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# THE BIG PONDER

## Home

By Jocelyn Robinson

**Jocelyn Robinson:** My home is a plant- and light-filled house on a quiet street, close by a nature preserve, in the small Ohio town where I have lived for over half a century. It's only a few blocks from the house where I grew up here in Yellow Springs; my mother lives there still. There are people here I've known since the 1960s. My son even went to the same schools that I attended, as did my brothers and sisters and some of their kids. I know this town; every crack in the sidewalk, every rock, every puddle, every tree. And it knows me. There's a mutual familiarity here, and natural rhythms that feel predictable, and safe. I've asked a few other people to share with me what home is for them, and each has a different definition.

**Bob Brecha:** That kind of feeling of really getting to know a place and being comfortable there is part of what's being at home.

**Debbie Robinson:** Well, home is where I'm living and working at the time, so this is home. I live here, I work here, all my things are here, my dog is here, so this is home.

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** Where I feel safe, secure, I don't mean physically, I mean more emotionally and culturally. And where I feel a sense of belonging. Home for me is about comfort and a sense of belonging.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Bob, Debbie, and Phyllis, unlike me, live far away from their places of origin, far away from where they grew up. It's something I can only imagine, and I'm curious to know more.

**Bob Brecha:** I'm really a product of Ohio. I'm an Ohio boy, if you will, and spent most of my life, most of my time has been spent in Ohio and now Yellow Springs, where I've lived since 1993 when returning back to the area for the position at the University of Dayton.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Sometimes, Bob Brecha lives in the same small, environmentally conscious, and socially progressive college town that I do. He came here as a young physics professor, after earning his doctorate in Texas.

**Bob Brecha:** I knew that when I returned to the Dayton area, I would want to live in Yellow Springs because that's a place that seemed like it would fit the kind of lifestyle I would like to

live. And it truly has become a home for me and for my family, my wife, Katharina, and now my two daughters.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Now he's a scientist who not only teaches but works to mitigate the impact of climate change all over the globe. This work has taken him to Latin America, the Caribbean, and to Europe.

**Bob Brecha:** There's actually a pretty easy way for me to think about how I feel at home somewhere. When I'm in Yellow Springs, it has to do with walking down the street and seeing people I know and talking to people in the supermarket or running into people on the street. When I'm in Berlin, it's really not too much different.

[MUSIC]

**Jocelyn Robinson:** So Bob has two places he calls home. After a formative European trip in his undergrad days, Bob knew that one day he'd return to Germany. His wife is German, and they've put down roots there as well as in Ohio.

[SOUNDS OF BERLIN]

**Bob Brecha:** I live in the center of Berlin, a place called Berlin Mitte. It's part of the, the core of what used to be East Berlin. But Berlin is a little bit like New York in that there's neighborhoods, that when you live in a certain place in Berlin, you really do most of your daily activities right there. You don't travel around the whole city. And so, it's natural that you get to know people or recognize people on the streets. So that's the one piece of it when I feel at home here, because I do see people I recognize. Or maybe it's just the fact that I can walk past the stores, and I know that I go shopping there and that I try to help support these local businesses. There's a lot of little secret places and not so secret places that I just enjoy going to, places to buy cake and, and desserts, or French croissants that are handmade or even just a wine store that I like to go to, choosing from the three or four that are within a few minutes' walk from here. But the one that I choose is not the closest one, because it's the one where I feel comfortable and the people feel friendliest when I go in there and they recognize me. And part of it, frankly for me is the fact that sometimes when I'm just walking down the street somewhere around where I live here in Mitte, I just suddenly am overcome with a sense of, wow, I really like it here. I just like being here. I like walking down the street here, and it feels good to be here. For me that's really the start of feeling like this is home for me.

[SOUND OF BOB WALKING IN MITTE]

**Bob Brecha:** My wife Katharina and I have two daughters, Regina and Francesca. They're grown now. And one of the things that's been interesting for me, one of the many interesting things watching your kids grow up, is how they have adapted in different ways to being binational. They both have both German and US citizenship, they speak German and speak English as well. We have spent a lot of time in Germany ever since the kids were born. We came to Germany for at least a certain amount of time, and the kids very quickly adapted. They knew they felt a sense of home not being in just Yellow Springs, in our house there, but in their grandparents' house. They could be in both places, I think nearly equally, well. That was an eye-opener for me, in some ways. The girls have moved back and forth between the cultures with varying degrees of ease, but they do have a more somehow universal sense, where they see that different cultures are equally valid.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** The Brecha family has maintained this bicontinental lifestyle for years now. I wonder what that's like for Katharina.

