The Fact of Belonging

How can we know where we belong? This is a very puzzling question, and a lot of people do not know its answer. If we want to answer that question, we must know the meaning of “belonging” first. My personal definition of belonging is: A feeling connects the person with a place, and makes him/her feel it as part of them and their personality. I do not know if my definition is right or not, but that is what I believe belonging is. I wanted another definition of belonging, so I decided to search for it on the Internet.

“(Of a person) have an affinity for a specified place.” That was the definition of belonging according to Google Translate. Now I have an idea about what does belonging means, but I still have many questions about it. Is nationality a proof of belonging? Do we belong in where we were born? Do our families and relatives have a relation with where we belong? Many of these questions are on my mind, and I do not have any answers to them. I might find the answers if I look for them, and the best place for that is the library. I went to the library to look for some books that might be helpful to me, but unfortunately I did not find what I was looking for. While I was returning to my home, I remembered that I have bought a book for my English class, and that might have useful information. As soon as I got to my home, I started to read it, it called “Seeing and Writing 4” by Donald McQuade and Christine McQuade. While I was turning its pages, I found a unit called “COMING TO TERMS WITH PLACE.” I told myself right away, “I should check it out, it must has a useful information.”

“HOMEPLACE” by the author Scott Russell Sanders was an article in the unit. I started to read it, and hoped to find what I am looking for. As I kept reading the article, I stopped at a question that caught my attention. Russell writes, “On the contrary, how can you value other places if you do not have one of your own?” (174 -175). I was thinking about that question for
almost ten minutes. I know that the question is not related to belonging, and it is talking about the value of the places. But that made me think about something else.

Does the place where we belong have a value? If the question is directed to me, my answer will be “Of course, it has a value”. I belong in Kuwait, and it has a great value in my heart. It is where I was born and grew up. I have lived in Kuwait since I was born until I graduated from high school. My family and all of my relatives are living there. I studied in its schools, and I played in its streets. I asked myself “Are these enough reasons to make me belong in Kuwait?” Maybe they are. When I was in the high school, my dream was to complete my undergraduate degree in the United States of America. Consequently, when I graduated from high school, I submitted my profile to the external scholarship. By looking at their depressed faces, I knew that my parents were not satisfied, but they do not want to prevent me from achieving my dream. At first, I thought it is normal like every parent they do not want their son to be far away from them. But when I spoke with them, I realized why they were so worried about me.

My parents: The life away from home is so tough Abdulatif.

Me: I know that. I have experience. It is not the first time that I travel. I have been to many countries.

My parents: This time is different. You will stay there for more than five years, and that is a long time!

Me: What is the matter? I can find everything I want there, do not worry.

My parents: But you even don’t know anyone there?

Me: It’s ok; I will make new friends.

My parents: You will never understand what we mean until you live there.
After that conversation, my opinion had not changed much. I still wanted to study in the US no matter what would happen. I packed my bags, and I was getting ready to take my dream trip. When the date came to leave, I was so excited. I was counting the minutes to get to the US. It was very long and exhausting trip. The flight lasted for almost twenty hours, but I felt it was more than that. Finally, I arrived to the US safely. My first week in the US was okay. Everything looks so different from my homeland. The streets, the restaurants, the markets and the houses, everything looks strange, but it was not a big deal to me. I know it is just a matter of time until I adapted to live here. The first hurdle I faced was the language. No one speaks my language, and I was using sign language to explain what I want. After a while of learning English, I started to speak it, but not as perfect as a native speaker because that needs more time.

After two months of living in the US, I saw the big differences between my homeland and the US from a different side. The lifestyle is so different here, and it is not suitable to me. The people here are thinking in a different way. For instance, the people in the US think that if you become older than 18 years old, you should leave your parents’ house, and live by your own. And the reason of that is to make you responsible, and ready to face the difficulties of life. In contrast, in my country the people think that you should stay with your parents forever. And even when you get married, you should still live with them in the same house. And there are two reasons of that: the first reason is the great importance of social cohesion in my country. The second reason is that responsibility can be learned even when you live with your parents. The place does not teach you how to be responsible, the life does. Both of the two ways of thinking might be right. And the reason for the difference is because of the differences in the way of thinking in various cultures. In fact, differences in cultures are one of the reasons that lead to misunderstanding between the people who are from different countries. And that explains why
the people here sometimes misunderstand me, and many of them are surprised when they know that I still live with my parents back home in Kuwait, because I am not from here and my culture is different. I miss my family, friends and my country. I do not belong here. I belong there, where my family is and my friends are. And where everyone has the same culture as me, and the same way of thinking. That condition of intense longing is called “homesickness”. I feel homesick every time I call my family.

