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Journey of a Global Nomad: Breaking Down and Breaking Through

by Vanessa D. Fisher



Dancing in the Liminal

I am a young woman currently on a global pilgrimage—a philosophical, cultural, and spiritual inquiry that is deeply intertwined with the engagements of everyday life.

I'm a critical thinker, a poet, and a passionate activist who is committed to creating a future of global sustainability for all. I am currently in the process of deconstructing much of my own identity as a North American woman, along with the unconscious filters and biases that have been intimately woven into that identity, so as to consciously re-construct/re-birth my 'self' as a *Global Nomad*, as a daughter born of the liminal, and as a grandmother of the entire cosmic process.

In *The Global Nomadic Experience: Living in Liminality*, authors Barbara F. Schaetti and Sheila J. Ramsey describe a Global Nomad as someone who is 'marked by frequent geographic transitions and multiple cultural influences.' At the heart of Global Nomadic existence is the social-psychological experience known as 'liminality.' From the Greek word *limnos*, meaning 'threshold,' liminality describes an "in-between time when what was, is no longer, and what will be, is not yet. It is a time rich with ambiguity, uncertainty, and the possibility of creative fermentation."

There are no false comforts here

only the echo of emptiness

hanging with anticipation

on a moment that has displaced itself from time

I find a new love

for the cold sharp edges of truth

they cut through all the markers of my seeming youth

and reveal in my heart an ancient burning

that has traveled to this moment

from the distant past of a bursting star...!

Living in the liminal is about leaving the comforts of home and stepping out of the certainty of any one fixed identity in order to discover and give birth to oneself in the 'margins' and at the mysterious intersection between multiple identities and relationships with others.

Critical postmodern feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti describes nomadism as a constant state of 'in-process' or 'becoming,' a "technique of strategic re-location in order to rescue what we need of the past so as to trace paths of transformation for our lives here, now and for the future." For Braidotti, the nomad does not stand for homelessness or compulsive displacement (i.e., complete detachment from all roots), but rather a subjectivity that has "relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity."

Nomadic is a verb, an experience of fluid boundaries, a process by which we map out multiple transformations and multiple ways of being and belonging. Braidotti argues that, "We have to map out the alternative cartographies of the non-unitary subjects that we are, so that we can get rid of any idea that there are subjects that are completely unitary, belonging entirely to one location."

Braidotti points to the essential need for a postmodern deconstruction of the unitary modernist self, as well as a breaking down of national boundaries and linear notions of time, history and progress. Braidotti, like myself, is also a reconstructionist. She wishes to deconstruct fixed identities in order to reconstruct new forms of expanded self, ethics and relationships that can serve the changes and needs of a globalizing world.

Choosing to become a Global Nomad, for me, has meant continually stepping out of the familiar and comfortable in order to stretch my own limits. It has become a soul commitment to expand, embrace and embody more and more of the world so as to become a better vehicle of service to the whole. This is not about colonialization or appropriation of other cultures, nor is it an attempt to collect more and more exotic experiences from other cultures in order to hang them on the trophy of *me* and all the exciting things I've done and experienced. Both of these are the potential pitfalls and dangers that we face as 'tourists' of other cultures and lands.

It is so easy to travel to other countries, see all the famous historical sites, take a thousand pictures of our experiences there, and yet never really enter into the energy of the land or engage the native inhabitants with any level of depth. We can easily travel through another culture without ever having to challenge or expand our own sense of self, or what we view as 'other.' As Braidotti states, "I don't call that nomadism, I call that the perverted fragmentation of advanced capitalism. Nomadism is marked by a

qualitative shift in our own consciousness, not by a consumption of the other into ourselves.”

It is this call to creating and expressing a qualitative shift in consciousness that I aim for in traveling the world and re-constructing/re-birthing myself as a Global Nomad.

So while my desire is to start connecting dialogues, values and worldviews across cultures, genders and generations, it is certain that I must engage in a continual stripping down and re-building of myself in the process. I feel this stripping down to be necessary for making my own worldviews and filters increasingly transparent and for supporting the emergence of a fluid and flexible sense of self that can tap into and express a more subtle global intelligence.

