

The Grasshopper in the Pinball Machine

By: Jacinta Hin, Tokyo

*I tried to find Him on the Christian cross, but He
was not there; I went to the Temple of the
Hindus and to the old pagodas, but I could not
find a trace of Him anywhere.*

*I searched on the mountains and in the valleys
but neither in the heights nor in the depths was I
able to find Him. I went to the Ka'bah in Mecca,
but He was not there either.*

*I questioned the scholars and philosophers but
He was beyond their understanding.*

*I then looked into my heart and it was there
where He dwelled that I saw Him; He was
nowhere else to be found.*

Rumi, 1207 - 1273

My yoga teacher Meagan has been keeping this beautiful poem of the 13th century Persian mystic poet Rumi with her for many years. She always brings it into class and leaves it on a small desk near the studio entrance for us to read. Over the years, this little poem has traveled with her to many places. It made me think about my own journey and how, just like in the poem, I found what I was looking for when I finally looked into my own heart.

Fifteen years ago, just before my 28th birthday, I left my hometown of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and moved to Tokyo. It was not my intention to start a new life overseas. I was merely looking for adventure, challenge, new people and new cultures. I left when many of my friends were looking to settle down in their careers and relationships. I forgot that I was of the same age and cultural upbringing, and probably in my heart

wanted those same things. Without really being aware of what it meant, I settled into an adventurous and challenging career, and a relationship with a person of a new culture.

From the day I set foot on Japanese soil, a cross-cultural pinball machine life started that lasted many more years than I could have imagined when I set sail. Tokyo is a crazy place, a whirlpool of contrasting activities and many different worlds crossing paths in an unstructured way. The city, one of the most cramped places on this planet, does not rest—it is either on top of its game or severely depressed. There is always a buzz. It is truly a city with mood swings and we, the inhabitants, just swing along. For many of us foreigners, our time here is an adult Disneyland experience, at once real and surreal.

I loved it when I came. Compared to my charming but sleepy birth city, Tokyo was alive and kicking, screaming for my participation. After all these years, I still love the place and all it has given me. And that includes years of living in cultural confusion, always traveling between different worlds.

I was home everywhere and nowhere. I was a “guest believer” who was forever hopping between locations and communities. I was very good at putting on new hats depending where I was, and I lived my life based on the principle of adapting. I behaved according to what I thought was the cultural make-up of my environment. My behavior earned me a feeling of temporary belonging. This was not a belonging out of desperation. It was mostly a pleasant belonging: there was learning, fascination, acceptance, curiosity, attention. There was freedom. I could always leave and I could always return.

But it was not always only pleasant. There were plenty of uncomfortable feelings, but I chose to close my eyes to many of them. Sadness often lingered—after visiting my family in Amsterdam, in my constant restlessness, and in the painful and exhausting awareness of either fitting in or standing out.

Don't get me wrong—my life in those hopping days was good. I had amazing experiences and met remarkable people. I learned not only from Japanese culture, but also American, Italian, British, Indian, Philippine and others. I have been privileged in my work and blessed by friendships with people from all over the world.

At some point, however, the uncomfortable feelings became harder to ignore. The restlessness became more and more a driver for my behavior. One day, while still employed as a company manager, I was in a teleconference with global management representing different continents and business cultures. We were trying to come to an agreement on a particular issue and I remember putting down the phone and asking myself, “How much bridge can a person be?” In all of my jobs I had performed bridging roles, merging Japanese culture and Western culture, mediating between employees and employers. This particular job was the ultimate bridge position, and after that teleconference I sat in both awe and frustration. I was no longer merely playing the role of a bridge. I had, it seemed, been reduced to the role of go-between. What had happened to the real me?

Something else came to me in the midst of these realizations—a desire to truly belong. I realized the desire had always been there, hidden from my consciousness. Only in my most down state did I recognize it; I saw a glimpse of another side of myself that made me want to see more. My curiosity was aroused, and for the second time in my life I set out on a journey.

For a moment it was tempting to just pack my bags and return to Amsterdam. After all where else could I really belong? I certainly felt urgency for real change. But something stopped me. Something about the burn-my-bridges scenario just didn't feel right. My intuition told me to physically stay where I was and to go on another kind of trip, one for which I did not need to buy any tickets, say goodbye to one person and hello to another. The journey I chose to go on was a journey inwards, into the very depths of me.

I made up my mind, quit my job and departed.

Just as I did on my first journey, I went in search of adventure, challenge and new experiences. But this time the adventure would be in finding my own inner treasures; the challenge would lie in facing my own fears and discovering my own truths; and the experiences would be in the richness of what I found, the choices I came to make and results I got.

An inner journey is all about letting go and replacing. As I traded my business suits for sweatpants, the first thing was to let go of was my old self-image. I had lived for 15 years with an image of myself as a business woman. I had dedicated my career to being

a leader and a manager. My goal was always to be a key person in the companies I worked for, to manage and mentor people and, ultimately, have my own firm. I dreamed of being surrounded by my own employees, who I adored and who would adore me back. Parting with this idealized woman brought me grief, but also tremendous relief. We had been trapped in a relationship that was not bringing either of us anywhere we wanted to be.

The scariest thing I had to do on my journey was to abandon the struggle to improve my weaknesses and to learn to embrace my strengths. I realized that in our work lives we focus so much on improvement. We obsess over our shortcomings without realizing how energy-draining and futile this really is. I saw how all those years I had fought against my qualities because I did not find them sophisticated or polished enough and had tried to adopt other ones that were not mine but seemed fancier.

