

# Journeys to Belonging

by [Mashrur Khan](#)

In her 2009 TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recalls an experience from her childhood in Nigeria involving her family’s domestic help, Fide. Adichie’s mother told her that Fide came from a poor family who had nothing. As a result, Adichie was shocked to see a basket crafted by Fide’s mother because “it had not occurred to [her] that anybody in his family could actually make something” (00:03:35-00:03:52). Reflecting on how her perspective constricted her understanding, Adichie identifies the root of her problem: she saw Fide through the lens of a “single story” (00:04:02-00:04:04). With no other narrative about Fide’s family except that of poverty, her view of him was reductive. This problem extends beyond Adichie’s childhood memories: Western cultures, she argues, have only one narrative about Nigeria – it is poor, primitive, and insignificant. Such is the danger of a single story: it limits perspective, hinders critical thinking, and devalues others and oneself.

Coming from a middle-class family – her father was a professor, her mother an administrator, Adichie was surprised when her American college roommate assumed she didn’t know how to use a stove. Her roommate seemed to believe “there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals” (00:04:36-00:04:47). Listening to Adichie discuss this distance between what others believe about her and what she knows to be true, I think back to my most recent trip to Bangladesh when I was fourteen years old. I was born in Bangladesh but moved to the United States at the beginning of grade school, so I’ve been exposed to American mindsets and cultural norms from an early age. I felt different from my predominantly white peers due to my

melanated skin, the daal and maangsho I ate for lunch, and my parents, who had difficulty navigating parent-teacher conferences with their broken English. In many ways, though, I was just like the other kids. Kids at that age are difficult to differentiate: they all like to play, they are taught the same norms, and they believe what they are told. As I grew older, I began to feel more connected to my American peers than my Bengali ones. Having a closer bond with my American school friends than my Bengali community at cultural events struck me as a marker of my success in assimilating; it felt important to become part of the American culture.

When it came time to visit my relatives in Bangladesh, I was introduced to one of my family's domestic helpers, Shumon. When I was a toddler, his primary duty was to be my babysitter and playmate – a role he assumed at the same age I was when I visited. Like Adichie, my understanding of Shumon centered on a single story of his poverty. When I realized that this singular narrative could not, in any way, encompass all of who he is as a person, I saw myself anew. Analyzing the dynamic between herself and her college roommate, Adichie reflects: "She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe" (00:04:41-00:04:59). I recognized the condescension Adichie saw in her roommate in myself: it was how I regarded Shumon and my other relatives in Bangladesh. I had worked so hard to remove myself from Bangladesh and embrace America that my own country, my origin, felt inferior.

Since I was only fourteen at the time, I had been easily swayed by Western narratives – an experience all too familiar to millions of people across the world. Now, I find myself appreciating the beauty in the differences between my American and Bengali identities. I still start to sweat, though, whenever I get asked the question: "Where are you from?" For some, answering is easy; they can just ask themselves, "Where do I call home?" For first-generation immigrants, this sense of home does not emerge so smoothly. I always

envied my peers who never had to grapple with the quick, split-second decision about which piece of their identity they wanted to reduce themselves to when questioned by others. But, as Adichie reminds me, there is never just one story about who someone is.

As I made my way back to my parents' house in March 2020 after being abruptly kicked out of my freshman dorm, I read an NPR headline: "New York, Illinois Governors Issue Stay At Home Orders, Following California's Lead." Those three words, *stay at home*, bring to mind conversations I had with friends about where the next few months of quarantine would be spent. For me, the answer was obvious: I would take the train back to where I'd been for much of my life, my childhood home in upstate New York. For others, returning home was not an option. While one of my friends negotiated with the NYU administration to let them stay on campus so they could avoid returning to an abusive household, another had to choose which divorced parent to stay with, and yet another stayed with a friend's family because of his status as an undocumented immigrant.

Home, suddenly, was no longer analogous to someone's origins. Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder is believed to have coined the phrase "Home is where the heart is" almost two thousand years ago (qtd. in Buccio). This idiom, a commonplace of Western vernacular, encourages us to appreciate the sense of belonging we find in those close to our hearts. But the panic provoked by the directive to 'stay at home' reveals that not everyone has access to a safe, loving environment. The notion of home, understood as an essential component of a person's happiness and identity, implies that we must claim *somewhere* in order to belong. What does it mean to call a place 'home?' I can return to my family's house in upstate New York, but does this make it my home? Can I call America or Bangladesh home when my mixed identity prevents me from fully immersing myself in either culture? The 'stay at home' order thus highlighted an array of questions and complications about what corner of our worlds we believe we belong in.

Kemp Powers and Pete Docter's 2020 animated Pixar film, *Soul*, sheds light on these questions of belonging. In the film, Joe Gardner, a pianist and school band teacher, hopes to become a professional jazz pianist. On his way home, after being hired to play piano for a famous jazz band, he tumbles into an open manhole and finds himself transformed into a soul in the Great Before, a place where mentors are assigned to unborn souls to prepare them for life on Earth. He gets paired with 22, a cynical soul who avoids going to Earth at all costs. While Joe tells 22 the story of his life, he comes to a startling realization: "My life was meaningless" (00:24:40). This existential crisis arrives just twenty minutes into the film. From here, Joe decides he's too young to die and attempts to return to Earth. By mistake, 22 is placed into Joe's body, while Joe's soul occupies that of a cat. To me, this mismatch suggests what happens when we lack the safety of belonging somewhere. For Joe, the panic and discomfort he experiences arise not just from his desire to be back in a human body, but also from his craving to create value and meaning in his life *through* his body. Being stuck as a cat is a manifestation of his rejection from the space where he assumed he belonged. This realization is demoralizing to viewers; Joe seemingly did everything right – he was kind, and extremely passionate and happy about his craft. Why is he so stuck?

