

***A New Multicultural Canadian as Guest Host on a Canadian Landscape:  
From 'Longing to Belong' to 'Belonging' in a Home Away from Home***

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**A**s a warm summer dawned in Saskatoon, turning my lawn a deepening green and bringing my flower beds to full bloom, the promise of blessings lingered heavily in the atmosphere around me, in the blue purity of the air, and in the depths of my waiting mind. Time and I were preparing once again for the holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, of practicing self-control, of developing the spirit of sacrifice and of expressing gratitude. In the garden of day, where summer, serenity and stillness bloomed fragrantly, the want for more learning, understanding, and belongingness stood within me, as if I were at a closed door, knocking to be allowed entry.

Summer course selection time for my master's program came near. From the beginning of my master's program in education, in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, I sat among education professionals and reflected on my role as a parent among teachers, administrators, and principals. I wanted to select a course that would avail an environment in which I could feel comfortable and confident listening, learning, sharing, reflecting and speaking. To my surprise, opportunity descended in the form of a particular summer course which I had anticipated since I started my university journey. I quickly proceeded in registering for *Engaging Parents in Teaching and Learning*, a summer course offered by Dr. Debbie Pushor. The words *engaging parents* became a source of motivation for

my inquiry and presented me with a strong sense that the door I had been hesitantly knocking on was now open for me to enter as a multicultural Canadian.

I proceeded into the first class of my summer in what might be described as a fasting state—a state of thirst; thirst not for water, but for finding answers to lingering questions. I had waited a long time at that door. My initial questions related to the door itself. Had I waited for so long because of not knocking consistently? Or had the door been firmly locked all along?

I thought I had always been familiar with the terms *guest* and *host* but the day I heard these terms in Debbie's class, I experienced them from a new perspective. This new lens affirmed my sense of belongingness among Canadian people and on the Canadian landscape.

Debbie, while introducing the term *guest host* (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005) in the context of educators on a school landscape, spoke of how educators are both guest and host at one and the same time.

“When educators enter a community, they are entering a place with relationships, culture, and a history that began long before they arrived and that will continue long after they leave. They are entering as guests. As Lambros Kamperidis writes, ‘Only when we know how to behave as guests will we have the honour to act as hosts.’ To welcome parents to a school, then, means that staff members open the door to the school as hosts who recognize they are simultaneously guests” (Pushor, 2007, p. 8).

Debbie emphasized how important it is that educators, as guest hosts, invite and welcome parents to the school landscape. She reminded all of us who were sitting in that class as educators, that it takes repeated invitations to parents to open up the door of possibilities where parents feel welcome to share their *funds of knowledge* (Moll et. al., 1992). At the same time, she intricately highlighted that, in order to welcome parents, teachers must be willing and ready to accept the risks that may come along with the invitation: the suggestions that parents may bring, or the assumptions they may challenge. During our entire class discussion, one thing that specifically clicked for me was when Debbie assigned the terms *guest* and *host* to the concept of roles, rather

than fixed identities. The positions of *guest* and *host* are not fixed identities, but rather roles which different people can assume. Just as school staff members are guests in the community, parents and other community members can also be positioned as hosts in the school (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 41-42). As I pondered the depth of the words *roles* and *identities* and how an individual can be positioned as a guest host on a school landscape, I began to ponder my own positioning as *guest host* on the Canadian landscape. How might I, as a multicultural Canadian, fulfil the respective roles of guest and host? How might understanding my positioning as a guest host on the Canadian landscape affirm my multiple identities?

I am still trying to find the perpetual link; to find what compelled me in that instance of absorption with the terms to relate the concept of guest and host to the sense of belongingness and alienation. After making Canada my home, moving between the dual spaces of belongingness and alienation became a part of my daily living. Is it possible to be a guest and host at the same time within our own home? As a common understanding, we are guests when we are visiting someone else's home but hosts within our own home while waiting to receive guests. Noting these things, I wondered why it didn't make sense to me that while Canada is my home, and I feel both a guest and host in Canada, I also simultaneously experience the sense of belongingness and alienation. What are the factors that cause me to shift my positioning from the solid place of either a guest or a host to both guest and host at once?

