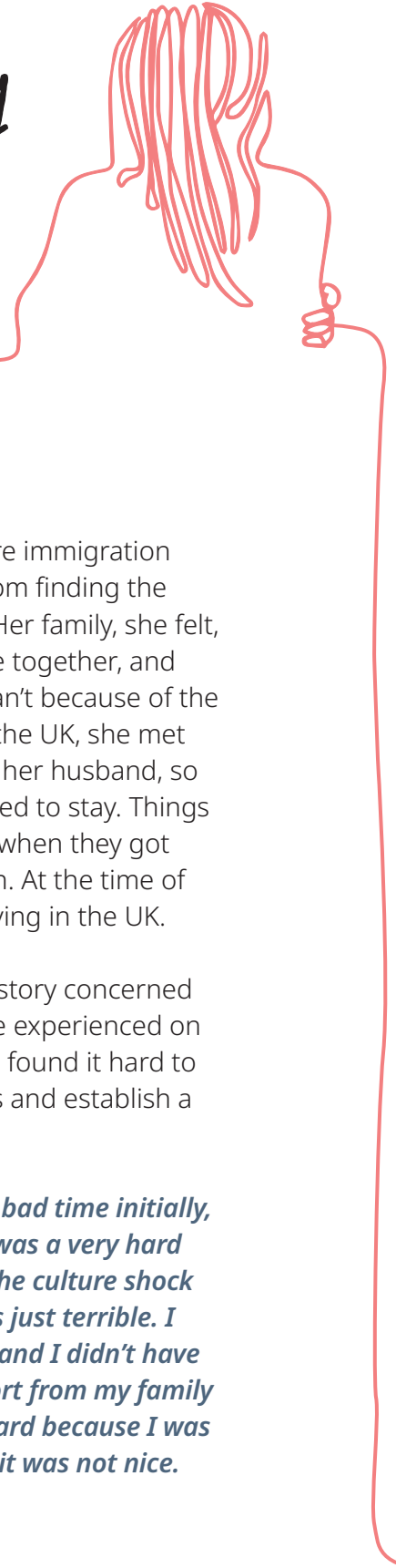


#6 A story of loss and searching



We have written elsewhere of strong themes running through many of the stories – of loss, immigration and unstable housing, and the implications of being homeless and rootless. For a couple of people, this connected with a narrative theme of searching – for a home, for understanding, for meaning and a sense of belonging.

One woman, born in India, moved to the UK in search of work, a home and family. She began her tale of searching with the loss of her father when she was very young:

That's why you keep looking for a father figure in your life, mentors or things like that and people who might be just like him a little bit. You keep looking for it in your life. [Storyteller 7]

She lived in another country for a while, where she had wanted to settle, before coming to the UK as a second choice.

Even after arriving here immigration laws prevented her from finding the security she needed. Her family, she felt, wanted them all to live together, and she told us that “we can't because of the immigration laws”. In the UK, she met the man who became her husband, so she was more motivated to stay. Things became more settled when they got married and had a son. At the time of interview, they were living in the UK.

A major theme in her story concerned the “culture shock” she experienced on coming to the UK; she found it hard to form good friendships and establish a sense of belonging.

I did have a very, very bad time initially, from 2006 to 2008. It was a very hard time for me because the culture shock was quite huge. It was just terrible. I was almost homeless and I didn't have any money, any support from my family as well. It was quite hard because I was in a new country. Yes, it was not nice.

She found people in the UK to be “very busy and... very individualistic”, focused on their self-development, their own goals and achievements, to the exclusion of what she described as “the social bit”. She saw mental health facilities as the only way she could find someone to confide in. In her own country, she said:

Building a friendship is quite easy and there are just so many people, you never feel isolated because there’s just so many people all around you all the time, you don’t have time to think about yourself. Whereas here, you have a lot of time to think about yourself, to introspect and to think about yourself but that’s a bit too much I feel.

She compared this to the individualistic culture in the UK, where people are not expected to talk to strangers.

Here, I feel sometimes it’s almost like everybody is so quiet and everybody is made to be so quiet that it’s almost like you’re killing people by the quietness. You’re killing people by not letting them speak, I mean on the tube or on the buses, it’s just like I feel like we are humans, we’re supposed to socialise, we’re supposed to speak out but the culture is such that I can’t go against the culture I feel. I have to adapt and I feel maybe the adapting has taken its toll.

The trigger for her period of psychosis was a falling out with a friend, a not insignificant incident in the context of her search for human connection. At the time, she was tired from a lack of sleep due to having a young child. She began to see things and to hear voices.