I draw from a mixture of theoretical and disciplinary frameworks for my writing and inquiry, including psychology, theology, post-modern theory, feminist theory, art theory and integral theory, among others. My own writing and work is in a continual process of deconstruction and reconstruction, ascending and descending, in-breath and out-breath... just as I am.

Breaking Through...

When I moved to Seoul in April of 2011, I was 27 years old and had hit an unexpected wall in my own life. A cascade of unforeseen breakdowns in my work, my relationships and my spiritual practice made it clear that something in my life needed to shift.

The ten years prior to moving to Korea, I had been participating and working in different capacities for a series of spiritual/self-help based organizations, all aimed at promoting personal, collective and spiritual growth in some form. I was very dedicated to my own spiritual and psychological growth and attended countless workshops, seminars and retreats from my late teens onward.

Through the course of my early to mid twenties, I was also becoming established in my own right within these communities as an emerging young writer and public speaker with interesting and intelligent perspectives to offer on issues of gender, sexuality and spirituality.

By age 26, I had presented my work at academic conferences, published in magazines and academic journals and won a prestigious award at an academic conference for my writing and research in the fields of feminism, spirituality and aesthetics. I also had the honor of participating on and facilitating panel discussions at the Integral Theory Conference with some of the leading women educators in the fields of gender, sexuality, spirituality and transformative education.

In many ways, from the outside, things looked promising for my future. I was precocious, driven, strong, outspoken and spiritually idealistic in many ways, and people were taking notice.

Yet despite these successes, throughout my mid-twenties, a tension and deep existential questioning began to grow within me about the ultimate trajectory of my practice and writing. Having worked and studied so deeply in progressive spiritual circles, and

having worked intimately with many spiritual and self-help teachers/gurus over the years, I had found myself in somewhat of a love-hate relationship with the entire genre of spiritual and self-help writing and teaching itself.

Although I loved the teachers I worked with, and many of them were also my close friends, I couldn't avoid the increasing questions and concerns surfacing within me in regards to what ultimate sustainable impact these organizations or teachings would have in the larger world in the long term.

Despite the good intentions of many of these organizations, much of what I saw being sold with sometimes over-hyped excitement as the next wave of 'universal' or 'evolutionary' or 'global' spirituality felt very much a North American-based phenomenon and often out of touch with the realities of people living in other parts of the world. I also felt that so much of the spiritual and self-help worlds were very insular within their own communities and discourses, and often unaware of the blindspots that came from this insularity.

I began to witness an increasing commodification and commercialization of spiritual discourses and teachings that slowly dislodged something in my soul. As much as I loved the communities themselves and many of the people within them, there seemed to be a lack of self-reflective critique within these groups about how their own teachings were becoming an increasingly elite luxury available only to those who could afford to buy it.

I suppose this contradiction felt somewhat stark for me because I had grown up poor and had worked service industry jobs all my life just to make ends meet while pursuing my very expensive spiritual path through high-priced retreats and workshops. I began to rack up a debt that was obscene on top of my already expensive debt from obtaining an undergraduate degree, but I kept assuring myself that it would somehow all come back to me because I was pursuing the 'good' spiritual path. I somehow believed that if I just gave it my all, I could transcend the limitations and realities of my socio-economic situation.

The reality of socio-economic conditions and how they impact and limit what we are able to manifest in our lives goes largely unacknowledged in most spiritual and New Age communities. This bias, for me, speaks to the lopsided approach of many contemporary North American spiritual-based approaches to change, and also often illuminates the socio-economic privilege of the people who advocate these views.

When I turned 27, the weight of this bias started to become apparent in my own life. I had ignored the reality of my debt and had ignored the fact that I really could not afford to be attending all these expensive workshops I'd been attending for the last 10 years. That blindspot was becoming increasingly unsustainable to the point that I realized I could no longer keep living the way I was living, nor could I any longer afford to believe that it was all somehow going to come back to me if I just attended one more enlightening retreat.

