

Le Bon Journal

Thursday 15 April 2004 <http://www.bonjournal.com/ezine/>
Volume 3 Issue 4: Uprooters on the uprooting experience

Uprooting (to pull up oneself and one's roots from home) involves more than the mere physical task of moving house or relocating to another country. There are psychological impacts of saying goodbye to one's parents, neighbours, and friends and starting a new life elsewhere.

From the rooted, the uprooted, and the rootless, here is a cross section of uprooters who have moved voluntarily and involuntarily; for work, study, and love; within and across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Some have uprooted so often that it has become a way of life. Others, having moved frequently in their childhood, prefer to stay put as adults. Still others, such as Joan Yap of Singapore, ponder why the rooted remain rooted while observing the uprooters roam the earth. Yet some, like Jack Arbor, are deliberately rootless, to promote a permanently uproot-able lifestyle.

Offhand, Billy Tan of Malaysia can relate to five major types of life-changing uprooting situations: uprooting from your parents and siblings, uprooting from your country and culture, uprooting from or changing your job/career/profession, uprooting from your religion such as changing your spiritual and philosophical focus, and uprooting from your marriage and children. In this issue, the contributors share their insights and stories.

A jetsetter who makes his home in Florida, London, and Spain, Ian Ferguson-Brown summarises the experience of uprooting as follows:

The first time is the hardest because you only ever uproot once. After that you are just a hanging basket wherever you go, and some might say a hanging basket case.

The journey

"Sojourner", the name NASA gave to the rover that was part of the Mars Pathfinder mission, is such a dated word. The word means temporary resident and is hardly used today.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese, Indians and Europeans fleeing their countries were referred to as sojourners instead of immigrants. Over the years, the regulation of cross border travel makes "sojourning" no longer valid. The world has become more sophisticated, people are better informed, and too many lessons have been learned to warrant immigration controls, especially in recent days. It is no longer possible, however exciting and romantic it sounds, to be able to move to a new country with only your personal belongings and no worries about passports, guarantors or bonds.

I live on a small island, a city-state, with an area of approximately 600 sq. km, less than half the size of London. In fact, should you fly from the Malaysian

peninsula or Indonesia, you will completely miss Singapore if you just blink. From the time of take-off at our airport, we will be in a different country in three minutes. There is only one train station here and the next stop is Malaysia.

It is easy to get tired of this place but no matter where I go, no other place feels like home. I envy those who have the guts to say goodbye to people and things familiar, to start all over again, and face the uncertainty of a totally new environment. I have always wondered whether I would be better or worse off if I had gone away when I had the chance and when I had fewer commitments.

Many times in my life I had considered uprooting for all kinds of reasons: experience of the four seasons, better career prospects, escape from bad relationships, or enrichment of the mind and soul.

When does one take the plunge? I would like to share a personal experience. When I started scuba diving, my enthusiasm was extremely high, and I was always broke after paying for diving trips and equipment. Wherever the dive master took me, under all kinds of water conditions, I earnestly made the dives, three times a day, just so to get the most from my hard-earned money. As I became more proficient, I became more selective before donning the full gear to go underwater: the visibility must be good, the current not too strong, the marine life must be rich, and the water not too cold. Often, I stayed in the comfort of the boat visualising the dive I did not do, without feeling that I missed anything.

So what is my point? Uprooting is a major change in anyone's life. As one gets older, one tends to minimise changes, making sure that any move outside the comfort zone does not cause any unnecessary suffering or inconvenience.

I do know of people who live overseas all their adult lives with their families, moving from one country to another depending on their employment assignments, with children growing up in rented houses and not having friends for more than a few years before they pack and leave again. Does "settling down" mean anything to them? What and where is home to these people? Why do people need to keep moving?

After much searching, I found an answer in a quote from the historian Katherine Sharp:

"Sometime in your life you will go on a journey. It will be the longest journey you have ever taken. It is the journey to find yourself."

Perhaps when we find ourselves, everything will be clear, calm, beautiful and warm, and there is no need to move again.

