

# TEDTalks, Pico Iyer

## Where is home?

00:12	Where do you come from? It's such a simple question, but these days, of course, simple questions bring ever more complicated answers.
00:21	People are always asking me where I come from, and they're expecting me to say India, and they're absolutely right insofar as 100 percent of my blood and ancestry does come from India. Except, I've never lived one day of my life there. I can't speak even one word of its more than 22,000 dialects. So I don't think I've really earned the right to call myself an Indian. And if "Where do you come from?" means "Where were you born and raised and educated?" then I'm entirely of that funny little country known as England, except I left England as soon as I completed my undergraduate education, and all the time I was growing up, I was the only kid in all my classes who didn't begin to look like the classic English heroes represented in our textbooks. And if "Where do you come from?" means "Where do you pay your taxes? Where do you see your doctor and your dentist?" then I'm very much of the United States, and I have been for 48 years now, since I was a really small child. Except, for many of those years, I've had to carry around this funny little pink card with green lines running through my face identifying me as a permanent alien. I do actually feel more alien the longer I live there.
01:37	(Laughter)
01:39	And if "Where do you come from?" means "Which place goes deepest inside you and where do you try to spend most of your time?" then I'm Japanese, because I've been living as much as I can for the last 25 years in Japan. Except, all of those years I've been there on a tourist visa, and I'm fairly sure not many Japanese would want to consider me one of them.
02:01	And I say all this just to stress how very old-fashioned and straightforward my background is, because when I go to Hong Kong or Sydney or Vancouver, most of the kids I meet are much more international and multi-cultured than I am. And they have one home associated with their parents, but another associated with their partners, a third connected maybe with the place where they happen to be, a fourth connected with the place they dream of being, and many more besides. And their whole life will be spent taking pieces of many different places and putting them together into a stained glass whole. Home for them is really a work in progress. It's like a project on which they're constantly adding upgrades and improvements and corrections. And for more and more of us, home has really less to do with a piece of soil than, you could say, with a piece of soul.
02:59	If somebody suddenly asks me, "Where's your home?" I think about my sweetheart or my closest friends or the songs that travel with me wherever I happen to be. And I'd always felt this way, but it really came home to me, as it were, some years ago when I was climbing up the stairs in my parents' house in California, and I looked through the living room windows and I saw that we were encircled by 70-foot flames, one of those wildfires that regularly tear through the hills of California and many other such places. And three hours later, that fire had reduced my home and every last thing in it except for me to ash. And when I woke up the next morning, I was sleeping on a friend's floor, the only thing I had in the world was a toothbrush I had just bought from an all-night supermarket. Of course, if anybody asked me then, "Where is your home?" I literally couldn't point to any physical construction. My home would have to be whatever I carried around inside me.
04:04	And in so many ways, I think this is a terrific liberation. Because when my grandparents were born, they pretty much had their sense of home, their sense of community, even their sense of enmity, assigned to them at birth, and didn't have much chance of stepping outside of that. And nowadays, at least some of us can choose our sense of home, create our sense of community, fashion our sense of self, and in so doing maybe step a little beyond some of the black and white divisions of our grandparents' age. No coincidence that the president of the strongest nation on Earth is half-Kenyan, partly raised in Indonesia, has a Chinese-Canadian brother-in-law.
04:46	The number of people living in countries not their own now comes to 220 million, and that's an almost unimaginable number, but it means that if you took the whole population of Canada and the whole population of Australia and then the whole population of Australia again and the whole population of Canada again and doubled that number, you would still have fewer people than belong to this great floating tribe.
05:13	And the number of us who live outside the old nation-state categories is increasing so quickly, by 64 million just in the last 12 years, that soon there will be more of us than there are Americans. Already, we represent the fifth-largest nation on Earth. And in fact, in Canada's largest city, Toronto, the average resident today is what used to be called a foreigner, somebody born in a very different country.

