

## The Way of the Nomad by Wakanyi Hoffman

More than a decade ago, I packed up our wedding gifts, a new baby, and a career in a suitcase. The sum of my childhood and young adult life was shipped from my homeland in Kenya to my husband's in Ohio.

What I didn't know then was that I would be signing up for a life measured in terms of time and distance, away from friends and loved ones.

That first move signaled the start of a modern nomad's life, which was recently captured in a painting by our 8-year-old daughter, in her attempt to document her quarantined life.

It is simple a painting titled 'The social distanced girl', which now tugs at my heartstrings, speaking volumes about how my little girl sees herself in these times.

It is also possibly a description of how she has always secretly pictured her life- as an endless journey further and further removed from familiar places, yet always stabilized by the presence of the setting sun.

'The social distanced girl' by Emma-Jean Njeri Hoffman

When I contemplate the stories that our children will be sharing with their children about the quarantined times of coronavirus, I am reminded of the stories that my mother has shared with me about my nomadic grandfather.

He did not survive a pandemic, but he may as well have been preparing for one, all of his life. He was a loner who would vanish for days in the forested wilderness on the biodiverse foothills of Mount Kenya.

He would travel on foot with nothing but a spear and a gourd full of water, and quite possibly, the conviction of a thousand soldiers at war.

He was the warrior who once hunted down a lion along thick trails that he cleared on his social distanced solitary sojourn. As my mother proudly recalls, he was a survivalist tuned into his symbiotic connection with the natural world.

This relationship ensured that he could successfully forage and nourish his body for three days, alone and isolated from other humans.

When I think back to that first move to the US, it also represents two remarkably isolating seasons in my life- I was both newlywed and a new mother, adjusting to both identities

while physically distanced from my family back at home.

Like my grandfather, I learned to trust my instincts to embrace this new persona in unfamiliar territory. I lived in virtual isolation, learning how to be a mother from books and long-distance phone calls to my mother.

We left the US to begin our first expat posting in Nepal, a country far from both our homes. This meant distancing our young family from grandparents, uncles, and aunts, even before they could establish a relationship with our newly built unit.

We would leave traces of our presence in suitcases filled with clothes that were no longer practical for the monsoon seasons ahead. My wedding dress was vacuum packed and stored away at a corner of my mother-in-law's attic, a hopeful sign that our physical distance would be temporary.

It was in Nepal after the birth of our second child, when I was isolated in unfamiliar surroundings, that I began to consciously calculate the distance between me and my mother.

She would travel to Kathmandu from Nairobi, just as she would have boarded a bus if we lived in the same country, determined to fulfill her role of feeding me copious amounts of fermented porridge, the traditional drink given to lactating mothers.

My mother-in-law would later arrive from a 17-hour flight from the US to Kathmandu, beating my mother in the mileage covered to visit their grandson.

To this day, both mothers stand united in their commitment as long-distance grandparents, visiting us wherever we are in the world.

When we moved from Nepal to the Philippines, it was hard to imagine distancing our growing family from friends with whom we had shared intimate segments of our story on a daily basis.

But life as a nomad, as we had come to understand from others who were living the same way, is measured not by our ability to adapt to new places, but by the agony of choosing to physically distance ourselves from the familiar.

But to abandon old ways and embrace new changes comes at the expense of this social experiment, testing the extents of our resilience. And yet change, as we have also come to discover, is the only constant to the human experience.

Change presents itself in daily observances, like a plant that flowers overnight, revealing its potential for growth, abundance, and the promise of blooming all over again tomorrow or next spring.

A peony blooming in our spring garden in the Netherlands

When we moved from the Philippines to Ethiopia, we had no way of predicting a return to familiar sounds and scents of Thailand, a country we had only briefly visited during the birth of our second child.

And yet those four years that we spent living in an expat bubble north of Bangkok defined us as solid citizens of the world, no longer feeling rootless, but confident in the spaces that we occupied around the world.

We met countless other families just like ours, who were also physically distanced from their loved ones. It was there that our children learned to embrace the term TCK (Third Culture Kids), having met their 'tribe' of other rootless kids just like them.

We left Thailand and returned to Kenya confident that our friendships and family ties could exist in virtual spaces.

I no longer desired for permanency in location. What I wanted most was for our children to feel at home in Kenya so that when we left, we would fill the distance between us and friends and family with the stories that made us feel connected to them.

It has now been 8 months since we moved to the Netherlands, where we also recently bought our first home. For both my husband and me, this is the ideal home, close to an airport that is located halfway between both our childhood homes.

But for our seasoned TCKs, it is simply another country code on their global neighbourhood, a home where they feel confident inviting their friends in other countries to 'pop' over for a visit, just as they would, if all their friends lived nearby.

It is also the address that they will reference when telling their versions of social distancing during the time of coronavirus.

If homeownership is supposed to signal rootedness, for us it is revealing of how far we have traveled to get here, to a clear, mental space where we can recognize the distances between us and all those that we love, without longing for physical proximity.

We now know that we can reach them on the other end of the phone line, over a chat thread, on a video call, and more recently, over zoom.

Our sense of home is no longer measured by time spent in close proximity to familiar faces, but in how well connected we feel even if our hugs are virtual and our conversations are long-distance.

While I still live in a different continent from my mother, our relationship is no longer measured by the physical distance between us, but by the amount of time that we can both commit to talking using any means possible, until the next time that we see each other again.

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