Joan Yap, Singapore

The uprooted lifestyle: a personal philosophy

Can you imagine collecting every possession you have in the world into a big pile and making an irreversible commitment to dispose or give half of it away by the end of the week? What about going on holiday, already knowing you will only come back with half of the clothing you packed because you plan to leave it in the hotel waste bin? Could you go through your address book right now (both snail and e-mail) and permanently erase half of the addresses without regrets or worries?

Well, that's exactly what my wife and I did over the last six months – and we thoroughly enjoyed doing it. More to the point, it's a deliberate part of our lifestyle. We are not new aged travellers or minimalist design nuts - but a good solid, middle aged, middle class, married couple with two kids and a house in the suburbs of a nice sleepy town. Just about as conventional as you can get without actually being dead!

We do not really have a name for our lifestyle but "uprooted", "decoupled", "dematerialised" or "decluttered" seem to be pretty good descriptors, and it's really become something of an addiction for us.

The decision to move house was the catalyst for our recent activities but it all began nearly twenty years ago when we left university and started living together in London. We had few possessions but rented virtually everything, including pots and pans. We never ever got out of the habit, and we gradually refined the art of living in an uprooted way until it has become something of a philosophy.

Living uprooted involves a lot more than just prolonging the feckless existence of a young, free and single, twenty-something urban dweller, of course, and it certainly involves a lot more effort than having a good spring clean and getting rid of your rubbish every now and again.

So how do you start to live the uprooted lifestyle? Making the decision to uproot is not just about where you physically live but also about untying those financial and psychological fetters that bind you to everything and everyone that you have encountered over your life. Moving house is good time to take your first plunge for the uprooting beginner because it is a time of change anyway but the process has to start long before then – and it's all in the mind.

Here are 10 golden rules for living an uprooted lifestyle:

1. Rent instead of buying whenever you can – that includes your car and home;
2. Buy only what can consume immediately or will use for the rest of your life;
3. Be on the look out for your next job even if you enjoy the current one;
4. Be prepared to give up the current job immediately you stop enjoying it;
5. Keep enough cash available so you do not have to work for two years;

6. Dispose of all possessions you have not used in the last two years;
7. Dispose of all contact details of people you have spoken to in the last two years;
8. Avoid contracts which you cannot get out of inside two years without penalty;
9. Sever the ties of nationality so you can work and live anywhere you please; and
10. Maintain a global e-mail address as your permanent (but virtual) root to the planet.

There are big immediate practical benefits to the uprooted lifestyle. Our cost of living is a lot less than what it otherwise would be. We have no debt and a lot more freedom to do whatever suits us and our children, whatever and whenever life throws at us. As a result, we are a lot happier than most people we know of our age.

The downside is that some of our current friends think we are mad and some are quite worried about us. Some former friends drifted away because we did not hold the same values as they did. Indeed, we have had to be extremely diplomatic at dinner parties with people we hardly knew who felt deeply offended that we did not want to buy our own home and a car or have a conventional career and a conventional *rooted* lifestyle like they had.

As people in a very advanced stage of *uprooting* we are always planning our next move because uprooting is something that does not just happen on its own. Our plan is to uproot entirely from the country we currently live in because we want to begin to equip our children with the skills and attitudes that will allow them to live an entirely uprooted lifestyle while making a positive contribution to whatever society they happen to choose to live in and using a lot less of the world's resources into the bargain.

Jack Arbor is the pseudonym of the author who can be contacted via the editor at Le Bon Journal.

Uprooting and making friends

Throughout my life I have continuously moved around. My school memories are mainly about coming in during the middle of the school year and being placed on the "back benches" together with the perennial "misfits." I have become so used to moving to a new place that I start to feel very uneasy after staying somewhere for more than two or three years. The idea of going to another country and facing a "new adventure" excites me as it brings another chance to find an environment to fit in.

Ironically, uprooting has become the main driver for me to continue moving, as I find it more and more difficult to fit into groups where people have known each other since their kindergarten days. The downside of moving around continuously is that it leaves you with very few friends because maintaining contact takes a lot of energy.

