

What 'Shelter' Means to Me

By Dhruv Vyas

A shelter is generally perceived to be someplace to provide safety for people. Usually, a shelter is made of bricks, wood, and concrete; it has a roof to protect you from rain or any other natural disasters. My experience has taught me that shelter is more than a structure. True shelter is something you cannot touch and is an emotional place of refuge we call home. When I reflect back on my life, the first shelters I think of were my Dadaji's (paternal) house and my Nana's (maternal) home. They were more than just buildings (or structures). They were the places I experienced the happiest moments of my life.

It's not that vivid in my memory: the young kid who cried to see his Dadaji, but when he got there, his mind would switch up and then he would want to go to his Nana's. This would keep happening all the time. Struggling to be at all the places, at the same time, was a consequence of too much love, security, and happiness found in each home during the first years of my life - each full of warmth, fun, and belonging.

A joyful period of my life, this reality was permanently tied to my environment and the family that lived within it. I felt completely safe and free within this environment and my family's love; however, as with all things changing and growing, and at some point you must move forward, like how I had to move entirely to a new country. The last straw came for me when I boarded the 16 hour flight from my beloved India to the United States of America. At that moment, when the enormous aircraft left the ground and traversed the broad ocean, it continued to take me farther away from all that I knew. Every joyful memory and moment from before became a mere part of my

past, suspended between my old life and my unknown future. The next chapter of my life was beginning, and it was discomfoting.

Moving to a foreign country creates a unique feeling of separation because of the shift from the old environment to the new environment. I was supposed to make new friends, attend a new school, and get used to the new place I would live. The apartment didn't feel right initially. The “this is your home now” smell, very quiet hallways, and the absence of the noise and warmth of my hometown created a very foreign feeling. As a young child I did not have the capability to understand why things are different when someone moves from one place to another. All I knew was my world had been turned upside down for no identifiable purpose. Fortunately for me, these thoughts would get pushed behind my mind as I had newer and more purposeful things to look forward to. I needed to create new friendships and my first experience with school in the United States as it was a new mission for me.

During my transition to this new location, I learned many difficult truths about the human experience. Moving frequently for work, family or just a new beginning; It can be hard to remember a home you felt secure in because of the different physical spaces, the people you interacted with, and the visual indicators of those spaces disappearing. This happens to many people across the globe and creates a historical memory loss in a home and feeling unsheltered as your physical surroundings become more like those of an alien.

But lucky for you, and lucky for me, a shelter doesn't really have to be a specific place in the real world. This is the greatest thing that helped me cope through whatever “emotions” I felt. When the physical walls of my grandparents' homes were thousands of miles away, I had to build a new kind of roof. Some things that help me feel safe now

are precious memories. I realized that the mind is an incredible architect. I can carry the warmth of my birthplace, the sound of my grandparents' voices, and the laughter of old friends inside my heart. They provide their own type of special roof—one that cannot be damaged by time, distance, or a changing address.

Most of these memories would make you feel nostalgic, and that nostalgia is a powerful tool. Nostalgic feelings are prone to make people feel safer and not focus on the immediate anxieties of an unfamiliar environment. Whenever the stress of my new life becomes too heavy, I retreat into the shelter of my past. By honoring where I came from, I find the strength to face where I am going. Shelter, ultimately, is the peace we carry within ourselves.