Andrea Eidinger

On April 3rd, I was on my way to class, when I received a phone call from my husband. It was the last day of the winter semester, and my students had organized a potluck to celebrate. My husband has battled Crohn's Disease for the better part of ten years, and had decided to stay home that day because his symptoms were severe. Over the course of those ten years, we've been through several flares (as they are called), and knew what to do. So my husband calling me right before class time was quite out of character. And for good reason: he called to tell me that he needed to go to the hospital. After a brief discussion (he wanted me to go to class, I told him he was being ridiculous), I popped into class to explain what was going on, and then ran to catch the bus. That was one of the longest commutes my entire life, both literally and figuratively. I arrived at the hospital to find my husband curled up on the benches in the Emergency Room. While I didn't know it at the time, we had just entered a two-month-long hell-scape that involved multiple emergency room visits, two major surgeries, and a lot of waiting. I'm happy to report that my husband is now doing fine, but the entire ordeal has highlighted the invisible costs of precarious academia, particularly those costs that arise from academic relocation.

The past year has seen increasing discussion about academic relocation, addressing issues like the financial cost, the emotional impact of frequent moves, and the impact of moving on families. I have been particularly touched by Environmental History Now's ongoing series, "Problems of Place," which has featured work by numerous academics reflecting on the importance of place from a personal and historical perspective. For many years, my sense of self was intimately tied to my sense of place. In many respects, I had an unusual upbringing. I lived in the same house from the ages of two to twenty-two. My lived experiences were firmly grounded in my childhood landscapes. Even now, I can close my eyes and see myself standing on the walkway of the tiny waterfall at my favourite park (pictured above). But, as Jessica DeWitt eloquently noted, early career academics are constantly told not to put down roots. We are expected to be ready and willing to move anywhere at any time in pursuit of work, temporary or permanent. This is particularly the case for single academics without children, who are supposedly "unattached."

But, as DeWitt noted, "no one is unattached. To call someone "unattached" is to negate their humanity." Though we are forced to move far away from our biological families, we create new ones, chosen ones. Graduate school takes time. We forge strong connections to our cohorts, we find romantic and non-romantic partners, and we put down roots. When I think about my time in Victoria, I remember the long walks that I took with my husband in our neighbourhood and the coffee shop where my knitting group would meet every Friday night. And much like roots, these families and communities are very much tied to physical places, and when we move, they wither.

When I finished graduate school and left Victoria, I lost more than I could possibly express: my community, my sense of place, my sense of belonging and my home. After all, home is not just the physical space that we inhabit, but the people around us and the connections that we make. Despite the best of intentions, it's hard to keep in touch after a big move. For the next six years, my husband and I moved four times and lived in three different cities. And each time we had to rebuild our lives and remap our landscapes. I read somewhere that it takes at least a year to learn a new city and to really feel at home there. That has held true in my experience. But it takes far more and much longer for a place to feel like home. I've haven't been able to recreate that feeling since. I think I'm too afraid to.

As we get older, it gets harder and harder to make new friends, and building personal networks requires a great deal of time and energy — two things that are often in short supply. In the normal course of events, folks naturally develop relationships and support systems in their places of work. But this opportunity is not afforded to sessional instructors. Since I defended, I've taught at five different institutions spread across six different cities. At the beginning, I tried to create new communities. I would try to get to know my colleagues. But I quickly learned that, as a sessional instructor, I was both a part of and apart from the department community. Some faculty members will make an effort to learn your name, especially if your department is on the small side. But, I don't think I'll ever forget the time when, after I introduced myself to a senior tenured professor, they responded by saying: "Oh, you're one of this year's sessionals," and then walked away. For the most part, your presence is too ephemeral to even register. Many of us are only on campus for a few hours a week, often we live far away, and many only stay for a year or two. In some departments, there will be well-meaning attempts to include you in faculty events, lots of talk about sessionals being an "important part of our community." But there is a clear limit to this. In my early years as a sessional, I made an effort to go to these events, thinking that it would be good to establish relationships, do some networking. But it quickly became clear that these events were about long-time friends and colleagues hanging out. After one memorable experience, where I was gently taken aside and told that I was not invited to a faculty retreat, the one that was being discussed at a faculty meeting that I was required to attend, I just stopped going all together. I would try to join local knitting circles, but I often felt out of place, and I was reluctant to form any deep connections after the heartbreak I felt leaving my knitting circle in Victoria.

The funny thing is that you don't realize how much you rely on other people until something bad happens. For much of my adult life, my husband and I were a team. We took turns supporting each other. So when he got sick, there was no one I could turn to.

My refuge was the online Canadian history community. I will never be able to express just how much their support and encouragement meant to me, nor ever express the depth of my gratitude. These amazing and generous folks arranged for grocery deliveries, sent me gift cards, kept me company while my husband was in surgery, provided advice and guidance for dealing with the hospital, and listened to me cry on the phone. They would talk to me about the most inane subjects to help me take my mind off my life, and send me messages asking if I was ok. They sent me bath products, tea, cards, hugs, and so much love. Many of these were people I had never met in real life, or had only met once or twice. But that didn't matter. They were my community, and they came together to hold me up when I couldn't do it myself.

I am also extremely grateful to the UBC History Department. The chair, Eagle Glassheim, arranged for an extension on my grading. My students were amazingly forgiving and supportive. And my colleague, Laura Ishiguro, even administered my exam and brought the booklets to me all the way out in Richmond (a three-hour round trip by transit)..

But as amazing as my online community was and is, it could not replace the physical presence of other human beings. There was nothing it could do about the profound silence I heard when I came home after visiting my husband in the hospital. There were no shoulders to cry on, no arms to hold me, no one to make sure that I was taken care of. I remember always feeling like I just wanted to go home, but I didn't know where home was anymore. And even now, more than six months later, I still can't shake that feeling.

I share my story here not to complain, but to emphasize that local support systems are extremely important, and the impact of their absence is profound. As Jessica Knapp told me while I was writing this blog post, "We are all connected. For better or for worse." In a profession where precarity is increasingly the norm and early career academics are increasingly expected to move several times for their careers, we need to consider the damage that this system does to us as human beings. We need to stop seeing sessional instructors as temporary, but as important parts of the academic community. We need to recognize that no one is unattached, that physical spaces and social networks are intimately connected, and that constant moves take a deep toll on our mental and emotional well-being. We need to consider how folks with limited-term contracts are treated, and what we can do to make environments more inclusive. We need to ensure that precarious academics have access to affordable counselling, extended health benefits, and medical/compassionate leave, even if they are only teaching one course. Most of all, we need to recognize that our actions and words impact the people around us. We need to do better. So that no one else ever needs to feel as alone as I did.

Special thanks to Krista McCracken, Jessica DeWitt, Jessica Knapp, and Anne Dance for their support and encouragement throughout the writing of this blog post.

Andrea Eidinger *(She/Her) is a historian of gender and ethnicity in postwar Canada. She holds a doctorate from the University of Victoria, and since 2009 she has been a sessional instructor in British Columbia. She is the creator and writer behind the Unwritten Histories blog, which is dedicated to revealing hidden histories and the unwritten rules of the historical profession.*