Occasionally I get a message from somebody, which makes me so happy that I decide, "I must write something as nice and detailed as this e-mail." Unfortunately on this very day my energy is often on its low, and it takes weeks and weeks before I suddenly remember this "obligation." I am sure it's the same with others, as I also have to wait ages for a response. So there is a dwindling population of friends and former colleagues where the contact is on the "verge of extinction."

As I get older, seniority in my profession means that the carefree days of making new friends easily among my colleagues are over. People reporting to me always come with long wish lists, while my peers are fighting the typical political battles. Among these brownnosers and backstabbers there is nobody you can just "talk shit."

Meeting old friends becomes a sentimental journey that often makes me too aware that everybody has moved on, the good old days are over and will never come back.

For instance, at university I had a very good friend from Thailand and for four years we frequently visited my parents over weekends or Christmas. When my parents visited him in Thailand last year, he told them that I was one of the only two friends he still considered friend. The last time I saw him was more than ten years ago. Although we were quite happy to meet again we had very few subjects to share. Already then we were literally "speechless," for what was moving one of us was irrelevant to the other.

Thomas Meyer, Luxembourg

Misunderstandings in new places

I couldn't understand Singlish (Singaporean English) when I was in Singapore for the summer. I asked a lady at a mall where the bathroom was and she told me to go to the "leef." I looked over and I saw a gigantic potted plant there. I asked her, "Go to that leaf?" She shook her head and said, "No, the LEEF!" I walked over to the plant, and there it was, the elevator door. She meant "lift."

Frances Ku, Hawaii

When we arrived in Korea, we lived off base, and I could not understand why nobody understood me. I was the wee age of 5.

Lisa Colaric, Texas

After several months, my neighbour in Houston finally asked if I was a student, for she always found me reading on my balcony after she came home from work. I told her that my company in London had sent me to work. She remarked that she could tell I was a foreigner because I didn't turn on my air conditioning even in July.

Anne Ku, the Netherlands

In Switzerland I worked at Victoria Jungfrau in Interlaken, a wow! to say the least. I was an apprentice

in the restaurant, and the clients joked that I'd have to bring a bigger ashtray. I went and got the biggest ashtray in the hotel that I could find and put it on the table. It seems funny now, but not so funny then. Grosse Ashabacker has taken on a whole new meaning for me.

Trish Fogarty, Ireland

Travelling husband

I have uprooted three times in my life. The first one was voluntary – a family decision, the rest were the result of being a travelling spouse. My wife had the opportunity to apply for a European position in Brussels, and we agreed wholeheartedly that it was an opportunity to expand our lives. Thereafter the Belgium office moved to the UK, so the kids and I had to come, of course. Then the job started to nosedive and my wife decided to apply for something else. She got the first one she applied for back in New York headquarters, so the family went along.

We had six months to prepare for the first move, four or five for the second, and three for the final move back home.

The London location never really felt like home surprisingly even less than Belgium. To integrate, I initially made some attempts at teaching photography and did teach a class. But then I got depressed and couldn't find more of that kind of work. I eventually took a personal development course, which led to meeting an artists' group that I continued to participate in and cement some good relationships there, as well as generating work for a very good exhibition we did in Berlin.

As far as doing things differently, I'm sure there were many other opportunities to approach life with more power, but it didn't occur that way at all. Life had me by the balls as they say.

The impact of isolation at home and diminishing intimacy with my wife after many years led to falling into, or choosing to get into, an intense love affair that then ended in a very disappointing manner. The most difficult part of it is that whenever I think my wife is feeling the impact of all this and prepared to talk about issues of intimacy and how she really feels about our marriage, she launches on a huge affirmation of our relationship.

Photographer in New York

Travelling wife

I have uprooted three times so far. The first time was for my studies in Belgium, voluntary of course, the second and the third were following my husband because of his work, let's say half voluntary.

The first time I spent about two months to prepare the move. The second and the third times were about one month but were assisted by relocation companies.

The first time it took me about three weeks to feel comfortable in my new home. Unfortunately, I never felt comfortable in Barcelona, outside of hot tourist spots. It took me about two weeks to feel comfortable in London.

