

Being Home

When I accepted the invitation to come preach today, my first thought was “I’m going home!”

To be honest, most of the ensuing thoughts were also, “I’m going home! I’m going home! Home! Home! Home! Home!”

Now, while lovely, you can image how these thoughts stop being of any particular use when sitting in front of the blank page that the sermon needs to go on.

Because there is so much I want to tell you.

I want to tell you how I carried a small picture of this congregation in with me to see the Ministerial Fellowship Committee last Fall when I was granted Preliminary Fellowship as a minister in our denomination.

I want to tell you how the day this congregation ordained me last Spring ranks with my wedding as one of the happiest and momentous days of my life.

I want to tell you about the hospice work I am doing now; a calling that you inspired me to pursue.

I want to tell you how I strive to bring the loving and unfailingly generous spirit of this community to every bedside I sit at, every family I grieve with.

Every time I stand before a gathering of mourners and take a breath to begin the memorial service, I remember how I did that for the first time here with you.

I want to tell you how I beam with pride every time speak about my ministerial internship here and how very, very excited I am that you have continued to open your doors and hearts to more student ministers because this broken world so needs the ministers you are helping to grow here.

I can't say that enough. Your ministry as a teaching congregation is going to help spread the spirit of this congregation around the world. Just you watch.

And more than all this, I want to tell you that I missed you.

A lot.

But most of all, I want to listen.

What's been going on here for the last two and a half years?

What have you celebrated?

What have you struggled through?

What has given you hope?

What has broken your hearts?

Who is missing?

What is saving your life these days?

What new traditions have you adopted?

What are you looking forward to?

I hope you are writing these down or something because the rest of our time together is going to be you guys answering my questions.

No? Ah, well.

Still, the invitation to return to the place I now consider my congregational home, especially in a season when so many of us are contemplating what going home even means anymore, got me thinking about home and how central a concept being home is to our lives.

This is the time of year when some of us make pilgrimages to the towns and cities of our childhood, returning home to places that are different than we remember them. Time and absence do funny things to places.

There's an extension on the high school now. The gas station on the corner burned down last summer. Half the stores in the strip mall are empty but at least there is a new Trader Joe's across the street.

These changes just reinforce that fact that life kept happening here after you left. How strange. Now you can't help but wonder if this still home if so much can change without your knowledge.

Or perhaps your home is the destination for these pilgrims.

You are the guardian of this place, its caretaker as well as its resident.

You welcome others home as they return. Your house becomes a kind of shrine as you clean and decorate; making it glow with hospitality and holiday cheer.

Or, at least, that's your aim. Suddenly children, family, and friends find themselves with a dual designation of guest and you know that in order for a holiday to feel right they must feel *at home*.

Because all the songs, and television specials, and magazines lining the supermarket checkout lines insist that this is the case. How did such a simple concept become so complicated?

For well over a month, sometimes starting even before Thanksgiving, our days are filled with songs pining for home.

There's No Place like Home for the Holidays.

Please Come Home for Christmas.

I'll Be Home for Christmas.

If you string holiday song titles together, you get a story of home. And the entire country seems to participate in this collective fiction of what it means to be home.

I call it a fiction because even if our personal histories are filled with nothing but nourishing, dependable family harmony, going home is still a mixed bag.

And that's if we are lucky enough to have a place to call home. For many people, because of natural disaster, war, or good, old-fashion family dysfunction, the word "home" brings with it feelings of devastation, abuse, and rejection.

Yet even if home has been a source of pain, the idea of home is still yearned for. A better home that fulfills its promise must be out there.

No wonder the concept of home is loaded, especially around the holidays.

What if we set aside all the holiday noise about home for a moment? After all, home isn't just longed for in the waning of the year. I would argue that home is a longing of all people, everywhere, throughout time. The longing for home is perhaps at the heart of all religious sentiment. Some essential part of us wants a sense of peace, a sense of belonging, a sense of rightness that can be described in no other way.

