

STAYING AT HOME ON PLANET EARTH

The Pandemic Tells Us That The Right To Shelter And Habitat Is An Urgent And Essential One, For Humans And Other Creatures

Right now, more of humanity is likely at home than at any other time in history. From India and China to the United States, from Norway and Denmark to South Africa and Argentina, governments have told their people to stay at home, to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Billions held in place for an indefinite time: the implications of these radical measures will take time to unravel. What does home actually look like for different people? And what will come of our relationships with the wider world outside our doors?

Home means many different things, as does the command to remain there. Lately I've been talking often with a family of textile workers in the industrial town of Tiruppur. The lockdown came so suddenly that they lost the chance to go back to their native place. Each family in their worker colony has one tiny room of their own. The children have been playing in the common courtyard. With police wielding batons on the streets, everyone is afraid to set foot outside. The factories are shuttered, wages suspended, and people are getting by as best as they can.

Staying at home brings into focus the question of whom we consider our own, whom we take shelter with. A community checkpoint has gone up on the edge of a village I know well in the Cumbum Valley. Panchayat workers are taking turns at the wooden gate, asking everyone to wash with soap and water, turmeric and neem, before they enter the village. The post is near the Dalit quarter on the outskirts of the village: isolated and disparaged in almost every matter, but included within this new collective boundary of cleanliness.

Migrants caught in impasse

Governments around the world assert home as a place of safety and shelter. This idea assumes that one has a viable home in which to stay put, that food and fresh water are accessible, that survival doesn't require one to leave or flee. In recent weeks, many countries have seen a surge in domestic violence. And lockdowns at national and regional borders have caught millions of migrants in an existential impasse. The coronavirus may ravage densely packed refugee camps around the world, but people have nowhere else to go. The United States is turning refugees away now at its own borders, without giving them the chance to appeal for asylum.

Within America, where I live with my family, many rely on online portals to the world beyond, juggling virtual meetings with lessons for kids, peering by video into the homes of others. Such distance is a privilege. Others, especially minorities and the poor, must still expose themselves: caring for the ill, harvesting food and delivering necessities, maintaining the infrastructure that lets the rest of us hunker down. The pandemic has also brought homelessness and eviction into focus, the simmering crisis of affordable housing in so many American cities.

"Shelter in place" orders now govern many American localities. The language recalls the nuclear terrors of the Cold War era; people are advised to 'shelter in place' when the environment itself is hazardous, when simply being outside risks exposure. This idea helps explain why some in America, including the President, have blamed the pandemic on a "foreign virus." There is racism in such language, akin to the way that Muslims have been blamed on social media for the spread of the virus in India. There is also a certain way of thinking here about the world beyond: as a space of uncertainty and threat, home as refuge from a dangerous world.

Recent lockdowns come on the heels of an intense drive for security in everyday life. On a daily level, wealthy Americans and others elsewhere have already been armouring up: retreating to fortress-like homes, moving about in tank-like SUVs, walling themselves off in many ways. "Americans are in fear," the security manager at an exclusive gated community in Florida told me a couple of years ago. The streets there were already strangely isolated and still. When the current pandemic passes, how many will remain afraid to go outside?

Kinship beyond family circle

In my urban neighbourhood in Baltimore, social life sputters on. Here, staying at home hasn't meant just staying indoors. People seek out parks and open space with kids and dogs, calling out to each other from a distance. It's springtime; with the cars and machinery idle, you can hear the songbirds more clearly, even the toads chirping from the flood control ponds that they've recently occupied. For the American toad, *Bufo americanus*, it's mating season. Just as social restrictions have ramped up for us, they've begun to congregate by the water.

It's hard not to feel wistful, seeing these knots of toads clamber over each other with such abandon. Our own instincts pull us now in contrary directions, together for solace at this harrowing time, apart with concern for our most vulnerable kin. This may prove one of the most serious social challenges of our lifetimes. But it is also a chance for us to reflect on kinship and connection, beyond the span of the family circle. For it isn't enough, we are learning, just to take care of our own, as if we were islands in the world.

Epidemic diseases like COVID-19, avian influenza, and Ebola are zoonotic, crossing to humans from other animals. They are often sparked by ecological instability, by the destruction of natural habitat and the cramming of animals into wildlife markets and scarcely inhabitable factory farms. They are symptoms, in other words, of a crisis of homelessness in the animal world, magnified by global networks of trade and resource exploitation. As economic activity slows to a crawl, pollution has been clearing in the industrial centres of Asia, Europe, and North America. Gutting environmental regulations to kick-start the economy – as the United States and China have done now – will only make the world more dangerous to everyone's health.

Sense of a common fate

The COVID-19 pandemic is a boot camp in ecological awareness, a reminder that the well-being of any one person is tied up with ever so many others, both family and neighbours and those we'll never meet or know. This sense of a common fate, a truly planetary predicament, is a rare and crucial thing. It is manifest in the many mutual aid networks and progressive political measures that have taken shape to meet the needs of vulnerable populations. Such resources will matter for other serious problems like the climate crisis, which will provoke new waves of homelessness and displacement. So much will turn on our ability to dwell on the deep ties between our lives and others elsewhere, the forms of kinship that we may nurture.

