

Why New York

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Ever since I was a young girl I would idyllically obsess over a potential life for myself in New York City. I should mention that I am a New Yorker, however, it wasn't until the age of 17 and moving to the city proper that I had come to learn there was a critical identity distinction between us Upstaters and those who were born and raised in New York, NY.

Myself raised in the gorgeous Catskill Mountains, Hudson Valley community outside of Woodstock, could not have asked for a more verdant childhood experience. I lived a life riddled with daily walks overlooking the Ashokan reservoir, with scenic mountain hikes just five minutes from the three-acre property my father, a Brooklyn-born man himself, had built our home. Outdoor summer excursions included swinging from trees into the painfully ice cold crisp water of Peekamoose, as well as fishing, frog catching, tree climbing, or playing make-believe in the forest with friends at any point in time. We grew our own vegetables, my mom had made some of my clothing in elementary school (yes it was embarrassing), and swimming in creeks, ponds, and lakes was a daily bathing ritual from late spring to early autumn.

It wasn't until the end of my third decade that I was able to reflect on the fortune my childhood provided. Upon my return to New York City in 2017, after having left for almost a decade, I had come to find many city-based family and friends leaving their urban life's behind in pursuit of the country dream: land, gardens, deers, apple trees, jam making, firefly catching, and the evening lullaby of cicadas during the steamy summer months. For myself, I had come to discover that while deeply appreciating and taking solace in the natural world, I wanted the opposite. It was the buzz of the ceaseless construction, masses of anonymous faces with potential stories, and endless exhilarating chatter of languages foreign to my ears that provided a sense of refuge into otherness that wanderlust spirits like myself often crave and need. I have come to identify this feeling as my personal sense of "home".

Webster defines "home" in its noun form as *"the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household."* A word that had always felt arbitrary, this definition provided some relief and insight. After living in many countries, cities, states, and small towns throughout the U.S over the past twelve years, I could never answer the question of "where is your home?". My response came with consternation due to the fact that although I had been living away from New York for quite some time, the place where my body found the type of resonance identified with "belonging and membership" continued to be New York. I would often say "Well I live here (insert any city) but I'm from New York". It was the deep-rooted sense of personal identification with the place that, upon later reflection, had likely been what allowed me to live and create many different communities elsewhere. I had the fortunate sense of what it felt like to have a "home" to return to at any point in my life.

The understanding of why New York and its five boroughs had continued to be my self-identified home was illuminated upon a recent decision to once again relocate to Brooklyn. After having spent a year in San Diego, a place considered by many as a celestial city of sorts with its beach culture, palm trees, iconic weather, and iridescent pastel sunsets, I left it all behind, opting instead for the condensed, overpopulated, loud, fast-paced, four-seasoned, and often noxious olfactory experience of New York City.

One would be hard pressed in this City to find the same daily glimmering sunsets descending behind the endless rolling waves of the vast blue ocean that had become commonplace for me in San Diego. Of course a small glimpse of the sun's daily transition could always be spotted on rooftops of Brooklyn apartments, Manhattan skyscrapers, or perhaps in making the daily commute over one of the city's three bridges linking Manhattan to its boroughs. However, New York City sunsets pale in comparison to the West Coast hues. And yet even with such daily scenic reminders of life's treasures, it was within just moments of driving through the Lincoln Tunnel that the sense of membership, lost to me in California, quickly returned. This was all the confirmation needed to understand that daily sun gazing was no substitute for the relationship our souls have with specific places that bring about a sense of belonging. Mine, the sense of pride in belonging to New York.

Irish poet John O'Donohue eloquently muses about one's relationship to place in much of his writing. One can almost taste O'Donohue's personal belongingness to Ireland. As I drove into Crown Heights, parked my car in front of my new apartment, a smile was plastered on my face reminding me of O'Donohue's narratives regarding the importance of relationship to our environment. The smile fastened to my face was probably too California and a bit unsettling for my New Yorkers, but I had no voluntary say in the matter. I was home and my body was responding.

Music and dancing right outside my new apartment's doorsteps, the hundreds of people traipsing throughout the cityscape on phones, or with strollers, sporting leased animals and many hands enveloped by a lover's. It was the humming of traffic, whistling of commuters, construction worker's laughter, and perhaps even obnoxious yelling of the kids that all inspired a sense of communal comradery, vacant for me in other places I had lived.

Now residing back in Brooklyn in an apartment that doesn't look out over the ocean, or have a beautiful view of rolling hills, I am more content than ever. I wake up to jackhammers in the street, and people's voices early in the morning, sometimes stomping from both the above and below residents causing the floorboards to crack and creak. At times I smell my neighbor's dinner from the building next door or another tenet's patchouli oil being burned, covering up the musty smell from our old, dilapidated building. Spontaneously smiling to a fellow pedestrian doesn't get the same reciprocity as it had in California and going grocery shopping takes far more planning than a five minute drive to the market. But I'm in love. And like any good all encompassing head-over-heels romance, I have come to ignore New York's flaws and offsetting characteristics for the sense of home the relationship to this place provides.

Why New York? New York has always allowed me to fall in love with reality as it stands. The muse in which this city provides creatively is like no place I have ever lived. It is a difficult place to have the same day twice, which generates a bedrock of inspiration and potential for continuous challenge and growth. The New York camaraderie via lamenting, commiserating or the exchanging of all-too-normal snarky banter with someone—who had just moment's prior been a stranger until pressed up against one another in the “sardine-can-like” subway experience—is the constant reminder of New York's innate inter-personal connectivity.

New York is a place that holds it all, and a lot of it. The stresses, the loneliness, and the magical serendipitous moments many experience at various times throughout their days. The city's struggles, triumphs, and togetherness pulsates throughout the intoxicating venom of which it inoculates its wedded residents.

More than anything though, it is truly the people. The people that band together when times are tough, the people that protest a large company like Amazon from moving into Long Island City knowing it would change the beautifully eclectic culture built on a community of immigrants. It is the people that look at my distressed face on a subway and console me by their words of “honey, we are all in this together”. The authentic disclosure from the community of people in New York rapidly makes the impersonal, personal. It's these moments of togetherness, of witnessing, and of being seen by one another that allows us as an urban organism to persevere just one more day.