



In-between Places

What would you do if you were forced to flee your home, your job and your family? Our writer faced this challenge and discovered that to move on, you have to leave some things behind

By Ebrahim Moosa

IT'S A MONDAY EVENING DURING the cold Cape Town winter; the last late night of the school holidays. As a treat, I offer to take the kids out for ice cream, while my wife Nisa stays home to watch a movie on TV. About an hour later – just before 9pm – the three of us join her in the main bedroom. Life is simple. Life is good.

Just after 9pm a deafening sound rings through the house. Has a car crashed into the house? I grope my way towards my study to phone the police and, as I look down the hallway, I notice the ceiling has been ripped apart. I know immediately that an explosive device has been detonated because, just a few weeks earlier, I had seen almost identical damage at the home of the late Shaykh Nazeem Mohamed, president of the Muslim Judicial Council. His house, not far from mine, had suffered a grenade attack. I immediately get my family outside. The safety of the street is better than the danger still lurking in the house. Within minutes dozens of bystanders have gathered and the cops have cordoned off the area. I see a charred gaping hole under the front window, which the police say has been caused by a pipe bomb. One minute I was having ice cream, the next I'm discussing pipe bombs with the police. The situation seems absurd. Our wooden garage door is shredded; Nisa's car is badly damaged. Many windows are shattered but – luckily – none in the main bedroom. We have survived, but at what cost?

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My life, and that of my family's, changed forever on that cold July night in 1998. The attack was carried out by the Muslim vigilante group Pagad, or People Against Gangsterism and Drugs as they liked to call themselves. Pagad exploded into the South African news headlines in the late Nineties when they burnt a notorious local drug lord alive, in full view of the media. I would later learn that their attack on my own house was one of more than 50 similar acts of urban terrorism in the Mother City during that turbulent period. As a Muslim academic at the University of Cape Town, I'd been one of the first to expose Pagad's thuggery and, together with other university, religious and civic leaders, had circulated a public statement criticising Pagad for its lawlessness and abuse of Islam. It didn't take long



for the hate mail and threatening phone calls to start. And then the bomb came.

I was angry. Angry that my home had been bombed; angry at the government, police and community who had mollycoddled this dangerous group; and angry that, despite giving the police hot leads about the possible attackers, not a single person was prosecuted for the attack on my home. It took a few words from a great man to begin soothing my fury.

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The phone rings – it is two days after the attack. On the line is Ebrahim Rasool (later to become Western Cape Premier), calling to say that Madiba wants to talk to me. I can't believe it: Nelson Mandela wants to talk to me? Why? Does he always call victims of violence?

When he calls, Mandela sympathises with my family's plight and condemns the attack.

If he were in Cape Town, he says, he would have visited me personally. He speaks to Nisa, my daughter Lamya and son Shibli. His words are a great balm and healing to my family, and to me personally. I feel humbled. His phone call is all the more extraordinary as it comes after 8pm on 15 July 1998, just two days before his wedding to Graça Machel on his eightieth birthday. His generosity of spirit only makes my decision to leave that much harder.

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With Madiba's phone call still haunting me, I relocate my family to the United States, and take up a post as a visiting professor at Stanford University in California.

My excitement about a vibrant and energetic new South Africa – remember, this is all happening in the mid-Nineties – is gone. I suddenly realise that I am just as vulnerable to wanton violence as any of the millions of South Africans whose daily lives are shadowed by fear and paranoia. During the second year of our States sojourn, I receive an unexpected invitation to join the academic faculty at Duke, one of America's top universities. Everything suddenly seemed to be

I travel a great deal within the United States and beyond. In fact, my professional life has been most gratifying.

My family too has grown. My children are now, as they say, all-American kids. And my wife, despite her initial concerns, is equally content.

But there is always the "what if?" question. And what if soon turns into if only. For instance, if only I was still home when my mother died.

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As the eldest of her six children, I think I was the closest, emotionally, to our mother. She always wanted me to be near her, especially after my long studies and absences abroad. She understood that I was forced to move to America, and she validated my choice to stay there permanently. When she visited, she was happy to see us flourishing in our new home. But our geographic separation was, I believe, an unspoken ache in both of our hearts, both of us wondering if only things could have been different.

Far away from her deathbed, which brought its own inconsolable grief, my

virtually, via email, phonecalls and the occasional Skype session. Over time, I've also lost contact with friends and family – people I once thought would be my friends in ripe old age and whom I'd always hoped would be my pall-bearers.

What I miss most are those tender emotions fostered with my immediate family and extended community. This loss is often the cause of my most unfathomable pain and sadness.

It is a loss born out by the fact that, whether I'm visiting South Africa or living overseas, I feel both homeless and at home.

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Stay In Touch

Even with all the technology and social media platforms available today, staying in touch still requires input and commitment

Men's Health resident psychologist Rafiq Lockhat believes that when it comes to family, a lot more work needs to go into staying in touch – family simply expect more. "You could contact an old friend once a year and it would be as though you spoke yesterday," he says. "Family, on the other hand, will resent you – rather than being happy that you called, they'll demand to know why it took you so long to do so." Here are his tips to keeping good familial relationships across big geographical distances.

1 Don't take relationships for granted. When you move away you'll no longer have constant affectionate contact and that can become a serious relationship barrier.

2 Counter barriers (like the change of cultural contexts), by setting up relationship maintenance behaviours. This means putting into place actions to sustain relationships and stay in touch.

3 Use technology. From social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace to voice and video calls on Skype and Google, being able to see each other "live" is a big plus.

4 Diarise these actions. On Thursday at 8pm you Skype your mother, every Thursday. It's the responsibility of the person who left to make sure it happens.

5 Reminisce. During these calls use the technique of remembrance – talk about familiar things and events ("Remember that camping trip on the Wild Coast?") that give context and joint emotional links. It's great explaining (and sending photos) of the dunes around Dubai, but while it should be part of the conversation that's most likely foreign to those at home, it won't aid in building or strengthening the relationship, only focus on the division.

– BY JAZZ KUSCHKE

Is it worth having all the comforts of America if it means being deprived of the love and proximity to family and loved ones?

happening in fast forward. The Duke offer is too good to pass up – what was meant to be a temporary relocation has suddenly become a new life in the making, and one that will have its roots in a land thousands of miles away from the place I called home.

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It's been over a decade since my family and I packed up for our adventure. Do I regret my decision? No. Although living as a Muslim in a post-9/11 America does come with its own challenges. My adopted country's foreign policy has made it a pariah in many parts of the world, which is also something I did not sign up for. (South Africa had shed its pariah status by ending apartheid; how did I end up in another country with such a bad reputation?) But despite the challenges, there are few societies in the world like the US where outsiders can flourish.

Personally and professionally, I have grown in ways that might not have been possible in South Africa. I've received much larger exposure as an expert in Islamic thought.

resentment for those faceless criminals who changed my life wells up strongly. I frequently engage in the painful process of second-guessing: is it worth having all the comforts of America if it means being deprived of the love and proximity to family and loved ones? Could I have done things differently in South Africa? I suppose I'll never know.

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In the United States, my circle of friends is quite diverse – people from very different backgrounds and social groups. In South Africa my pool of contacts was racially homogenous, unless I worked at cultivating friends across ethnic and racial boundaries. I left too soon after the end of apartheid in order to know how different things could be.

But I do often think what a difference it would have made to my life if my children had experienced the constant love and care of grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins as teens and young adults. Family weddings, births and birthdays are now events I attend