The hardest part of the journey was the sense of defeat I experienced, the sense that I was giving up and giving in. After several months I slowly moved away from this perspective and started to like the “new” me. Of course there was nothing new about me—it was the real me I started to like. I started to like the idea that I could be at my best when working alone rather than leading a team. I started to warm up to the idea that I would be great in a helping profession rather than a performing profession. For each part of the old me that I was letting go, I found amazing replacements.

The inner journey has a distinctive pattern. From the grief of parting with the old, we move on to relief for no longer being something that doesn't fit, and from there we discover a vast space in which we find and create the new. We become a lighter version of ourselves. We get these amazing “aha!” moments of excitement and exhilaration when we hit on something special. We reach a state in which we are constantly excited, energetic and jubilant. People around us begin to comment on how good we look. Change is palpable.

Ultimately, my journey gave me what I had desired—a place of permanent belonging. And, much to my surprise, it had nothing to do with location, environment or culture. I found it right where it had always been, inside of me.

The feeling of not really belonging and being without a home is fairly common among people living overseas. Some of us leave for better pastures because we feel we don't

belong where we were born, others become homeless while being away from their birth place, and often it is a bit of both. We settle for a while in a new lifestyle, and with time we lose the connection with what we left behind. We don't succeed in making a complete connection with where we are. We get stuck in limbo land and don't make it back; neither are we able to go forward. We feel we somehow gave up our rights to the place we once called home, and we never really gained rights to the adopted home. On our "home" visits we feel out of place, but back in the new home we become homesick for the old home. We forever walk in circles. We long for connection and belonging and wait for it to happen in our external world. But what it really shows us is that we need to create something new.

What we forget is the journey that brought us where we are and the desire behind that journey. We forget to go back to that moment when we got on that first plane. We forget to reflect on the deeper meaning of that moment and the reasons behind being on that plane. We think we somehow ended up here in a new place for reasons beyond our control. We forget that the journey was a choice grounded in focused desire.

But when we do go back and ask ourselves what it was that made us leave, we realize that we left to discover new things, not to end up somewhere not knowing what happened. And when we reverse the focus of discovery from the external world into the internal, the journey becomes a journey of self-discovery.

This is what made me realize I had to go on my internal journey before deciding on any external journeys. The desire behind my move to Japan was a powerful desire to create something new. The reason I was tempted to move back to Amsterdam was nothing more than a desire for distraction, an urge to return to somewhere safe. There was no powerful, positive desire to create something new in Amsterdam.

Looking at life as a journey is a powerful perspective to take for us globetrotters. From this perspective, we can see the parallel between the external and internal journeys. They are like yin and yang, and everything in between is the connection. We can see how all of our experiences in our external journeys are not moving us away but towards where we came from and who we are, because where we came from and who we are is always ourselves.

We flow from our external journey into our internal journey through a transitional and

often chaotic period of extreme external living, disorientation and confusion. In his book, "The Way of Transition," William Bridges described this state of chaos as "...a fertile state, a creative state, a state of pure energy and great potential". I have come to believe that herein lies the key to successful internal travel. While the external journey was one of discovery and absorption, new impressions, ideas and experiences, the internal journey is one of discovery and creation, creation of an authentic version of yourself and creation of something new. And in that creation we shed confusion and disorientation and we reconnect.

The internal journey is not only preceded by a transitional period, it is a transition in itself. As William Bridges describes it, "Transition may not be simply a step toward an outlook that is more appropriate to the life-phase we are actually in. It can also be a step toward our own more authentic presence in the world. That would mean that we come out of transition knowing ourselves better and being more willing to express who we really are, whenever we choose to do so. It would also mean that we are more often willing to trust that who-we-really-are is all right – is valid and a person capable of dealing with the world."

The purpose of transition is thus to become grounded in who we really are. This grounding prepares us for whatever comes next. Without this internal work, any move is bound to be an empty one. We risk becoming eternal refugees, nomads in our own countries.

Any choices we consequently make from this grounded state, this inner place of belonging, about our next steps in the external world flow out of this place. We can choose to stay where we are, move back to our home countries or to another country. We can choose to stay in our current career or transfer our experiences and skills to a new one. We can choose to embrace all of our experiences as valuable and be grateful for how they prepared us for our next step. After living for so long surviving and adapting, rediscovering my agency, my ability to make choices, was an amazing experience.

The point is not that we don't have to make changes in our external realities when we hit rock bottom. But if we allow ourselves to do our internal search first, we can make authentic, meaningful changes. A friend said it beautifully the other day, "I cannot have all I want, but I can choose all I want". Whatever we do, we will do so as strong, firmly grounded beings, not as lost souls trying to cut our losses. We can return to our birth

countries. But the journey *back* to where we came from will become a journey *to* where we came from. There is no backwards, only forwards. We will arrive in glory with our chins up, knowing who we are, what we want and how to get it.

Mountain pose, my yoga teacher explains to us, is the mother pose of yoga, the pose that is *in* all poses. Always go back to mountain pose, she teaches us. “Look for your mountain,” she reminds us when we are struggling to get our downward dogs, bridges and shoulder stands right. Like life itself, the mountain pose is extremely complex. When I don’t get it right I don’t feel connected. But when I am in perfect mountain pose, my body feels simultaneously grounded and lifted, safe and exalted. My whole body is engaged. And this is how I came out of my inner journey—firmly grounded, lifted, whole and light as a feather.

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