What does it mean to belong? Where do we belong? In the place where we were born? In the place where we grow up? Or in the place where we choose to live, love and get old?

I have struggled to answer this question all my life. You see, I was born here in Australia, so technically I am not a migrant and yet, for all intents and purposes, I am a foreigner here, in the country where I was born.

This fact hit me, like a tonne of bricks, when I was about 8. My big, extended family was sitting around the table as usual after dinner one Sunday when the conversation took us back to AltaVilla Irpina, a small village in southern Italy. My uncle was retelling, for the hundredth time, the story of a picnic down by the river on an early Spring evening. In my excitement, I chipped in: “I remember. That was the time when Nonno’s dog, Toto, was bitten by a snake.” There was a moment’s silence until one of the cousins said, “How can you remember that? You weren’t there. You were born here in Australia”. And yet I could remember because the stories and the emotions had become real, they had created a false memory that had formed the backbone of my personality.

The first time I went ‘back’ to Italy (and isn’t it strange, that I say I ‘went back’ to a place I had never visited) everything was familiar. I knew the houses, I knew where my Nonna collected the water from the well and I knew the chapel on the street corner where there was a fountain with drinking water. But I didn’t belong there because I wasn’t born there. And yet, with my hesitant English, my dark eyes and hair and my olive skin devoid of tell tales Anglo Saxon freckles I didn’t belong here either.

From that moment of realization until now, I was lost. I don’t know where I belong.

This is a common feeling for many migrants. A feeling of displacement and confusion of identity. On the weekend I was reminded of this as I shared a typical Aussie barbeque with young university students. There was a young Norwegian girl, Brigitte and a maths undergraduate Ahmed – all good so far. But then there were three students from China – they introduced themselves as Winston, Holly and Claire. I asked Winston about this and his response saddened me. He said Australians can’t pronounce their Chinese names so they
change them to accommodate us. Australians, particularly South Australians, proudly live in a multicultural society but many of us can’t, or won’t, learn to pronounce migrants’ original names. We haven’t improved in this respect since my parents arrived in Australia early in the 1950’s. Their given names were Alberico and Elvira. My father was known amongst his peers as Albert or Rico. My mother, depending on where she worked, was Ella, Vera or Veronica. Would it affect your sense of identity, girls, if your name was disrespected in this way?

My father left Italy as a young man of 24 – he had been married already for 3 years and had a one year old child, my brother, Armando. Like many of his friends, my father left my mother and brother behind. The idea was that he would get a good job, buy a house and then send for her. He was a proud, handsome, intelligent young man who hadn’t even begun his adult life in Italy but like all young men of that age, he thought he was a champion, invincible, the head of his young family. When he arrived in Adelaide, he was shunted into anonymous queues, given forms written in English that he could not possibly understand, his name was mispronounced so he didn’t know he was being called – he was treated like an uneducated fool. His relatives had said that they would meet him at the dock but no one had prepared him for this humiliating reception.

And so he began, from those early days, to feel ashamed of his lack of English, his lack of schooling, his dark skin, his black hair. And he determined that his children would never feel that shame. These feelings became a big part of growing up in my migrant family. Failing in anything we did was never an option for my brother and I. If we did anything we had to be good at it. If we played sport, we had to be the captain of the team, if we entered a competition we had to win. It was not that we were competing against anyone else; my father was not competitive in the sense that we had to be better than others, we just had to do our absolute best and work as hard as we could. Unlike my cousins and friends nothing else was expected of us, none of the cleaning or cooking. If we were hunched over our books, our parents were happy. If we succeeded at school or sport, they would burst with pride. Again, unlike my cousins and friends, my parents never discriminated against me as a girl.