Not all these manifestations were negative. One of the voices was her father: “It’s a good voice” – and she experienced some of what she went through as a form of spiritual awakening in which she was channelling information from other beings, some of whom she described as coming from the future. She began a new search: for meaning and understanding in relation to her mental health and her spiritual awakening, but also for someone to talk to about what was happening to her.

She demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the culture and attitudes surrounding mental health in this country. She was clearly aware that she needed to keep her spiritual explanations to herself at times but was also critical of a system that relied on medication as the main form of treatment. She described her experiences with her psychiatrist as frustrating and said that she had wanted to talk to them about her experiences but found they were unreceptive. This had an impact on her ability to make sense of her experience.

It makes you feel, I don’t know what’s the word, lonely or isolated or whatever. It just makes you feel not happy because you’ve gone through this incredible crazy experience and you want to share it with somebody and you want to maybe sit down and just try and understand it. In some ways it might be true, who knows. It might be true that maybe there is a race of aliens and they tried to contact me, I don’t know. I should be able to say that, that’s my point of view, without being laughed at, without feeling... at least I should be able to think that way or at least have that freedom to think this.

She felt obliged to take medication to prevent her son being taken away by social services – she felt that social services were only interested in whether she was complying: “you’re taking medication because you’re putting everybody at ease”. This further compounded her sense that she could not talk to people about her experiences, making it difficult for her to make sense of them.

She finally found someone to talk to at the mental health service when she was referred to a psychologist – someone who did not dismiss her search for meaning within a spiritual framework. She had spent time and energy seeking an understanding of her own experiences and had finally found a person to share this with.

I just don't want to be labelled because of my viewpoints, to be crazy because if I've gone through this experience, I can say... I don't call it a spiritual awakening, nor do I call it a mental health problem, I just say it's an experience because at the end of it, it's just an experience. You're going through that sort of experience which is different, which is not normal. It makes you do things differently. It can be ultimate reality, it can be several different things. But I should be able to voice my opinion and be able to talk to people. I think that's what is needed in mental health facilities.

Her observations about mental health services included the need for people to find someone on their wavelength to talk to early on, before professionals leap to medication or diagnosis. She also spoke of needing to go somewhere quiet to begin to make sense of things.

She described the language of mental illness and diagnosis as creating stigma. She suggested that regarding it as a “special experience” might encourage more people to talk about their experiences and others to listen.

There should be a place where, without thinking, without making them... firstly, the whole mental thing is debatable, whether it is something you should consider as a stigma because the word mental health itself is wrong I feel. You are saying that this person's mental health has broken down.

I think that's why it creates the stigma. If you called it more experience or whatever, special experience. It is a very special experience which people go through and they need more support for it and be able to talk to more and more people who have also gone through that.

...you still need people to talk to about your theories and the things that you've experienced even though how crazy and far-fetched they sound. You still need that safe environment where you feel accepted and not being laughed at and understood.

She felt that without the freedom to talk about the experiences she had been through and her beliefs about them, she was at risk of losing her identity. In her own culture, her beliefs might have been understood alongside “gods and goddesses, stories where people were flying. We have that culture of having those things, whereas here you have to be a bit mental.”

The moment I say it, people laugh at it and you're like, "Okay, am I not supposed to think that way." So at least you should have that freedom to say, "Yes, it might be possible." If it was possible then I should be able to think more about it. But whereas I feel here, because you're laughed at, you stop doing that. You ignore it and you have to live this bleak life which doesn't... you're not supposed to think about God. I mean sometimes also people laugh at religion.

Interviewer: *So you're having to deny a part of yourself almost?*

Storyteller: *Yes. You're kind of losing your identity.*

Her story ended with her intending to continue her search by moving to another country with her husband and child – somewhere new to both of them that might start them off on a more equal footing.

I'm hoping that the next place I go to is a lot more friendlier and easy for me to make friends too and people who I can confide in and can build that relationship where I don't have to feel as if I don't belong.

Looking back on her story, she said:

I'm afraid that what has happened to me is due to not having that support and not having that family and not having the friendships which I'm looking for.

The interviewer described the tone of her interview as sad but spiritual: "I get a sense of restlessness in her, a seeking of peace and home."

A SPACE TO EXPLORE MEANING

Dolly's perspective

“ I mourn the spaces that psychiatry doesn't want to provide – a place to explore truth, meaning, trauma and pain with someone who has got your back instead of trying to pathologise everything, and pretending none of it is normal for a human to do.

Where can we have difficult and uncomfortable conversations without coercion censoring people in the most demeaning of ways?

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