

Searching for Home

“With languages you are at home anywhere.” This quote by Edmund De Waal has always been at the forefront of my educational and life experiences. I was born in Pakistan and moved to Madagascar when I was 3 years old. Then I went off to boarding school in Kenya when I was 10 and I moved to Canada at the age of 19 to pursue my undergraduate degree. Each of these countries have different national languages, English is prevalent in some of those countries but the most common form of communication is not English. The quote by De Waal has never lost its relatability in my life as I have made a home in each of these countries and my sense of ‘home’ has been heavily influenced by language. I feel at home in Canada even if it is halfway across the world from the African continent where I grew up because of the French language.

I was raised in a multilingual household and spoke different languages with my parents, grandparents and extended family. Traveling to these different countries, living in them and going to schools with different languages of instruction seems like a faraway concept to most, but to me, it's my story. When I was younger I was ashamed about speaking Urdu and Gujarati in Madagascar, which is a primarily French-speaking country. As I got older, I realized just how important my language is to be able to communicate with my grandparents who do not speak English. Family is a permanent part of one's life and communication with them is essential, but most importantly, home exists within family.

Being able to speak multiple languages has become my super-power and it also got me interested in pursuing certificates in addition to my degree at the University of Alberta. I started off with adding the Certificate in Translation Studies and eventually also added the Certificate of International Learning (CIL) to my Psychology degree with a French minor. Participating in the CIL made me realize that along with language there is culture that is learned. It may seem obvious that culture and languages are connected, but the key takeaway I had from CIL is my self-reflection on this concept and the extent to which that is true in my life. The intersections of orientation, courses and the intercultural communication training have led to some eye-opening realizations for me as well as helped me expand my knowledge on cultures and adaptability.

This internal conflict I had about being shy about the languages I spoke and the realization that it is a strength, was reopened during the cultural identity module as part of the intercultural

communication training. The module spoke to me deeply as it was an insightful learning on the fact that identity can be plural, I do not have to belong to one identity. If I can speak multiple languages, I can have multiple identities and be part of multiple cultures and communities. I do not think I would have been able to affirm this conclusion with such strength without the modules assigned for CIL training. Furthermore, the concept of ascribed and avowed identities allowed me a moment of reflection to actually categorize my identities. My ascribed identities include being an international student and the eldest daughter of a middle-class family to Pakistani parents and my main avowed identity has changed to accept my multilingualism.

In addition, I completed a few courses in Psychology and some translation courses from the Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (MLCS) department as part of the CIL course requirement. These courses had a lot of relevance when it came to group discussions during the intercultural communication training and orientation reflections. One example was in my Cultural Psychology class where we were discussing collectivist mindsets and individualistic mindsets, both of these terms also re-appeared during the orientation training. In class my professor asked us to reflect on how we view ourselves when speaking an individualistic language, such as English, and a collectivist language, like Urdu. When speaking in English I realized that I had a more individualistic mindset and I used the words “I” and “me” a lot more. Whereas when I spoke my mother tongue, Urdu, I found myself using the word “we” whilst referring to myself and my family. The word for “I” in Urdu is “hum” which literally translates to “we.” I found this translation fascinating as it captures such different cultures at its root form, language. During the breakout group discussions at the CIL intercultural communication training, some people found this fascinating and others related this concept with their own languages. I found this to be a moment of relatability with my group members, that despite the languages being different, there are already similarities between them and by extension, us.

Furthermore, during the second half of the intercultural communication training I found myself interested in the different strategies used for handling stress in a new culture. Being able to put a name to the challenges such as the reverse culture shock was beneficial to me as in the future it will help me identify the stages and break down my stress in a new culture. The module on cultural development and navigating through various cultures is not something I had prior knowledge on. Every time I moved to a new country, I simply trusted my instincts and adapted to

my new environment and culture. However, the intercultural communication training component has helped me identify these stages. It feels like a relief to be able to name certain milestones in immersing myself into a new culture.

I have always disliked the question “Where is home?” It has never been a straightforward answer for me and it's complicated and messy to explain to a complete stranger. In university, I found myself getting asked that question a lot more as people were more curious about where I am from. Now, thanks to the Certificate in International Learning, I am more at ease with having multiple answers. I choose to answer with “Madagascar,” as it is where I first learned how to speak English, French and where I continued to practice my Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi. If I am asked about my schooling history, I am okay with talking about Kenya and the boarding school ‘home’ I made with my friends and peers. While living in Canada presently, I have made a home with roommates I met in residences and a life involving the city and other international students. In every country I have lived in I have been able to interact with the language of the country, the culture and the people and I am lucky to have realized that I have a home in each of them. My search for home and my answer about where ‘home’ is only going to get more complicated, the older I get, and now I am at ease with this idea.

The journey of obtaining my Certificate in International Learning has felt like a major reflection of my life, my experiences and my learning. More importantly, I have accepted that my identity is tied to the languages I know and being a polyglot and/or multilingual is one of my greatest strengths. I am grateful to be able to incorporate such strong parts of my identity with my education through both my certificates and I hope to carry these teachings with me in my professional life. For, according to De Waal, I am at home anywhere and with any people who know the same languages I do.