Even if the homes we have known in our lives have been places of violence, shame, or neglect, we still long a place of perfect love.

We want to go home.

The story of Genesis, the foundation of the bible, and, therefore much of our Western civilization is begins with the first humans being banished from their home. Ever after, they, and all of their descendants, seek a way back.

Call it Paradise, call it Heaven, call it Utopia.

It is the place we yearn for, the place we strive for, the place that can finally satisfy every spiritual want we have ever had.

The 13th century Sufi poet Rumi speaks to this longing when he wrote:

"All day I think about it,

then at night I say it.

Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?

I have no idea.

My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,

and I intend to end up there...

I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.

Whoever brought me here, will have to take me home."

The Christian writer C.S. Lewis imaged the ecstatic homecoming of finally reaching heaven when one of his characters exclaims, "I have come home at last! This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now."

This longing speaks to the core of us.

We can recognize this quest in others because we are on it ourselves.

We Unitarian Universalists are nothing if not a questing people.

We are spiritual adventurers determined to ask all the questions,

learn all the stories,

and find all the possible answers

because what we are seeking might be in that next book,

or in this next job,

or in that next relationship.

It might.

We are forward-leaning people, and this isn't a bad thing. We pull and push toward a world with more justice and more love for a reason. Because if we do find what we've always been looking for, we want to make it available to everyone. It's the Universalist in us.

There is a place for longing. There is a place for dissatisfaction with the status quo. There is a place for striving for something better. But constant yearning and striving is exhausting and unsustainable. It must be balanced with contentment and rest.

It must be balanced with home.

I hear that November's theme for spiritual practice is sacrifice – the practice of surrender.

These are loaded words in our tradition and culture.

We are wary of sacrifice because it has been used to the harm of others, particularly those without power.

We chafe at surrender because we value our control.

Surrender seems so passive.

So... un-American.

According to the pagan calendar, we are in the time of year ruled by the Crone.

Just as the trees shed their leaves, the Crone cuts from us, what we no longer need.

It's an unsettling time. A time both of harvest and of death.

A time when what you thought was valuable is gone, leading you to realize it is no longer necessary after all.

It is a time when we can learn the truth in the apparent contradiction that only through surrender can we find freedom.

What if we could sacrifice our notion that what we need to feel whole is located beyond us?

What if we could surrender the idea that home is somewhere, sometime else?

What if we could be where we are?

“No one longs for what he or she already has,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “and yet the accumulated insight of those wise about the spiritual life suggests that the reason so many of us cannot see the red X that marks the spot is because we are standing on it.

The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company.

All we lack is the willingness to imagine we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are.”

The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are.

The Dalai Lama is fond of quoting an old Tibetan saying, “Wherever you feel at home, you are at home.”

The Gospel of Luke quotes Jesus as saying, “God’s kingdom is coming, but not in a way that you will be able to see with your eyes. People will not say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ because God’s kingdom is within you.”

For every soul who cries out, “I want to go home!” There is a wise teacher who replies, “Sweetheart, you are already here.”

It is finding the moment of peace in the midst of chaos. It is surrendering control and consenting to be where you are.

There are times when our longing for home becomes more than just a metaphysical pull. There are times when we are truly lost; refugees in our own lives. It is in these times that even the tiniest glimpses of home, of that red X beneath our feet, save us.

It is that genuine smile from a stranger, that insight that comes when washing the dishes, that phone call from a friend you haven’t seen in years, that favorite episode of Doctor Who that you caught purely by chance.

Because home isn’t a place, or even a particular set of circumstances.

In order to go home, you have to *be* home.

And the marvelous thing about this is that when you are home, you invite me to be home.

In this way, we become home for each other. We can remind each other why right here, right now, is the place to be.

So this holiday season, as you journey out, or not. As you host gatherings, or not, I hope you will pause frequently and consent to be where you are and to notice the unique beauty of your home, wherever you find yourself.

And thanks for welcoming me home.

Please join me in saying “Blessed Be and Amen.”