**Bob Brecha:** The interesting thing is that we know we have about six more months here and then we'll be heading back. We both love Berlin. And, and she's found a life here, I mean, as well. We have friends living nearby, and one of her best friends from school lives not too far from here. Okay, with all that, she's actually probably more than I, looking forward to going back to Yellow Springs. I mean, I'm looking forward to going back, but she really is. And, and I think I could stay here. And so we're, strangely enough, you know, she's looking to go back to, if you want to call it that, my country and I'm wanting to stay in her country. So yeah, but of course we'll both come back and then continue our back and forth journeys. So.

[MUSIC]

**Bob Brecha:** I think we both had a little bit of worries, both coming from smaller towns that, that, how do you move into a small town in Ohio from the outside? And that was no problem whatsoever. I mean, both of us in our own ways, got to know people and got involved with different things and, and quickly felt like, yeah, this is our town. You know, there's a sense of belonging to this fabric of the town.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Feeling like you belong to the fabric of a community is one way to experience home. But for some people, that's not how it works.

**Debbie Robinson:** So the whole neighborhood where I grew up, I mean, there's still people that are there that are fairly middle-class, but in between are like vacant lots from where, the housing just imploded and then they tore it down. So Springfield is not a ... I'm trying to be

diplomatic here ... It is not, it is not someplace I would choose to live ever again right now. There are very few professionals, African American professionals. It's just a form of rust bucket. I don't know. I haven't been back in a while, but not, not, no, not a fun place. Not a fun place.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Do you miss it?

**Debbie Robinson:** No.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Why not?

**Debbie Robinson:** What would I miss? There's nothing to miss. There's no intellectual life really.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** As a kid, I looked up to one person more than any other – my cousin Debbie. She's five years older than me, and I always saw her as a smart, creative, adventurous, role model. Our fathers were brothers from Springfield, a small city north of Yellow Springs that was once an industrial hub in the region. Today it is a struggling community like many in the Midwest post-globalization. While I chose to remain in my liberal hometown, my cousin knew that Springfield was not a place that she could thrive. Even though it's her hometown, it's not where she calls home. After earning a master's degree in linguistics, Deb moved to Portugal where she taught English as a foreign language and worked as a writer for nearly two decades.

**Debbie Robinson:** People tend to romanticize when you live overseas, there's this romantic element. People don't appreciate the normalcy of when you are working, you go to work, you come home from work, you have your friends, you have conversations on the telephone with your friends. You go shopping, you go to the store, you know, you take public transport, just like anywhere else. So a lot of living overseas is normal, right? Because you're working, you're not there on vacation. And it's like being working anywhere else, and you have a home and I had a nice, nice, nice apartment with a nice, nice veranda, kind of overlooking the city. And to this day, had I been able to work it out financially, I would have stayed in Lisbon. I would never have come back to the United States. But here I am and I'm okay with it. All right. But I just remember when I came back and basically had to rebuild when I came back, and I remember Uncle Billy saying, Deb, – 'cause I, you know, I didn't own a house, I didn't own anything, right? And their little, blessed little bourgeois hearts, I didn't own a home. Yeah. Anyway –, Deb, do you ever feel bad when you look back and think of all those wasted years in Portugal? [LAUGHS] And, it didn't quite, it didn't hit me until I got back to my mom's building, was down in the parking garage in the basement. And then I just kind of started laughing, because I thought, "wasted years"? I was able to do things in Lisbon I would have never been able to do in Springfield, I would have never been able to do in Ohio.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** So Debbie rebuilt her life here in the US. Now she lives in Tsaile, Arizona with her dog, Boomer. For the past nine and a half years she has taught English composition at Diné College, the first tribally owned college on the Navajo Nation. Living on the rez [editor's note: slang term for reservation as in Indian reservation] is like living abroad again.

**Debbie Robinson:** I had never been in the Southwest. I'd been to Phoenix once, and Phoenix is not anything like where I live now. Because I'm in Northern Arizona. And I came out and you know, I, I saw it. I interviewed, I liked the people I interviewed with, you know. I had to wait until my house was ready, but once my house was ready, it became home when the truck got here with my things from Ohio. That's what makes home. Oh, there's nothing like having your sofa, your bed, but more importantly, your sofa, your TV, and your blankies, and your pillows. Sofa, blankie, pillows. So that's what makes home feel like home, yeah.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** And now your dog?