So at a critical turning point, I decided to do something very different and very practical. I chose to forego any more retreats and instead obtained an ESL certificate and took a job teaching

English at a professional English school in South Korea so that I could begin paying off my debt.

Breaking Open...

Living in South Korea for a year brought more to me than just a greater flow of income. It also increasingly dismantled assumptions and cultural markers that had been largely unconscious to me as a North American, and it made the biases of my own culture increasingly transparent to me.

I got involved in volunteer work related to women's issues in South Korea (as women's issues had been an area that I had felt quite knowledgeable in), and I was criticized more than once from my Korean feminist colleagues for my ignorance, biases and privilege. I was continually challenged, and my naïvete around certain things was exposed in ways that were sometimes uncomfortable and embarrassing. Being exposed for my own cultural biases was painful. It began to break me down in some fundamental way so that I really started to question things I had previously believed myself to hold expertise in.

I also began to realize that so much of my 'success' in my work and writing in North America was because it was very exclusive to a particular group. That was fine for what it was, but I knew that it wasn't enough for the work I really felt called to do in the world and for the work that really mattered to me. I felt some purpose burgeoning inside me to support the building of change that could have global impact, even though I had no idea how I was going to do that.

Following that inner intuition and call to something larger, I willingly submitted myself to this breaking down process, knowing that it was necessary for my own deepening, even if it was painful and disorienting at times. I knew that a true global consciousness could only be cultivated by my own willingness to be humble, curious, broken down and broken open in my thinking and assumptions by the cultures I visited and lived within. This radical commitment to global nomadic existence therefore became the new foundation for my philosophy and path.

In the course of living abroad, as part of this commitment, I've also spent a lot more time reading and learning about politics and economics in order to better grasp how socio-political realities shape our world and our individual as well as collective choices. This has been a necessary complement and corrective to the largely spiritual and psychological approaches to change I had been immersed within for the last decade.

Politics runs so deep in how we live and interact, I believe that real lasting sustainable change cannot be enacted without a strong understanding of the ways that politics and the economy shape our lives, our psyches, our choices and the world around us.

My Commitment to Radical Global Nomadic Existence

This past month, I committed to working at least 3-4 more years with my company. My time working for my company will be spent living in different countries, spanning Asia to Europe to South America. I've also committed to becoming fluent in at least

two other languages because I believe that living in other cultures and learning other languages is one of the best, if not the best, ways to expand my thinking and ability to take diverse perspectives.

My commitment to global nomadic existence is therefore not just a pastime, a cool idea, nor a brand I'm attempting to sell to others. Rather, it's a commitment I've made to myself and to the divine to break down and willingly submit to a fundamental reorientation of my self and identity at its core, so as to be of better service to the whole.

I also sense this kind of global consciousness is becoming increasingly essential and intuitive for my generation at large, as the problems we are facing and will face in the coming fifty years will be global in scope and impact.

If we are to have any hope of making it through, we have to start thinking larger than the limits of our own culture, and I've found that this is not something that necessarily comes easy to us as North Americans. As a culture, we are often deeply entrenched in our own values and beliefs in ways that we are blind to. Therefore, broadening our orientation to a vision that is global in perspective is not something any of us will accomplish overnight or in a weekend workshop, and that is OK.

If I've learned anything in my short 28 years of being on this planet, it is that real sustainable development and change takes time, patience, as well as the courage and humility to continually step outside of one's comfort zone so as to embrace the contradictions, conflicts, paradoxes and challenges inherent in the world within and outside oneself.

As I increasingly realize the actual scale, depth and complexity of the world around me, it has been a very maturing process in regards to being able to embrace both the potentials and the limits that the real world imposes on me. Change on a global scale takes time, and I believe that idealistic spiritual approaches on their own, no matter how well-intentioned, are not going to be enough to speed up that process.