My mother was a fiercely intelligent woman who had never been to school. Most evenings after all her chores were done, we would sit
together, she and I, and she would practice her signature. I would read her some of the stories I had for homework. She learned to read by recognising letters in the labels of foods she bought. She taught herself to read and write rosters in the hospitals where she worked firstly as a cleaner, then as a housekeeper in charge of a team of women. As a family, we all shared her anger that she had been denied an education simply because she was a girl. It made my father determined that I would have the same opportunities as my bother and it drove me to succeed at school because it gave me a love of learning and a gratitude that I was valued by both my parents as an individual. I believe it also made me a very patient and respectful teacher. My mother’s story, born of poverty and the misogyny of her time, gave her determination to overcome her background and it has made me the feminist that I am today. I was hesitant about including such a personal detail of my family life, but it is a common story true of so many women who came to Australia in the 50s. Perhaps what is different is that my parents, uneducated and simple as they were, saw more clearly than others that only through education could we hope to succeed in our new country.

My brother and I understood what drove my family’s sense of identity and pride. It was tied up with another strong emotion. Somehow, we had to justify my father’s guilt in uprooting his young family from the safety and love of immediate family, to take them halfway across the world, to subject them to petty humiliation on a daily basis. We had to make it all worthwhile for them. These expectations weighed heavily upon us as young people. I saw these same pressures amongst my cousins and my peer group of friends. The wonderful success of my generation I attribute to this weight of emotions that our parents felt – shame at their treatment, guilt for leaving, and wounded pride that the new country did not celebrate their youth, their beauty and their skills. They were put to work as factory fodder, doing the most menial of tasks, the dirtiest of work. The legions of successful people from my generation, of course, include teachers and engineers, doctors and lawyers but also business people with entrepenueral skills who established their own businesses as panel beaters, hairdressers, restaurauers, accountants. What drove us was not just a natural drive to succeed but a final answer to the schoolyard taunts of ‘wog’ and ‘dago’ – we showed them.
My generation had to grow up quickly, we had to wrestle with very adult emotions and often we had to take on the roles that no child should have to do – being the interpreter for our parents, explaining an official form or writing a letter to a landlord or a boss. This is not a natural situation and added to the humiliation our parents must have felt.

Very often, these days, I am reduced to tears when I see the plight of refugees and our treatment of them. I see in them my father’s bewildered eyes, my mother’s plea for someone to give her work. We call my parents’ journey one of migration, giving it legitimacy, purpose and direction. But in truth they were economic refugees, fleeing a war torn Italy that could not support them and their families. Italian migration to Australia is not new, it started a long time ago. From the 1830s fishermen from Puglia migrated to settlements in Port Pirie and Port Adelaide. Then between 1920 and 1930 there was a substantial flow of Italians to Australia especially from 1924 when Italians could no longer migrate to the United States. Of course, the biggest wave of migrants came after WW2. And now, of course, there is a new wave of young, professional Italians matching those numbers. So, if for over a hundred years, Italians have been leaving what they imagined was an intolerable situation to come to Australian, why do they cling to the outdated memories and glamourize the past. Wouldn’t normal people try to forget what they left behind and embrace without hesitation everything in the new country?

It is an important but complex question – it is too easy to say that the our parents felt rejected by the majority of Australians and so they clung to what and who they knew. The swell of migration had created a time of exciting social change in the new country. I remember at the time there were constant new arrivals with welcome parties, weddings and christenings – there were parties every week within a closed and safe community. In those early days we didn’t feel isolated, and though I have concentrated on the sad times, we really also had a lot of fun. We didn’t need to reach out beyond our community. I remember so much laughter, songs and deep friendships – but it was always bittersweet as people remembered their families left behind even in the midst of happiness. And generally since they worked with other migrants in factories or hospitals there was no need to learn much English beyond the
necessities. It is only now that they are old and alienated, sadly often from their own grandchildren, that they are lonely and homesick.

My experiences as a daughter of migrants have made me the person I am today. And it has been my honour and privilege to share those issues with you this morning. For those students who have an Italian cultural connection through parents and grandparents, I hope that you will treasure the opportunity of connecting with them in a real and meaningful way through learning the language of your heritage. To the other students for whom this is a second or third language, I hope you will take the opportunity to learn about a great culture and civilization. The richness of the Italian language, its origins and its history will lead you to understand that being Italian is more than cheesy Neapolitan love songs and delicious food.