When the notion of *guest host* was introduced to the class by Debbie, I was subconsciously taken aback with the thought that a guest and a host were concepts that relate to home, and every home has a vital door used by others to enter. The combination of the words *home* and *host*, which are part of my realm of experience, vividly took me back to my homeland, Pakistan; a home I had left behind in order to make Canada my new home.

My first home, Pakistan, is vastly different than my new home, Canada. In my native country, as a small half of Pakistan's collective whole, identity never posed any questions for me. Identity never needed to be highlighted at either personal or social levels. Ponderings over acceptance of who I am didn't need to be taken into deep consideration. Identity was self explanatory and evident. We all lived among immediate and extended family, shared the same memories, stories, values, culture, color, language and religious beliefs; we knitted and gathered vibrant cloth; cooked in the same kitchens where the aroma of spices called upon nostalgia; ate naturally grown fruit ripe with fragrance and gentility. The sun felt warmer, the sounds were familiar, and the chanting of prayers before dawn was wrapped in the softness of humility, love, and longing. The yelling of vendors selling spicy goods; the cheering voices of kids playing cricket in the streets; the honking noises of rickshaws, trucks, buses, scooters and cars; heavy quilts of smog powdering the horizon; cobbled streets creating blinding storms of dust; and the tapping of barefooted beggars on gilded gates. All were well known. All this familiarity and interdependence within my comfort zone instilled in me a sense of belongingness: belongingness to the place, people, voices, noises, songs, and totality of the environment. There wasn't much need to attempt sense making in terms of my own entity; familiarity with the existence of being and belonging provided enough explanation for self- acceptance.

I slept to the sound of my country's tender melody of monotony. It was my country, my people, my identity, all in complete balance. Nothing to spear the imminence of the tomorrow I expected, or the agelessness of tradition living among us. I was prepared for the coming tomorrow. I had become so accustomed to it and its bearings that when it arrived, I knew right away its expectations and effects. Existence and expression in my homeland of Pakistan was bound to understanding and perseverance.

When I first arrived in Canada I felt like a guest. To me, the notions of *guest* and *host* lie between the living space of my dual homes: Pakistan and Canada. When I entered the new nation Canada, to my absolute incredulity, this land seemed to be the authentic version of the beautiful and perplexing landscapes and scenery I used to observe in my school English textbooks and documentaries. This was truly a flight of fantasy to me, as it seemed that I was living in this idyllic country that had always intrigued me as a child. I had pondered, looking at those pictures, how a land could be so remarkably beautiful, and at the same time, how its customs, conduct, traditions and surroundings could be so different from those that I witnessed every day in Pakistan.

As the airplane landed in the terminal, and I took my first steps on Canadian land, I was eagerly trying to absorb the environment around me. I saw many colossal buildings stationed closely to each other, buildings which seemed to stretch all the way to the clouds. How were the structures so tall and immaculate? I felt the foreign air rush through my lungs, and wondered, “Why does it feel so purified and distilled?” As I peered at the new world around me, why did my urge to question freeze on the spot? I was awed by how the sun seemed so bright and dazzling hanging before my eyes. I was astonished to see how the blue of the sky embedded the sun so that it looked like a pearl in an oyster. Looking at the beautiful white faces of the new people before me, I felt as if all the radiance of the world had gathered and situated itself in this very place. At that moment, one feeling became very apparent: I realized that this world was deeply and utterly different from the one I had just come from. Alongside this realization, my heart wept for my own country and its lack of development. Question after question arose as my desire to question thawed: would the new people accept me as being different? Am I a guest in

this country? Is this my new home now? Where and how will I situate myself; as a guest or as someone who belongs?

I naively thought that what I had left behind would stay behind. I perceived that my two different worlds would act as separate entities. I was, however, surprised to find myself constantly moving, analyzing, comparing and contrasting my dual worlds. It seemed as if making sense of the new world was utterly impossible without keeping in mind the world in which I grew up. I was not only learning about this new world painted with shades of white, new people, new culture and new environment, but I was learning about how these people perceived me. What language did I speak? What did I think about? What was my existence? I went through mixed feelings of understanding as to how I could see others and how others would see me.

