



Mind Matters

articles on mental health from experts in the field

You Can Always go Home

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Whenever I talk to an old friend of mine, affectionately nicknamed Dolomite, we often tell each other that our “Roots are showing.” In our minds the phrase has a double meaning, and we don’t mean it as a reminder that our visit to the salon for a dye job touch-up is overdue. Being told my roots are showing could be taken as an insult or a compliment. But more and more, I’m viewing it as a tremendous tribute. In case you haven’t figured it out yet, Dolomite and I are telling each other that our background, our upbringing, is quite apparent when we say the roots are showing.

The interesting thing is that her roots, growing up half Seneca and half white in Pennsylvania, and my roots, growing up white in a relatively diverse and socioeconomically deprived area of Michigan, have more similarities than differences. We both had fathers who passed on prematurely, but who always used their humor to get through tough times. We both know, from personal experience, that the five-pound government-issued cheese blocks make the BEST grilled cheese sandwiches in the world, and that the cheese block itself can make an excellent self-defense weapon. Both of us know what it’s like to feel suffocated by our circumstances and desperate to extricate ourselves from those circumstances, to prove that we’re not limited by the limitations of our upbringings.

I write this as I reflect on my most recent trip back “home,” a tiny journey back to my roots. I remember a time when I was ashamed of where and how I grew up, a time when I identified with the “poor white trash” label that was sometimes applied to me, seemingly with indelible ink. But now, when I go back, I’m filled mostly with gratitude. As I cross paths with the people and places that have known me for my entire life, I feel at home, fully myself. My hometown, in the poorest county in Michigan, begins to look beautiful to me. I know, without a doubt, that I would not be the person I am today, if it hadn’t been for my unique and colorful background. And I feel uplifted in a place where I once felt trapped, like a helpless victim of mass depression.

Having said all of this in what I realize has been a sentimental and long-winded manner, I have to disagree with the adage that says a person can “never go home.” I think we can, and must, go home, wherever that might be, whether seemingly good or bad, and be reminded of our foundation. After all, no matter how hard we try, our roots are going to show from time to time.

But, the past that has shaped us, if and when we can face it, is also the very source of our individual strength.

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