I think my uprooting experiences did make a stronger and more flexible person. But sometimes I get disappointed at not being able to combine all the advantages of the different places I have lived in, like Spanish sun and seafood, French life style, London's cosmopolitan atmosphere, and Taiwan's night market and restaurants. The combination of all of these is the kind of paradise that I have dreamed of.

Shounin Li, London

Military dependent on the move

How many times has my family packed up their belongings and made for another foreign place, unfamiliar surroundings, foreign foods, smells, sights? I cannot recall all of the places before age four. I recall Germany, then Georgia and Colorado for only a year each and then the one place that had affected me the most, Korea, my mother's homeland and a place that I happened to have kinship with. After Korea, then Texas, then Okinawa (six that I can recall). I suppose you can say that I've sampled the world.

The reasons were always vague to me. My father was given orders, and my mother obediently packed, organized all of our things within two months. But no, I do not believe that these moves would have been voluntary if they were not for the military orders. My mother loved living in Korea for obvious reasons, but she also settled in Texas very well. Both of my parents loved Texas so much that after Okinawa, my father retired from the Army and they now live in Fort Worth, in the same house they bought 20 years ago.

In any new location I have always had the sense of being out of my element for a time. There were places where I felt like I never belonged. I suppose it took me at least a month of coming to school and roaming around my new neighbourhood to feel as if I fit in.

Integrating into local society? As a child you just try to fit in, to acclimatise to the local ways. I had a difficult time in the 70's in central Texas (Copperas Cove). I am half Korean, and I looked it with my slanted eyes that disappeared when I laughed, dark hair and my Korean mother who was never far behind.

Uprooting has made me so much stronger than my friends here in Texas. I have a better understanding of people of other countries and cultures, and I am more willing to experience new foods and places to travel.

Lora Colaric, Texas

Son of diplomat returns home

I must have uprooted at least five times in my life: USA, Canada, Portugal, Belgium, France, and England.

Most of the time, I was dragged around the world by my Italian diplomat father.

It was a major upheaval every time. Changing friends and schools was difficult. These were all involuntary moves and on average were difficult and complex, requiring a fair amount of time to make all the necessary adjustments.

Basically I don't like uprooting, and I don't recommend it to anybody as it carries a significant amount of disruption, risk and costs. I always associate it to the uprooting of a plant. If you uproot a plant too often you risk killing it off! A rolling stone gathers no moss!

Despite this, I have also learned a lot (languages, customs, etc). Uprooting has given me a much broader outlook on life.

I am currently going through a bit of a mid-life crisis, in search of an identity and a root. I need to experience Italy as I am ashamed to say that I have never lived there! After spending more than 25 years in London, I think I am ready to taste something different. My family hometown is Montefiore dell'Aso, a small medieval town perched on a hilltop, minutes from the Adriatic Sea and the mountains of "Sibillini".

It's time to unwind and take stock of life. I will map out the next leg of my long journey and strike a healthier work-life balance. It's all happening because I am making a deliberate effort to make it happen otherwise I can easily be taken over and possessed by aspects of life that have little if no consequence or meaning.

London gave me a unique opportunity to establish an international recruitment business. The next stage is the development of a virtual office which will allow me to work in a seamless manner from anywhere in the world including Montefiore dell'Aso.

Guido Egidi, London

Loneliness and homesickness

The most comfortable thing to do in a foreign environment is to eat. I went on a pizza and ice cream diet in my first year at university but didn't realise that I gained twenty pounds until I saw a picture of myself. I was wearing trousers with elastic waistband and couldn't tell that my special diet had an effect. To make it worse, my mother sent me several boxes of Hawaiian chocolates with high calorie macadamia nuts for Christmas. I depleted the boxes before the New Year, gained more weight and acquired lots of pimples. But the chocolates were a good remedy for my homesickness.

I was so lonely in Singapore, my first overseas assignment at age 23, that I would order breakfast to be delivered every morning and wait for the hotel maid to turn down my bed in the early evenings, just to have someone outside of work to talk to. When I started to cry in a taxi after feeling the loneliness of two months of all work and no play, the middle-aged driver

sympathised and told me that he was also single and would love to take me to his home.