**Debbie Robinson:** Boomer goes where I go. Boomer goes where I go.

[SOUND OF DEBBIE WALKING DOG IN TSAILE]

**Debbie Robinson:** Walking out with the Boomer. More or less dragging him. Come on baby! Come on, come on! And marveling over the beautiful sky ... basically, I live in a three bedroom two bathroom house, but we refer to homes here as 'hogans' but it's not like the traditional dirt-floored hogan, it's shaped like a hogan in terms of it's, it's like all angles, I think it's like eight angles or something like that. And I live at 7,000 feet in a very rural area, and we are at the base of the Chuska Mountains. So there's not much here. It's very beautiful, gets spectacular sunrises and sunsets and at night, as long as the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority does not come out and fix the lights, I have, like, no environmental light around where I live. So when I go out, I have stars, okay. Orion is right there, and right below Orion is Sirius, and on the other part of the sky I have the Milky Way. So that's what greets me when I walk out of the house at night. I've got stars, starshine, and moons and full moons and things like that.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** The Diné people, who we also know as Navajo, have a blessing that goes:

In beauty I walk  
With beauty behind me I walk  
With beauty above me I walk  
With beauty around me I walk  
It has become beauty again

Those words are so descriptive of the landscape and the culture for the Diné people, and for my cousin.

**Debbie Robinson:** Coming out to the Navajo Nation, yeah, I've been influenced by some things here. You know, I've learned lessons here. I think I have more of a sense of humility, 'cause here, you know, Navajos by nature do not brag. You don't brag about things. Right? And you tend to be more quiet, more introspective, but, I never, you know, I don't try to be Navajo, no, I don't go running around to ceremonies and things like that because their ceremonies are their ceremonies. I am not Navajo. And yes, there is a certain amount of discrimination, you know, a touch of xenophobia. But you know, on the day to day, as you're dealing with people, when I deal with Ronnie, the administrative assistant, Ronnie is Ronnie and Debbie is Debbie. You know, with my students, my students are my students and I'm Miss Robinson. Whether I'm here or whether I was overseas, I am always a colored Catholic girl from central Ohio. So my home doesn't affect, where I live doesn't affect my quote unquote "identity."

[MUSIC]

**Debbie Robinson:** At this point in my life, whether I'm here for one year, two years or three more years, eventually, when I leave to Diné College, I lose my housing. So home has it, when you say, what is my concept of home? It's like, uh, for me, the question is like, where am I going next? Where do I live next? What kind of housing arrangements am I going to get next? Right? When I retire, what will I be able to afford? Am I going to be able to live someplace nice? But you know, but to go into like a, a conceptual idea of home, I'm just concerned about having someplace that's clean, lots of light, comfortable, quiet, no bugs, someplace to walk the Boomer, local shopping, local medical care. It's more practical. So when I figure that out, then, then I can ponder concepts. But right now it's practical. It's got to be very practical.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** While the concept of home is practical for Debbie Robinson, it is a good deal more abstract for others.

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** I'm Phyllis Jeffers-Coly, and I live in Sébikotane, Senegal, which is 32 kilometers outside of Senegal's capital city, Dakar. I've been here going on five years and I came here to restart my life and to start businesses, Tangor Café and Diasporic Soul.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Phyllis moved there with her Senegalese husband Eddy from Cincinnati, though she was born and raised in North Carolina. Their home is their business. Not only do four generations of family live there at any given time, but they run an eatery and host Black Americans who come to West Africa seeking a home they've never known.

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** Where Eddy and I live, people talk about their ability to come here and just find peace and sleep. Some people have even called the space sacred, which is humbling. But there's definitely a very calm, tranquil energy about the space. Most of our furnishings were

shipped here from Cincinnati. He wanted me to feel at home when I got here – 'cause his brother was like, why don't you just get furniture made? And Eddy was like, I want my wife to come into this house and feel like she's in her house. So, I feel at home. I mean, my family is definitely here spiritually and in the physical form, in terms of heirlooms and things of that sort. So it's, it's a warm, comfortable home, energetically and in terms of the physical space.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** So how do you know when your house is a home? Is there a transformational moment you can point to?

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** Yeah. I mean, I know my house is a home because I would rather be here than anywhere else. I miss the United States. But when I'm there, after a few weeks, two weeks, three weeks, I'm ready to come home. There's energy in this house that's mine, and it doesn't belong to anybody else. There's the way the day moves. The way the day feels, where the sunshine comes in and how the birds sound, the background noise from the street, be seeing Eddy's mom and kissing her every day. All that stuff is home to me, to me now.