Joe's experiences align with Docter's: In a recent interview with *Rolling Stone*, the director elaborates on his own metaphorical out-of-body experience. After his earlier film, *Inside Out*, became a box office hit, he wondered whether his next film could match or exceed its success. Drawing on this sense of uncertainty, he decided to investigate the following questions: "What is it to live, you know, what's going on in this place?" ("Pete Docter Explains" 00:01:08-00:01:12). Docter initially describes Joe as focused and set in his ways, far from a "lost soul . . . aimlessly wandering through life" (00:05:30-00:05:40). Eventually, Docter realized that beneath the surface, Joe is, in fact, an aimless wanderer – and so is he. Like Joe, Docter was so "single-mindedly passionate and focused" that he became "a lost soul and start[ed] blocking out the rest of the world"

(00:05:46-00:05:50). Though the worlds that Joe moves between are fictional, the problem of aimlessly wandering – failing to belong anywhere – is not.

Once we recognize ourselves as aimless wanderers, how can we work to return to a path we desire? By the end of the film, Docter tries to answer this question. The two main characters' mindsets have transformed: Joe began by fighting to return to Earth so that he could achieve success as a jazz musician, only to discover a vague and supposedly more expansive sense of purpose. Instead of feeling an aversion to Earth, 22 embraces it. The film closes with Joe telling us what he'll do with his life now: "I'm going to live every minute of it" (01:30:10). I, like some critics of the film, found this ending unsatisfying. As film critic Molly Freeman puts it, "Docter does infuse *Soul* with a message about the meaning of life and finding purpose, but it's messy and only made muddier by the questions the movie sets up then fails to answer." The film's message about finding joy in life's little moments does not do justice to the complex questions Docter set out to examine. There's a dissonance between this simplistic, cliché moral and the film's elaborate design and nuanced character development. Watching the film in isolation on our small screens – *Soul* was the first Pixar film not released in theaters as a result of COVID, it was all the more difficult to find joy in the little moments through which we were living. Perhaps this dissonance, however, invites viewers to find their own answers.

Joe's return to his human form feels like a return to the safety and belonging he associates with his body. In the *Rolling Stone* interview, Docter tells the story of how pianist Herbie Hancock messed up a note during a performance and felt he had failed. But his co-performer, Miles Davis, adjusted his own performance and resolved the chord so that no one else would notice Hancock's mistake. Reflecting on this story, Docter concludes, "What [Davis] did was he didn't judge it. He just took it as something new that happened and did what any great jazz musician should try to do, is to take anything that happens and turn it into something of value" ("Pete Docter Explains"

00:09:49-00:10:04). With this framework in mind, Joe returns to his body not because of his sudden discovery of the beauty in every moment – instead, he earns back his body by discovering the value of his experience. In fact, Joe’s path was never directionless, but rather his wandering challenged him to find value. After all, value does not derive solely from seeing beauty in all that we do, but also from finding meaning in unexpected places. In this way, we can work to reclaim the spaces to which we feel we belong, even those in which we do not always feel in place or secure.

In today’s world, valuing who we are becoming has felt more difficult. Younger generations like mine, burdened by the pressures and repercussions of social media, often determine self-worth according to the opinions of others. The pandemic has heightened this: forcibly separated from friends and family during lockdown, we have sought comfort in our smartphones. I watched with alarm as the screen time report on my phone jumped from two hours per day to ten. My peers experienced the same shift, sharing my desperation to connect with others through the only means available to us. But the safety and belonging we searched for in our phones was false and unfulfilling. We use social media to cope, but in doing so, we devalue ourselves by way of comparison to others. This impulse to live according to others’ standards exists beyond social media; with the transition to online class, my academic advisors and parents emphasized that the most important thing I could do was to achieve excellent grades. In this way, when it came time to apply for medical school, admissions officers would see that I achieved academic success despite the stresses of the pandemic, thereby making me a more competitive applicant. Sprawled out on the living room carpet with my papers around me, I worked diligently while the news played in the background, listing the daily updates on coronavirus deaths. My grades felt insignificant compared to the world crumbling around me. I kept working, nonetheless, because that is how others had insisted I could find value.

My biggest fear is that I would have the same bleak epiphany as *Soul's* Joe Gardner. But Docter and Powers's film taught me this: persisting in my journey to belong and staying present help me to cope with my fear of meaninglessness. Adichie, too, asks us to avoid surrendering to "a single story," so that we can avoid reducing other people and places into reductive paradigms. I believe, however, that the biggest victim of the single stories we create is ourselves. Giving ourselves to celebrate the merits and hardships of our unique journeys, empowers us to redefine value for ourselves, helping us to break free of how others define it for us.

Now, when someone asks me, "Where are you from?" I still don't have a concise response – and that's okay. I appreciate the challenge the question brings me. Struggling with the answer reminds me that there's more to who I am than how others perceive my background. I've always struggled to choose between being American or being Bengali because I was taught to believe I had to choose one or the other. But, like many others, my identity is a mosaic of my experiences, identities, hardships, and successes; all these things have value and so do I. Joe Gardner found his way to belong by the end of the film, substantiated by his return to his body. I haven't yet felt that in place on my journey toward belonging, but, I – *we* – are on our way.

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