Anne Ku, the Netherlands

An uprooted artist reflects

I've uprooted eleven times since age four, with the first being a family move. The rest have been individual moves. Circumstances included changing of schools and moving between countries for new jobs. For the individual moves, I moved myself, without assistance. Preparation took a few months each time.

The newness of every place is always the excitement, so adaptation was something to look forward to. Being comfortable in a new place meant the end of excitement for me for the most part, which took about three years, to make new friends, get situated, get acquainted with directions and locales.

I could not have done anything differently because ever since I left my childhood home, I was forced to move because of various factors, the most relevant one being that I had no family or roots in any of the places outside my childhood home, and thus, there was nothing to keep me anywhere. Soon, moving became a habit, and a pleasurable one, but the excitement is never sustained.

Uprooting made me into more of a risk-taker. A stronger person -- I'm not sure. Good at adapting, yes. Proficient at meeting new people, yes. Multi-cultural, sure. Moving a lot can also become addictive, and turn many into escapists. You lack the staying power of those who can stick it through in one place.

Frances Ku, Hawaii

Voluntary moves for study and work

I have moved three times, plus once without a country change, all to do with study or work. I had enough time to move (more than one or two months each) and received no help from anyone.

The stages I went through in uprooting are 1) getting accommodation, getting to use the cooker and coffee machine, 2) getting confident that the job/studying place/situation is durable, and 3) getting a social life with the locals.

It took me 1 month to get accommodation in Paris, 1 week to get confident and comfortable with the place, and 2 months to get a social life with the locals. In Luxembourg, it was 2 days to get a place to live, 1 month to get confident with work, and 2 weeks to get a social life. In West Berlin, it was 1 month for accommodation, 2 weeks for work, 1 week for a social life. In London, it didn't take me long to get a place to live, only 1 day to get used to the business school, and 2 days to get a social life.

Uprooting has made me fitter maybe, stronger, I do not know. Uprooting once in a while is a way of life. I never considered my future without uproots. Hang a

world map on your wall, and you will see what you are missing if you don't uproot.

Fred Vacelet, London

From Ireland and back

I have uprooted six times since 1992. First time was a mandatory college placement to Switzerland. The second was a voluntary move to Scotland for a job, which I quickly realised, was not for me. Then I met the President of North America in Ireland, which let to an opportunity of a lifetime, moving to Seattle. Since I only had paperwork for the US for 18 months, I had to be transferred to Canada. I was headhunted and sent to Northern Ireland, which was wonderful at the time. I met my future husband there, and we moved to London where I got a wonderful job with a recruitment company. When my husband got a job in Canada, I joined him as a visitor but never really gave it a hundred percent to settle in. I was also disappointed with my husband's employers who made no effort to accommodate or assist with the paperwork for me. We've now returned to Ireland, and I am finding it rather difficult to settle in.

For most of the moves we had only two weeks notice. For last two relocations we used professional movers. The couch has just as many miles on it as we have if only it could speak. I found the moving companies to be a total rip-off but the only way that one can cope at the same time. The quotes and the actual expenses were miles apart unfortunately, and we always ended up paying a lot more than what we should have.

In all of the locations I made a great effort outside of Europe. I was disappointed in Europe because I thought I was no longer the foreigner and hence not of as much interest to people. The culture shock, on the other hand, has nearly been worse back in Ireland and London than any place else.

Yes, uprooting does make you a stronger person. I have grown as a person in many ways thanks to the wonderful people that I met along the way. In fact, it's not the scenery or the country that I remember but the people that I bumped into that have made me a better person today.

In hindsight, I feel as if I have gone backwards instead of forwards. Having said that, I did meet my husband, and I have lived in some spectacular parts of the world. Life is too short, and we can't bring our possessions to the grave with us in the end. You learn to let go of things more easily through uprooting.

Trish Fogarty, Ireland

Advice on uprooting

First of all, try to learn local language! Be well prepared, and go without prior prejudice and try to understand and appreciate different cultures.