I wondered how long it was natural to feel like a guest within a new country. I contemplated the fundamental question, which I continued to be asked frequently even after living thirteen years in Canada, “Where are you from?” This question initiated a process of identity negotiation within me living in a new country. I noticed the fact of being observed in my new country. People of my new country wanted to know about me, about who I was. Is it because I am different? How am I different and what makes me different? Does my head scarf make me different, or possibly my language or culture? Maybe it could be my beliefs, traditions or color?

The process of asking myself questions began an uncertain search for identity. Was the feeling of guest dependant on how the hosts see me and treat me or was it dependant on what I titled myself? I felt like a guest because when I went to the clothing stores, I wondered why my clothes were different than the clothes being displayed and sold. When I went to a restaurant, why couldn't I smell the fragrant aroma of spices that had encircled me throughout all of my

childhood? As I was passing by a church, why couldn't I hear the sound of a prayer call? When I wanted to be outspoken and try to make friends, why would the words get caught in my throat? In mid-day when the sun was supposed to be the focal point in the sky, why did it feel as if it had lost some warmth? When my children came home singing Christmas melodies, why did my conscience remind me of Eid celebration? Does the feeling of guest and host relate to home, to identity or both?

To me for most of my life, the concept of home was simple enough. When I continued to feel like a guest for a prolonged period of time in Canada, this was somehow a mystifying concept to me, one that has uniquely altered the concept of home for me. Is home a place or a building where we reside? Could home be a family whom we live with? Or is home where we are guest? Or host? Or is home simply a vision or feeling that resides within us? After moving from country to country and from city to city, the concept of home triggered a strong sense of self reflection within me. If home is neither an object nor an entity, what is home then? Are all the places I have ever resided considered home? Is home only one place, the place where I feel like a host rather than a guest? When Canada is my home just as Pakistan is, why do I feel like a guest here? Where is this feeling coming from? How can I divert this sensation to make myself feel at ease, to feel belongingness – to feel like this is truly my “home and native land”? How can I divert this sensation to wholly give myself the assurance that I am both a guest and a host in my new land?

I believe that in a multicultural nation like Canada the solidarity of our home rests in positioning its every member in a guest host position at one and the same time. The dictionary defines guest as a person who receives hospitality at the home of another, a person who spends some time at another person's home in some social activity. A host is a person who entertains

someone else as his guest, usually in his own home (*Collins English Dictionary*, n.d.). The place and landscape, *home*, is playing on a common ground in both definitions. Something happened in Debbie's class that changed my positioning from guest to host for the first time ever in my Canadian journey except for a few brief interludes. When our families from Pakistan visited us in Saskatoon I felt, fleetingly, like a host. That day in my graduate class, I felt confident, worthy, powerful and important. Even though none of my family members were visiting me, I felt like a host because I had the feeling of being at home, and I also felt a strong sense of belonging at the same time.

I can vividly remember the first day when Debbie Pushor, who knew that I was taking this course in a fasting state, offered me an opportunity to share my culture, religion, and my very being with our other colleagues. I felt such strong feelings of recognition that day that my feelings pushed me to abandon all silence. With confidence, I embraced expression and new emotions through speaking. I gathered and pinned my heart onto my sleeve in plain sight while all those around me sat and listened. There was heightened sensitivity on both parts. It was an undefined reluctance that was unfurling in that moment in which I was neither hesitant in telling and sharing, nor were my colleagues hesitant in asking and knowing. That day, I noted our paths converging at a single junction where I was able to express, and they were able to ask, qualm-free and with preventive sensitivity aside. A powerful feeling overwhelmed me as I noticed curiosity, previously buried, in their eyes. In that environment, I could feel a sort of quiet fascination. From overcoming hazy boundaries and planting acknowledgement, a radical openness to listen and to understand others and a feeling of complete oneness were born. The strong feelings of empowerment came together and became one with belongingness and created a collage of hope, care, respect, acceptance, understanding, and community by painting a family



without borders. On that bright day, things changed for me. I strongly felt as if my colleagues provided me with an open stage where I could candidly express myself and where they could fearlessly quell the buried reluctance within them and confidently explore and my being, in its entirety. I remember after my attempt to whole heartedly address their questions about my identity, the simple words *thank you* were draped in exquisite colors of gratitude far away from fear. I learned in that class that sensitivity, and fear of intruding on cultural or religious beliefs, is one of the prime reasons that there is a culture of silence. Such a culture then acts as an obstacle to fostering belongingness in others. That day in class we simply shared all kinds of stories including our personal stories, family stories, professional stories, stories of strength and stories of vulnerabilities and also explicitly conversed, discussed and spoke about diverse life experiences.