One day I asked myself “If my family and my friends were here, will I still have the same feeling?” Something inside me wants to return and I am trying to establish if it’s my family or the place that is drawing me back. After thinking about it for a while, I decided that it’s a combination of family and the place itself. Of course, my experience in the US will not be the same if my family and friends are with me, but that will not change my desire to return. Family plays a big part of belonging, but the belonging also includes the place and the memories associated with that place. In fact, a lot of families contribute in creating a sense of belonging in their kids, no matter where they are, by using the same token national songs, traditional clothing and other things that can also foster a sense of belonging.

Belonging is love. When you belong somewhere, you love it. And when love a place you will do your best to improve it. No one cares about a place more than one who belongs in it. And here we can clearly see why the sense of belonging is important. When you do not belong in a place, you do not care about it. In contrast, you only care about the place where you belong.

For instance, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Kuwaitis did not leave their land. Why they did not move to a safe place? Why did they prefer to die in Kuwait rather than leaving it? And the answer is simply because they belong there. And the belonging is something worth dying for. Consequently, the Kuwaitis decided to fight the enemy back. And they succeeded in
their mission, and the got their country back. The question is: if the sense of belonging was not important to the Kuwaitis, would they fight for their country? Indeed, a lot of residents and tourists in Kuwait had run away to their countries, and this confirms what I said before. When you do not belong in a place, you do not care about it. Thus, who did not belong in Kuwait at that time, they run away easily.

From that example, I can see that belonging is close to the meaning of nationalism. In spite of their similarity in the meaning, they are a little different. Nationalism means: to be loving to your country, while the meaning of belonging is a feeling that connects the person with a place, and makes him/her feel it as part of them and their personality. Thus the difference is that nationalism is a feeling toward a country, while belonging is a feeling toward a place, and that place might be larger or smaller than the country. But sometimes, people who have a strong nationalism or belonging might become racists. For example, when have a strong belonging, you do not accept strangers to live in the place where you belong, and that can be considered racist, and that is a risky level because it may cause a sectarian strife between people.

Racism is a big issue faced by many countries. Racism can lead to disintegration in members of the same society and civil wars. In 1861, a civil war occurred in the US, and racism was one of its causes. Thus, racism is a serious issue that must be eliminated. I have not been subjected to racism in the US many times. It happened only once when I was in Arizona. I was walking on the sidewalk, and someone called me “Terrorist” for no reasons. But in general, the US managed to reduce the racism dramatically. I wish one day the world would become free of racism.

One of the questions I still wonder about is: how do aesthetics affect the sense of belonging? Do we belong in a place because its external appearance? I do not think so, because
appearance may disappear, but belonging will stay forever. For example, the people, who belong in desert or arid places, do they belong in it because of its appearance? That is not logical at all, but maybe they do. If the place where you belong is destroyed, that will change your belonging? Of course not, your belonging will make you rebuild it again. And that reminds me of what happened with the Kuwaitis after they got their country back. When they entered their country, every thing was destroyed, and the waste was filling the streets. And that was not the worst thing; the worst thing was severe air pollution. The severe air pollution happened because the Iraqi forces set fire in oil wells, before they withdrew from Kuwait. The sky was very dark, and people were barely breathing. In spite of all of that, Kuwaitis did not sit by and watch their homeland collapse. They collaborated with each other, and rebuilt their country hand by hand. They extinguished the fire at short notice, and they rebuilt their country within six months. And that is the outcome of belonging in a place.