**Jocelyn Robinson:** What's the connection for you between home and identity?

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** The connection for me between home and identity is, home is where you get to be yourself, unapologetically, where nobody's, you know, telling you what to do in the sense of, like, trying to suppress your spirit, trying to tell you who you are isn't good enough, trying to tell you you're not worthy. Home and identity go together in a sense that this is where home is where you can fully, I can fully express myself. Like it, it's where you get to fully be yourself in ways that the outside world won't let you be. That's home. And when people run away from home, they're running away from a place, I think, often, where they felt like they couldn't be that authentic person. Where is the mythical magical place where Black Americans, where diasporic souls can fully, fully be at home? I'm creating home for myself and my husband, but I'm creating home for the Black Americans that come here because there is this seeking of restoration around culture and identity. So I think one of the biggest revelations for me is, or affirmations, is that home is the place where you can fully be who you are and fully let go of all the stuff that's been imposed on you from the outside ... which is where the rest and the respite and the sanctuary come, the idea of home should be this place where you can find sanctuary, you know, where you can find rest, where you can find room to heal and to feed, feed parts of yourself that don't get fed anywhere else.

[SOUND OF BIRDS IN SENEGAL]

**Jocelyn Robinson:** Phyllis strives to connect guests to home in an ancestral or spiritual sense. She wants to make people feel special, like they belong there, like they matter. The experience can be transformational.

**Phyllis Jeffers-Coly:** And you know, there's a lot of intellectual activity around what, what constitutes the African Homeland for Black Americans. But at the end of the day, this feels like home because there's a connection to a culture that is familiar in our DNA. Like everybody's talking about intergenerational trauma, but there's also intergenerational culture. And what I mean by that is, the culture that we come out of, which is communal and collective and spirit, spirit-driven and spirit-informed, and I don't mean Islam. I don't mean Christianity. I mean, this connection with energy that is massive and huge and dynamic. It's in nature, it's in people, it's everywhere. It's so palpable here. And when people come here, they feel the energy, that they haven't felt before. For a lot of people that energy's at Gorée Island, in the Maison de Enslavement [des Esclaves], and some people it's the whole Island. Some people tell you, no, it ain't that house, 'cause the whole Island was a slave port. I mean, the whole Island was a holding cell.

So let's be clear, it's all in the dirt. But there's some people, have these very physical, visceral reactions. Sometimes they cry. Yes. And weep and lament and fall on the floor or fall against the wall or need to be held. But at the same time, they have physical, embodied reactions to energy everywhere they go here. Everywhere. There's some kind of energy shift that happens when you see all this stuff, all this, all these cultural artifacts, forms of expression that, that, that make you stop and see yourself in a way you never saw yourself before.

I'm not telling people to move to Africa. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is come here, and see a culture that's life affirming. Your life is affirmed. Your existence in a Black body is affirmed here, and things that maybe you thought were wrong, things that you thought were problematic, things that you were ashamed of, this is a place to begin to reframe how you look at yourself and how you look at the world. So, coming to this home allows you to see your other homes in the same way that I just did. Like, seeing my home here helps me make sense of and understand and be maybe more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving towards the home I came from in the first place.

And the home for people who come here, it's reconnecting with these cultural pieces that they've been disconnected from, like this veneration of nature, this recognition of spirit that's not bound in a church pew or a prayer rug, a sense of community and a collectivism where, you know, you're going to be okay. The beauty of our creativity in ways that's expressed, that's not always commodified, and packaged, and sold. And I think by coming here and feeling at home here, it gives you a new way to go back to the US and imagine. And that's powerful. So that you can ultimately, at the end of the day, be at home in your Black body. 'Cause the thing is, I think people come here because they don't feel at home in their Black body in the United States. And I hope that by the time they leave here, they begin to have a sense that that's the goal is, is to get



to a place where I feel at home in my Black body. That's the goal, to feel at home in your Black body, wherever that Black body is. That's the goal. That's the goal. Yep. That's it, that's the goal.

[SOUND OF JOYFUL PEOPLE IN SENEGAL]

[SOUND OF WALKING DOG ON NATURE TRAIL IN YELLOW SPRINGS]

**Jocelyn Robinson:** To be at home in one's body. In one's house. In one's community. Home is place, it is people, it is culture, home is self. I'm walking my dog on the nature trail near my house. Birds are singing. The sun is warm. I like it here. It feels good to be here. For THE BIG PONDER, I'm Jocelyn Robinson, at home in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

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