I ponder upon the complexity of and relationship between place and people. In that place and with those people, I felt like a host. After collecting, rejuvenating those and reflecting upon preserved moments, I believe the reason behind my feelings of being a host was that I observed the ‘real hosts,’ those students who were Canadian born, sincerely moving between the spaces of guests and hosts in that particular class. With the progression of every class, openness and reflection became stronger among us and our emotions flooded. The need to be heard was realized. I could never forget all the tears rolling down cheeks, smiles beaming, laughter travelling, care flowing, personal stories unravelling, reciprocity blooming, and vibes of vulnerability and strength pulsating, which felt like they all had travelled around the world and gathered in that classroom at that particular moment of time. While sharing our personal life stories and exchanging colourful experiences, our voices echoed in unity. Our personal

differences and similarities removed the barriers of individuality and rather emphasized the distinctiveness of humanity by strengthening a strong sense of community within us.

I remember the sorrowful tears and flushed cheeks of Ashley<sup>11</sup>, a tender hearted mother, as she shared the story of her son with special needs. She spoke of the way his babysitter made his genuine disabilities seem bigger than his rich qualities by saying that she could not handle the burden of babysitting him anymore. Ashley spoke of how his babysitter said to her that her son wasn't normal and he would never become normal.

And how could I forget the look of confusion on Marla's face, a divorced White woman who had been married to a First Nations man. Because her daughter took on her father's appearance but lived with her, she was struggling to maintain her daughter's dual identity. Marla's story resonated with me because as a multicultural parent, I am also struggling to maintain my children's identities.

And what about the tale of Tammy, who, as a young girl, was bullied about her weight? Her personal story of struggle was about how a sprout of confidence and self-assurance enabled her to realize that there is more reason to strive for excellence in life than looking beautiful. She diligently explained that it was those hurtful moments that taught her to listen to her own voice first and question how she viewed herself. Her self reflection offered her the reassurance that she had mixed up her notion of self esteem with the superficial concept of the way her body looked, her outward appearance. She learned to accept and appreciate herself for who she was rather than how she looked and how she was viewed by others. From there onwards, the restoration of her lost confidence began with the first and foremost step of acknowledging her strengths and abilities and taking pride in them. She accepted that all she needed was her inner peace, as it offered her ways to combat her insecurities.

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<sup>11</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of all individuals in the narrative

Priscilla's torn and wounded heart was visible to me despite the confidence with which she masked it. She was a pregnant First Nations woman, the sole educated member of her community who was trying to blend into Canadian standards. She spoke the words of a tragic disownment by her First Nations community because of her transformation into white ways of living. However, a worry she felt was the fact that she did not want to lose her values; rather, she simply wanted to be part of the Canadian society as best as she could. She fretted also because she wanted her child to grow up as a spiritual and traditional First Nations individual with all the same virtues and values with which she was raised.

Taylor poured her heart out explaining her half-caste heritage. How her ancestors had struggled with the ups and downs of life; how they had been treated in society; and how today she found her place in society, with great effort. She talked about the discriminatory attitudes, forced assimilation, and deprivation of civil, economic, educational and political rights. She also spoke of how the marginalized existence of her ancestors led to a myriad of social problems, including issues of self esteem and lack of employment opportunities. She stated how, through education, she found her way. She became a teacher, and she valued her membership in the teaching profession, as it entailed enormous responsibility and commitment towards all students. I could feel the pride in her voice when she spoke about how she was not only teaching, but learning from her students by understanding and accepting who they were, their individuality, values, and beliefs, both in a cultural and social contexts.