Shounin Li, London

Do as if you were going to live there forever. Do not try to create your own colony in the country. Open up to people. Learn the local language, and the local expressions/accents.

Fred Vacelet, London

Before you decide to move, ask yourself, "Am I moving because I falsely believe the grass is greener on the other side? Or am I moving because I am happy wherever I am, as happiness is within, and moving is a practical decision which makes sense?" Looking back, some of my moves were escapist. Escaping from personal issues never works, because you bring your baggage wherever you go, and no environment in the world can solve your personal issues. There is also no such thing as "paradise." I live in Hawaii and I encounter people here who suffer from depression or are malcontent. Hard to believe, but it's true.

Frances Ku, Hawaii

Be prepared to experience what you can't imagine, and I don't mean seeing the Ducal Palace in Venice.

Photographer in New York

The advice I would give to anyone who is moving away from familiar surroundings is to research the area (country) first, if possible, visit ahead of time. I did not have these advantages, so it was culture shock when I arrived in Japan and Korea as a child (Germany is but a blur). The food was different, the language unfamiliar, and of course, the customs strange.

Lisa Colaric, Texas

Don't uproot without writing down all the things you like and don't like. Take the emotions out of it. All of my moves have been because of emotions, and while it is good to listen to your heart sometimes this is not the right direction to go. Try to take a leave of absence from work and go live in the country to find suitable employment and plan ahead.

Trish Fogarty, Ireland

Make sure there is an integrating factor, be it work, study, or some community you have to interact in and with. Give yourself six months to get settled and feel comfortable. Approach your new environment with an open mind, and try not to hang onto the past, otherwise you will feel a lot of resistance. Consider yourself lucky to have uprooted.

Anne Ku, the Netherlands

In every issue of Le Bon Journal, we include a piece from the online journal entries at analyticalQ. Here is one from 28 July 2000, written by Anne Ku's mother about a boy who was involuntarily uprooted.

A bottle of soy sauce

His mother told him to go to the shop to get a bottle of soy sauce. He walked down the road and sang the song:

*"Great, great father and brother,
Fight for nation
Being a soldier. Ha, ha, ha."*

Then he saw a man coming out of a car and walking towards him. The man grabbed him and pushed him into the car. The boy told the man that his mother was waiting for him to bring back a bottle of soy sauce. The man said that he had nowhere to go but to fight for his country. It was 1944; he was only fifteen.

He left for Taiwan with the troops. Looking back in the direction of his hometown, he couldn't see anything but dark clouds.

Standing in front of the mirror, he sees his grey hair. He misses his mother and thinks of how he has failed to get what she asked for.

Homecoming at last. He returns home carrying a bottle of soy sauce. He is an old man with a boy's mind.

"Maaaaa, Maaaa," he calls and calls. There is no answer. He checks everywhere. There is no sign of her.

Finally he finds her resting place.

He kneels down and touches the tombstone as if he were touching her shoulders. He says, "Ma, here is the bottle of soy sauce. I am so sorry. I am forty-five years too late. Why didn't you wait for me?"



Anne Ku, editor

If you like this issue, please visit <http://www.bonjournal.com> to tell your friends. We are always hungry for feedback. The next one (15 July 2004) is on *second passions and personal philosophies*. Every issue is published the middle of the month with submissions of maximum 700 words due by end of the previous month. We are accepting contributions from now until 30 June. Please contact editor@bonjournal.com if you would like to contribute an original piece of self-expression or to sponsor an issue.

Last issue: Love is actually all around the world
15 February 2004 (3 page pdf)

Next issue: Second passions and personal philosophies
15 July 2004

Questions for contributors for July 2004 issue:

1. Do you work to live or live to work? Is work a means to an end or an end in itself?
2. What is your second passion? Will it ever become your first? If so, how and under which conditions?
3. Describe your personal philosophy and what influenced it. How is it unique?
4. How have you combined your personal philosophy in pursuit of your second passion?
5. If you were to live your life over again, what would you do differently?

Copyright 2004 Anne Ku