the two-year "home" residency requirement.

My newly discovered concept of home provides ample space for a variety of challenges in teaching and practice. Home is an ongoing experience, with no finite borders. I am now content knowing that, although I sometimes yearn for aspects of German culture, I no longer struggle with the question of where I belong. □

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