In April 1970, the first Earth Day was inspired by a photograph from Apollo 8, an image of the Earth as a fragile blue ball in the vastness of space. Many hoped this vision of a vulnerable world would catalyse environmental consciousness and bring a planetary healing, dissipating the rancour of social and political antagonism. As the 50th anniversary of this moment nears, in 2020, we seem to be edging even closer to ecological catastrophe. And yet the alternative remains, the chance to take the earth itself as a place of collective shelter.

In a world of stark inequality, this will have to be more than the idea of a common planetary home. We need to think carefully about what home has been for particular people, and how to build and maintain more generous structures of belonging. The pandemic tells us that the right to housing, to shelter and habitat, is an urgent and essential one, for human beings and the countless other creatures we share this planet with. Securing this right will help to avert the ecological crises to come, and we may find ourselves at home in the world once again.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

1. **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; the illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
2. **shelter** (noun) – protection, safety, shield.
3. **habitat** (noun) – home, abode, house, dwelling place/residence.
4. **humanity** (noun) – humankind, the human race, people.
5. **implication** (noun) – consequence/outcome, ramification, repercussion.
6. **radical** (adjective) – unusual, uncommon, different, atypical, distinctive.

7. **unravel** (verb) – resolve, work out, reveal, explain, unfold.
8. **come of** (phrasal verb) – result from, happen as a result of something.
9. **as does** (phrase) – like, also (when compared with something).
10. **command** (noun) – instruction, order, direction.
11. **lately** (adverb) – recently, of late, in recent times.
12. **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/encirclement/isolation of a person by the authority.
13. **courtyard** (noun) – unroofed, open to sky area surrounded by the walls/buildings on all four sides.
14. **wield** (verb) – use, put to use, employ, handle, control.
15. **baton** (noun) – responsibility/duty; a police officer's stick.
16. **set foot (in)** (phrase) – enter, come into, move in.
17. **set foot (outside)** (phrase) – leave, come out, move out.
18. **shutter** (verb) – close, shut down (a business).
19. **get by** (phrasal verb) – survive, manage, cope, exist, subsist (stay alive with difficulty).
20. **as best one can** (phrase) – do something effectively even although it is very difficult.
21. **go up** (phrasal verb) – (a structure) be built.
22. **take turns** (phrase) – work/act (in shifts).
23. **outskirts** (plural noun) – surrounding/outlying areas, suburbs.
24. **disparage** (verb) – undervalue, discredit, downgrade/ play down, belittle.
25. **collective** (adjective) – combined, united/joint, cooperative (by all people as a group).
26. **impasse** (noun) – deadlock, stalemate, stand-off.
27. **assert** (verb) – declare, maintain, state.
28. **viable** (adjective) – manageable, feasible, effective.
29. **stay put** (phrase) – remain somewhere without moving (from that place).
30. **flee** (verb) – run away, run off, take flight, escape.
31. **surge** (noun) – rise or growth.
32. **existential** (adjective) – empirical, pragmatic, factual, experiential, objective.
33. **ravage** (verb) – devastate, ruin, damage, wreak havoc.
34. **refugee** (noun) – displaced person, asylum seeker, escapee/exile.
35. **turn away** (phrasal verb) – refuse to enter; reject, fend off, rebuff/repel.
36. **asylum** (noun) – protection provided by a foreign country to somebody who is unable or unwilling to return to their home country due to fear of persecution (harm, harassment or oppression).
37. **rely on** (phrasal verb) – depend on; resort to, have recourse to.
38. **juggle** (verb) – cope with, deal with (by managing several activities cleverly).
39. **virtual meeting** (noun) – (interactive) online meeting.
40. **peer** (verb) – look, observe, view closely.
41. **privilege** (noun) – advantage, right, benefit; honour, pleasure.
42. **expose** (verb) – make vulnerable, be at risk.
43. **harvest** (verb) – acquire, obtain, gain, get gather (a ripe crop from the fields).
44. **hunker down** (verb) – to remain in a place for a period of time.
45. **eviction** (noun) – expulsion, banishment, ousting/removal.
46. **simmering** (adjective) – fuming, smouldering, brewing.
47. **the Cold War** (noun) – The Cold War was a state of political and military tension after World War II between powers in the Western Bloc (the United States and a group of countries) and powers in the Eastern Bloc (the Soviet Union and a group of countries).
48. **hazardous** (adjective) – dangerous, risky, perilous.
49. **exposure** (noun) – putting oneself at risk.
50. **akin** (adjective) – similar, related, equivalent.
51. **uncertainty** (noun) – unpredictability, unreliability, riskiness/precariousness.
52. **on the heels of** (phrase) – very soon after something, following closely after something.
53. **drive** (noun) – campaign, movement, effort, push.
54. **armour up** (verb) – shield, safeguard, protect, guard (someone with some protective layer).
55. **fortress-like** (adjective) – unattackable, invulnerable, impenetrable, inviolable.
56. **tank-like** (adjective) – sturdy, strong, solid (tank means armoured vehicle).
57. **wall off** (verb) – enclose, confine, fence in.
58. **still** (adjective) – quiet, silent, hushed, soundless, undisturbed.
59. **kinship** (noun) – blood relationship, common ancestry/lineage; family connections.
60. **sputter** (verb) – make a noise, crack/buzz, hiss.
61. **seek out** (phrasal verb) – discover, detect, find.
62. **idle** (noun) – not operating, not working, inactive, out of action.
63. **toad** (noun) – a common name for certain frogs.
64. **chirp** (verb) – make a short, sharp, high-pitched sound.
65. **Bufo americanus** (noun) – American toad.
66. **ramp up** (phrasal verb) – increase.