In this past year, I've personally let go of the zeal and hype of trying to change myself or the world in a week, a year, or even 10 years. I'm working to embrace slow steady change because I feel at an intuitive level that such an approach will allow me to help support building real sustainable roots for our collective future and not just short-term solutions that will crumble in a year.

Liminality as Source of Integration and Transformation

A big part of my journey over the last year has been a practice of cultivating an intuitive ability to hold spaces of liminality, where radical interconnected love, mystery and beauty prevail. From those 'in-between' spaces of mystery and unknowing, unexpected insights emerge. This is a powerful space accessible to all of us.

I feel it is within these liminal spaces that we can begin to hold and work with the larger global contradictions, conflicts, paradoxes and challenges facing us in a creative way that integrates the best of the inner and outer worlds, the individual and the collective domains, and the spiritual and political approaches to

untitled

*fear grips these tender limbs
something unknown moves deep within
a weight that sinks
a cry for something indistinct
an amorphous chaos of forgotten words, seasoned wounds,
and silenced screams*

*they quiver like ripples on a dark unknown sea
an abyss that now dangles beneath my feet
a paved street
a song stuck on repeat*

*a pitiful sight i am
a branch in a hurricane
attempting to plant roots*

*an earthworm squirming on pavement
under the sun's hot admire
my limitations curling and coiling
under the heat of love's fire
i am stuck again
with no light to guide me
no roadmap beside me
no insight to find me
just this love for truth at the core of my heart
that continues to tear my world apart*

*i pray every night that i might burn at god's altar
but not falter
by scorching the lives of those that i love*

*but like an infant
trying to live by love's hand
i'm often humbled that i can barely even stand
as the pain of truth feels too immense to bury
yet also too heavy for my human heart to carry*

*and so i ask:
where was god when eve dove deep
and eden fell from under her feet*

*and where was god when serpents cried
and beauty died
in the wake of her absence*

*and i kneel and beg:
please god show me the good within
but i only continue to shed sin's second skin*

*because virtue is a composite
composed of its opposite
and the more one seeks and speaks of love
the more one meets their own limitation
and invites false imitation*

*the more one becomes a bottom dweller
a fearless propeller
piercing the truth of their own confusion
which unfolds in ever subtle layers of delusion
a violent intrusion
on the image of who we once thought ourselves to be*

*and i ask god:
what is the point of all this pain?
and god does not refrain:
compassion*

*it is through pain that compassion deepens
everything else will eventually weaken*

~Vanessa D. Fisher

change. At least, that is the hope, and it is also something I hold with unwavering resonance as a possibility deep in my bones.

Six months ago, I initiated a Dialogue Series on my website entitled, "Dancing in the Liminal: A Global, Border-Crossing Inquiry into Art, Activism, Spirituality and Leadership for the 21st Century." This Dialogue Series marks part of my commitment to facilitate what I hope will become a more integrated discussion on leadership for the future by looking at how spirituality and psychology intersect with politics, art, economics and culture. This is one manifestation of the creativity that is emerging through my own global nomadic journey and my increasing commitment to foster spaces of liminality that might allow collective intelligence to emerge in new chaordic forms.

It has indeed been a very full year of learning, growth, breaking down, breaking open, as well as building up new structures to hold the authentic expression of what I love and want to bring

forth into the world. It hasn't been easy, nor has it all been done perfectly, but the path itself has always been paved with my own deepest intentions to bring more truth, beauty and goodness into the world, and I hope that reflects in what I do and create.

Who knows what the future will bring, but may all that I do in the coming years be a continual commitment of service to something larger than myself, and may each country I visit bring me to my knees, rattle my assumptions, and break me open to more beauty, mystery and love in ways that benefit us all.

note: 'quote taken from my poem "Death's Heartbeat"

Vanessa D. Fisher is a published author, poet, public speaker, cultural critic and self-ascribed Global Nomad with a keen interest in international issues as they intersect with gender, spirituality, art and culture. Originally from Canada, Vanessa is currently traveling and living around the world, working as an ESL teacher and volunteering for international organizations related to women's issues and sex trafficking. <http://www.vanessadfisher.com/dialogues.php>