05:42	And I've always felt that the beauty of being surrounded by the foreign is that it slaps you awake. You can't take anything for granted. Travel, for me, is a little bit like being in love, because suddenly all your senses are at the setting marked "on." Suddenly you're alert to the secret patterns of the world. The real voyage of discovery, as Marcel Proust famously said, consists not in seeing new sights, but in looking with new eyes. And of course, once you have new eyes, even the old sights, even your home become something different. Many of the people living in countries not their own are refugees who never wanted to leave home and ache to go back home. But for the fortunate among us, I think the age of movement brings exhilarating new possibilities.
06:32	Certainly when I'm traveling, especially to the major cities of the world, the typical person I meet today will be, let's say, a half-Korean, half-German young woman living in Paris. And as soon as she meets a half-Thai, half-Canadian young guy from Edinburgh, she recognizes him as kin. She realizes that she probably has much more in common with him than with anybody entirely of Korea or entirely of Germany. So they become friends. They fall in love. They move to New York City.
07:05	(Laughter)
07:07	Or Edinburgh. And the little girl who arises out of their union will of course be not Korean or German or French or Thai or Scotch or Canadian or even American, but a wonderful and constantly evolving mix of all those places. And potentially, everything about the way that young woman dreams about the world, writes about the world, thinks about the world, could be something different, because it comes out of this almost unprecedented blend of cultures.
07:39	Where you come from now is much less important than where you're going. More and more of us are rooted in the future or the present tense as much as in the past. And home, we know, is not just the place where you happen to be born. It's the place where you become yourself.
07:58	And yet, there is one great problem with movement, and that is that it's really hard to get your bearings when you're in midair. Some years ago, I noticed that I had accumulated one million miles on United Airlines alone. You all know that crazy system, six days in hell, you get the seventh day free.
08:21	(Laughter)
08:24	And I began to think that really, movement was only as good as the sense of stillness that you could bring to it to put it into perspective.
08:34	And eight months after my house burned down, I ran into a friend who taught at a local high school, and he said, "I've got the perfect place for you." "Really?" I said. I'm always a bit skeptical when people say things like that. "No, honestly," he went on, "it's only three hours away by car, and it's not very expensive, and it's probably not like anywhere you've stayed before." "Hmm." I was beginning to get slightly intrigued. "What is it?" "Well —" Here my friend hemmed and hawed — "Well, actually it's a Catholic hermitage." This was the wrong answer. I had spent 15 years in Anglican schools, so I had had enough hymnals and crosses to last me a lifetime. Several lifetimes, actually. But my friend assured me that he wasn't Catholic, nor were most of his students, but he took his classes there every spring. And as he had it, even the most restless, distractible, testosterone-addled 15-year-old Californian boy only had to spend three days in silence and something in him cooled down and cleared out. He found himself. And I thought, "Anything that works for a 15-year-old boy ought to work for me."
09:46	So I got in my car, and I drove three hours north along the coast, and the roads grew emptier and narrower, and then I turned onto an even narrower path, barely paved, that snaked for two miles up to the top of a mountain. And when I got out of my car, the air was pulsing. The whole place was absolutely silent, but the silence wasn't an absence of noise. It was really a presence of a kind of energy or quickening. And at my feet was the great, still blue plate of the Pacific Ocean. All around me were 800 acres of wild dry brush.
10:27	And I went down to the room in which I was to be sleeping. Small but eminently comfortable, it had a bed and a rocking chair and a long desk and even longer picture windows looking out on a small, private, walled garden, and then 1,200 feet of golden pampas grass running down to the sea. And I sat down, and I began to write, and write, and write, even though I'd gone there really to get away from my desk. And by the time I got up, four hours had passed. Night had fallen, and I went out under this great overturned saltshaker of stars, and I could see the tail lights of cars disappearing around the headlands 12 miles to the south. And it really seemed like my concerns of the previous day vanishing. And the next day, when I woke up in the absence of telephones and TVs and laptops, the days seemed to stretch for a thousand hours. It was really all the freedom I know when I'm traveling, but it also profoundly felt like coming home. And I'm not a religious person, so I didn't go to the services. I didn't consult the monks for guidance. I just took walks along the monastery road and sent postcards to loved ones. I looked at the clouds, and I did what is hardest of all for me to do usually, which is nothing at all.

11:57	And I started to go back to this place, and I noticed that I was doing my most important work there invisibly just by sitting still, and certainly coming to my most critical decisions the way I never could when I was racing from the last email to the next appointment. And I began to think that something in me had really been crying out for stillness, but of course I couldn't hear it because I was running around so much. I was like some crazy guy who puts on a blindfold and then complains that he can't see a thing.
12:28	And I thought back to that wonderful phrase I had learned as a boy from Seneca, in which he says, "That man is poor not who has little but who hankers after more." And, of course, I'm not suggesting that anybody here go into a monastery. That's not the point. But I do think it's only by stopping movement that you can see where to go. And it's only by stepping out of your life and the world that you can see what you most deeply care about and find a home.
13:03	And I've noticed so many people now take conscious measures to sit quietly for 30 minutes every morning just collecting themselves in one corner of the room without their devices, or go running every evening, or leave their cell phones behind when they go to have a long conversation with a friend. Movement is a fantastic privilege, and it allows us to do so much that our grandparents could never have dreamed of doing. But movement, ultimately, only has a meaning if you have a home to go back to.
13:36	And home, in the end, is of course not just the place where you sleep. It's the place where you stand.
13:45	Thank you.
13:46	(Applause)