67. **congregate** (verb) – assemble, gather, come together, flock together, get together.
68. **wistful** (adjective) – regretful, nostalgic, yearning, longing.
69. **knot** (noun) – cluster, group, band, huddle.
70. **clamber** (verb) – scramble, climb, ascend.
71. **abandon** (noun) – recklessness, lack of restraint, unruliness.
72. **instinct** (noun) – natural tendency, inclination, urge/desire.
73. **solace** (noun) – comfort, consolation/ relief, support.
74. **harrowing** (adjective) – (extremely) distressing, disturbing, upsetting.
75. **vulnerable** (adjective) – at risk, endangered, unsafe, easily affected by.
76. **kin** (noun) – relations, connections, relatives.
77. **reflect on** (verb) – think about, give thought to, consider, contemplate, mull over.
78. **span** (noun) – extent, range, compass, stretch.
79. **COVID-19** (noun) – coronavirus disease 2019.
80. **avian influenza** (noun) – it is also known as influenza A or the bird flu. It primarily infects birds, but can pose health risks to people.
81. **Ebola** (noun) – Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever, is a rare but severe, often fatal illness in humans. The virus is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission. (Courtesy: WHO)
82. **zoonotic** (adjective) – relating to a disease that can be transmitted from animals to people.
83. **ecological** (adjective) – relating to the branch of biology which studies the interactions among organisms and their environment.
84. **instability** (noun) – uncertainty, unpredictability, lack of stability.
85. natural **habitat** (noun) – natural environment, natural element, natural territory, natural surroundings, natural terrain.
86. **cram** (verb) – crowd, crush, pack, jam, fill (in a small place).
87. **scarcely** (adverb) – hardly, barely; rarely.
88. **inhabitable** (adjective) – fit to live in, fit to occupy, usable.
89. **magnify** (verb) – increase, heighten, intensify.
90. **exploitation** (noun) – taking advantage, making use, utilization.
91. **crawl** (noun) – a slow rate of movement.
92. **kick-start** (verb) – revive, renew, restore.
93. **boot camp** (noun) – a short, rigorous training camp.
94. **well-being** (noun) – healthy state, comfort/happiness, prosperity.
95. **(be) tied up** (phrasal verb) – link, couple, connect, relate.
96. **planetary** (adjective) – world, universal, global.
97. **predicament** (noun) – difficulty, issue, problematic situation.
98. **manifest** (adjective) – clear, evident, obvious.
99. **mutual** (adjective) – reciprocal, required, returned.
100. **progressive** (adjective) – modern, liberal, forward-thinking.
101. **take shape** (phrase) – become clear/definite, become tangible, fall into place.
102. **provoke** (verb) – incite, arouse, induce.
103. **displacement** (noun) – a forced removal/ departure of people from their homes, mainly due to war/natural disaster/persecution.
104. **turn on** (phrasal verb) – depend on, relate to, be decided by.
105. **dwell on** (phrasal verb) – linger over, think about, mull over.
106. **nurture** (verb) – encourage, promote, foster.
107. **fragile** (adjective) – weak, shaky/risky, unreliable, insubstantial, feeble/unsound.
108. **catalyse** (verb) – to cause/accelerate some action/ process.
109. **consciousness** (noun) – awareness, knowledge, attention/observation.
110. **dissipate** (verb) – disappear, vanish, dissolve.
111. **rancour** (noun) – bitterness, hate, resentment/ hostility.
112. **antagonism** (noun) – enmity, hostility, antipathy.
113. **catastrophe** (noun) – destruction, damage, disaster.
114. **stark** (adjective) – clear, distinct, evident.
115. **inequality** (noun) – Inequality is simply defined as “the state of not being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities; imbalance, unevenness, disproportion, disparity.
116. **generous** (adjective) – caring, unselfish, self-sacrificing; large, huge, great.
117. **belonging** (noun) – affinity, connection, attachment, closeness.
118. **avert** (verb) – prevent, stop, avoid.
119. **anthropology** (noun) – the study of human beings (humanity).