THE CATALYST

Unrooted – I owe it to myself to see my own dreams through

It seems I'm always trying to forge belonging, or fielding a gulf between myself and the community I grew up with. I feel deeply disconnected from my childhood friends and peers, cultural background, and family. My home base. My roots.

By: Aishah Khan | Posted: March 30, 2023

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This past year, I had a plan. I would return to school, find a job, and "settle down." I would *make* myself belong.

I guess the way of the world doesn't cow to our carefully calculated plans. I couldn't find a job, and I decided to embrace the ether. I began to feel more like myself than I have in a long time.

Growing up was strange

I never felt at home, least of all with my family and our uncompromising codes of hard work and morality, the shame in mediocrity. My parents often said I don't share their values, which although true, made me feel like more of a pariah in my own home. My parents worked harder than I've ever had to, locking down stability to support themselves, their parents, siblings and eventually our family.

I've never had to worry about those things because it was all done for me, out of devotion from parents who didn't know me yet. Still, why am I so different? My siblings share similar goals as our parents and greater community. Why am I the way I am despite sharing DNA?

DNA isn't the only thing that binds people. I grew up in the small microcosm that is the Pakistani community in Ottawa, which is emblematic of other Pakistani communities throughout the diaspora. We seek professions in stereotypical fields like science and engineering. Even law was considered too soft in my mom's time (the 70s), and she opted for medicine instead.

I do have academic accomplishments that I am proud of, but it's not enough. I went to college, I did liberal arts. I blog and draw as a side-hustle. I take photos for a living.

There's always been something missing inside of me that alienates me from my community. I lack that desire to hunker down, sacrifice my time and freedom for a rewarding profession. Both

of my parents had their own aspirations that were hacked at the heart by their parents. My dad was sent to Canada at 17 so he wouldn't join the Pakistani air force, and my mom is a writer at heart, but her dreams have taken a backseat for decades as she fulfilled her parents' dreams instead.

Why am I so selfish?

When I graduated from university I resolved that I was done studying for some elusive career on the horizon. Before long the realities of life crept unto me, and I felt the pressure. At some blurry point in time, I became obsessed with mirroring those around me, and felt inadequate because I hadn't been seeking "more."

The clarity that I once had about my life grew hazy, and soon it was entirely obscured by the desire to be someone I'm just not. I returned to school last fall to land myself a job that would render me established in the bubble that enclosed me and my world.

The truth is that I grew up surrounded by people I don't fit in with, and I've always tried to mould myself into someone that does. I've tried to bury shame and un-belonging by forcing myself to exist harmoniously inside that bubble. Only recently I've realised that all this does is trap myself in a perpetual cycle of discomfort and alienation.

Sacred moments in nature

So, I reverted back to old habits. Jobless and jaded, I drove around Ontario for a few weeks. I followed the Group of Seven route from Toronto to Thunder Bay, retracing the hundred-and-some year old steps of the legendary Canadian artists' along the highway, stopping at creeks and waterfalls and vistas that inspired the paintings that line the walls of Canadian galleries.

Nature has a profound effect on me. Taking in the sights surrounding me is almost transcendental. There's nothing sacred about these moments, yet to me they are powerful moments in time that are intensely grounding. I sit on a rock mid-river, watching the water swirl around my feet, transfixed. I come to a sudden stop as a big brown owl swoops low over my car on a winding country road in broad daylight. A thousand kilometres away from home I stare into the blending of blues between Lake Superior and the sky as my rickety SUV teeters up the hills on the edge of Ontario.

My vision sharpened as I drove, the endless unfolding of scenery filling my cup which had been dry for so long I hadn't even realised I was choking on the dregs. That clarity began to return.

I know a lot of the shame I feel is self-inflicted. Comparing yourself to others, while insidious, is a pretty human thing to do. I want my core circle to know that I can fit, even if the raw truth of it is that I don't even want to. Letting go of the need to prove something to others is harder than I thought. I don't want to cower anymore, haunted by shame, steeping in self-hatred. I want to grow and be the person I'm supposed to be.

It's myself I need to win over, I see that now. And it's hard to do when I stay rooted to a place that doesn't nourish me, but deflates me as I am faced with displays of happiness that have never resonated with me.

So, this is what they mean when they say happiness is a choice. Spread your wings. Don't be afraid of growth. Follow your heart. All those tacky cliches have been pretty meaningless to me until now, when I finally have enough perspective to understand them.

Either choice will bring hardship and happiness, but I owe it to myself to see my own dreams through.

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A recent writing and communications student who is slowly settling into her niches of feminism, mental health awareness and editorial writing. She is an avid reader and media consumer, and one of her all-time favourite books is A Tree Grows in Brooklyn. In her spare time, Aishah can either be found drawing or painting in the winter, and camping, canoeing and swimming in the summer.

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