Talking about Kuwait reminds me of it. I remember when I returned to it for the first time, after a year of absence. It was last December during the Christmas holiday. I did not tell any of my friends and family members about it. I wanted it to be a surprise to them. I bought the ticket for a high price, but returning home was worth it. It was a very long and exhausting trip from Washington DC to Kuwait. I remember when I was counting the minutes to leave Kuwait, and now I am counting the minutes to return to it. Then, I understood what my parents meant when they said “You will never understand what we mean until you live there”. Eventually, I arrived to Kuwait after 24 hours of flight, and my happiness of returning home made me forget the fatigue. I took a taxi, and I went to my home. When I was on my way, my heart was beating so fast, and my eyes were filled with tears of happiness. I was looking through the window, and I said to myself “Nothing is more beautiful than returning home”. I did not believe that I went
back to my homeland. “Is this Kuwait?” Yes, it is. These are its broad streets, and those are its crowded markets. I realized I am in Kuwait when I saw “Kuwait Towers”, and when I saw the arid desert. The weather has not changed, it is still sunny and warm. The people still wearing their traditional clothes, so everyone looks the same. Suddenly, I heard a voice I have not heard it for a long time. A voice is filling the heart with comfort, and the chest with faith. That voice that filled the place was the voice of “Athan.” And Athan is the call to prayer, so everyone hears it and goes to pray. I stopped the taxi, and I went to pray. After I finished with my prayer, I returned to the taxi, and we continued our way to my home. When we entered my small neighborhood, I felt that I came back to life. I arrived to my home, and I got out of the taxi. I ran as fast as I could to my home. When I opened the house door, all my family members were shocked. They were staring at me for a while, and it seemed like they did not believe that I returned. Then they realized it, and they started to give me a warm welcome. During my stay in Kuwait, I visited all my relatives and friends. Also, I went to all the places where I used to go in the previous years. And because I belong here, everything looks familiar to me. In that period, I was having mixed feelings. I was so glad of my returning to my home, and also I was sad because I had to leave it again. After three weeks of psychological comfort, the date came to leave. I did not want to leave Kuwait again, but I had to. I have to complete my way towards achieving my dream. I left Kuwait, but my heart did not. My body left it, and my heart stayed in it. I left Kuwait, and I was whispering to myself “Kuwait... I promise you that I will return to you again. And when that day comes, I will not return alone. I will bring my certificate with me. I promise you that I will make you proud of me.”

I returned to the US, and I had no choice. I have to adapt to live here, but I do not want to lose my belonging. I want to keep my customs and traditions. But on the other hand, I want to fit
in with the American society. It was so tough, but I had a solution. In my apartment, I could keep my own customs and traditions. I could cook my traditional food, and wear my traditional clothes. Also, I could speak my native language unabashedly. I hung the flag of Kuwait on the wall of the living room. In contrast, outside of my apartment, I wear casual clothes. Also, I speak English to be understandable. And I try to fit in with the community as much as I can. Furthermore, I try to behave like Americans, but in a way that does not conflict with my religion or my traditions. In this I can keep my belonging, and make a new one here.

There is one big difference between the US and my homeland that I have not talked about yet. And that difference is not related to the place, it is related to the people who live in it. The people in my homeland were born in it, and they did not move to it. And their backgrounds are from there also. Thus, they did have the opportunity to choose where they belong. On the other hand, the people in the US had come from everywhere. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 36.3 percent of the population currently belongs to a racial or ethnic minority group: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In spite of all the people’s different backgrounds in the US, they still belong in it. So that changed my mind about belonging. Sometimes you have the opportunity to change your old belonging in a place, and make a new one in another place. But not everyone could have that opportunity. And the reason is because of the different qualities that people have. For instance, it is very tough for social people to change their belonging in place, because their relation with the people in the place reinforce their belonging in it. On the other hand, unsocial people could change their belonging easily. Because they do not care when the people change.
I learned a lot about the fact of belonging. I learned that we might be different in where we belong, but we all agree that belonging is very important. I learned that belonging is a proof of love and devotion to the place. I learned that belonging has nothing to do with where we were born. I learned that our families and relatives have a relation with where we belong. I learned that the places where we belong have a value in our hearts. I learned that if we have a strong belonging, we might become racists. I also learned that belonging in a place has nothing to do with its external appearance. And I learned that the most beautiful feeling is that feeling when you return to where you belong. I learned that sometimes you have to combine the place where you belong and the place where you live. Also, I learned that sometimes you have the opportunity to choose the place where you belong. But not everyone could have that opportunity, because it up to the qualities that the person has.
Works Cited