Sage, although she appeared to be so athletic and strong, became so fragile in a moment of sharing her heartfelt experience of a young boy of First Nations descent whom she taught. She attempted to help the child, not only as a white teacher but also as a mother herself. Because she regularly saw him coming in drenched from the playground, and she felt his family could not

afford rain boots, she bought him a rain coat and boots. She spoke of the way that she would never be able to forget the smiles and gratitude that were written all across the boy's face, and neither would she forget the next day that when his mom came to the school with all of the things she had given him, and returned them to her. She questioned Sage's assumption that the mother could not provide for her son. She spoke through her tears and told us about how she tried to explain to the boy's mother that she wasn't meaning to act in any offensive way, but just offer a pure and humble intention. While Sage acted with love and affection for the boy, she realized she did not consider how her gifts would position his mother. It seemed as if there were not just tears streaming from her eyes, but pain lying in her heart.

We all exhibited our true selves along with our vulnerabilities. We explored our assumptions and biases. We reflected and re-reflected on our actions and practices. We worked to create a buffer zone where judgments were substituted with an openness and willingness to understand the perspectives of others, and where silence was exchanged for communication. I believe this is what is called engagement. What I observed and experienced was an atmosphere of trust, open and honest dialogue, a sharing of our fears, emotions and voices, and an acceptance of similarities and differences of languages, cultures and values. We simply listened and shared. We were neither expert nor neophytes in that class, but solely human beings who wanted to share, listen, feel and be heard. We were all guests and hosts in this space as we shared our stories and we received the stories of others. We felt the belongingness of being guests in the community and we felt the ownership of being hosts. I was no longer a *new Canadian parent*, or *marginalized*, or *outsider*. I was a guest host alongside other guest hosts.

The words of Debbie Pushor spoke strongly to me. While highlighting the importance of parent engagement to our class, she consistently emphasized the words *inviting parents*. My

silent comprehension of the word *invitation*, in particular, belongs to the conceptual and contextual word bank that I have been collecting to understand my entirety in terms of being a guest host on a Canadian landscape. I align the word invitation to home, host, and guest. I believe open and honest invitations to new Canadians, beyond good intentions, will open the doors of unlimited possibilities where their presence is not only tolerated, but celebrated; their knowledge is valued not judged; their experiences are discussed not dismissed; and their voices are heard not ignored. Invitation offers possibilities to acknowledge similarities and differences, celebrate diversity, merge multiple knowledges, co-construct stronger community, make mutual decisions, take collective actions in order to celebrate the success of every single citizen, and create a welcoming society.

Invitation seems key to becoming considerate guest hosts. The feeling of hosts and guests is relational and reciprocal; when hosts become guests, the guests automatically feel like hosts as well. Neither can remain solely in either of these positions. Canada, as a diverse nation, demands every citizen to move between the spaces of guest and host. These dynamics put responsibility on all of us to share our positions as guest and host and, in so doing, also share our power and authority. It is with this new awakening, that my colleagues not only offered a place for physical being but for my voice and knowledge as well. I felt strong positive vibes that what I was sharing was not being taken for granted and that my individual existence was of equal worth.

My immersion and engagement in discussions, and my contemplation and questions, influenced my sense of self and led me to a critical knowing of my very being with a unique positioning of dwelling in two homes. It also helped me understand my existence in the context of others; in the context of all the colleagues who were sitting in that class. I felt in that class that a sense of belongingness depends more on engagement in the community than on the context of

the physical place. Belongingness comes from people not places. Not necessarily people who share the same beliefs, but rather people who share the same ethics: ethics of respect, acceptance, recognition, understanding, and equality.

I return to the feelings I have had of being a guest since I moved to Canada about thirteen years ago: guest in the country, guest in the school, guest in the restaurant, guest in the clothing store. During this time, the feeling of being a guest has been much more prevalent within me than the feeling of being a host. In contrast, I will never forget the feeling of being a guest host that I experienced while talking about my identity with my colleagues. Being a guest host defines who I really am. The fascinating life long lesson that I learned in my graduate class is that having the feeling of being a guest in a new home can be softened with the feeling of being guest host all at once. I learned that home is what we perceive it to be. Home is a place for me where I earnestly play the role of both a guest and a host at once with a strong sense of belongingness. The position of guest gives me an assurance that I am present to learn, listen, observe, understand, and reflect. The position of guest host offers me the sensation that I am simultaneously teaching and learning, stepping up and stepping back, comforting others and being comforted, and collectively listening, telling and unravelling stories. Canada is home for me when I am invited to be my full self; to give and receive all of which I am capable.

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