

Beyond Borders: A Reflection on Home for the Holidays
A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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Home

It is not easy to see how the more extreme forms of nationalism can long survive when men have seen the Earth in its true perspective as a single small globe against the stars.

~Arthur C. Clarke

Sermon

When I was growing up my parents had a tradition of inviting an international student from the University to join us for Thanksgiving dinner. The holiday didn't mean a lot to them – but the dormitories just emptied out at the University. I remember feeling pretty shy around the students but glad that my parents were being welcoming and trying to make people feel at home. The holidays are heavy with the freight of the word “home”. It has so many meanings.

I have been ruminating on the idea of home particularly, this year, since my experience at the Mexican bakery on near the Taco Bell on Dundee in preparation for our Dia De Los Muertos service. It was in the interaction with the woman who so kindly interpreted for me with the proprietor of the bakery that I found myself engaged with reflection on thoughts of home.

Where is home -- they say home is where the heart is. But what does that mean? I can remember when I moved into Hyde Park for Theological school – the city was so alien to me – so noisy it was hard to sleep for the first few nights – horns, sirens, voices on the street. I had moved from Atlanta – a pretty big city, itself, but Chicago was far more intense. Gosh – I have to tell you something I found pretty funny the other day as I was listening to my daughter Chava and three of her very smart friends talk about their driving lessons as I was shuttling them someplace. They were all concerned about learning parallel parking – it is one of the great challenges to any driver. Anyway they knew some guy at school who had told them not to worry about parallel parking because you never need it – everyplace has front in parking. The girls were all laughing as one of them said – “Well – I know I'm going to want to go into the city.” It was an interesting study in the imagination and adaptability of the human animal. Anyway – my first couple of weeks in Chicago were nerve wracking. But I chosen to come here – the city beckoned me – more than Berkeley or Boston. I think that I wanted the earthy Midwestern – ness, the textured city, the great lake. So there I was. I got the boxes unpacked, hung pictures, and discovered, one night lying in bed and listening to the sounds of the city, that I loved the noise and the activity and, instead of being over stimulated or stressed, I was comforted hearing the ongoing life outside. I drifted off to sleep that night with a feeling of home that I had not had since – well, I'm not sure since when. I was at home. And I've felt at home in this city – and the suburbs – ever since.

My parents moved a lot when I was little. I was born in Morristown, New Jersey – but we only lived there for a year. Then I lived in Spartanburg, South Carolina for a year, then up to Rochester, New York, where we moved every year until I was in First Grade. Where is home?

We are interesting creatures – while we can set down roots – we are mobile. Amazingly mobile. That's one of the reasons why we've been able to survive and continue to evolve over the ages and the millennia. We are mobile in so many ways and have been since the very beginnings of human life.

So it wasn't surprising that – after fomenting treason and revolution – and experiencing repression in England – the Puritans set sail for new lands and found themselves in this most generous of lands. I feel certain, as I think over the large breadth of human history that there have been countless bands of survivors who have found themselves strangers in strange lands. They have been few and many, men and women and children, starving or ill, exhausted and yearning for rest. From the first

parents in Africa – where our genetic roots are all said to be – we have been branching out and out. Seeking more plentiful food, water, gentler climes, more room to grow – humans have set forth – not usually hungering for rootlessness – but hungering for the land and the other people to offer welcome or to make survival easier. Talking with Colleen Vahey the other day about this she said – “even our land migrates.” Yes – even the land beneath our feet that seems so solid – is a living and moving presence in our history. Once all the land was one mass – Pangea. The coastlines from which we often take our sense of home – think of the way you look at a globe and orient yourself according to the shapes of the continents – the coastlines are the places where the land was torn asunder by natural forces. Scars from a time when we were one continent. And since that great rending humans have migrated. Some migrate within the course of a year – going from one climate or hunting ground to another --- snowbirds – some native American tribes were seasonal migrants – going from one familiar home to another during the year in a cycle – belonging not to one place – but to many; sometimes we call them nomads – imagining that they belong no place.

Home is where we are nourished. That is why – the world over – whether it is called thanksgiving or some other name, there are celebrations of harvest – in gratitude for surviving – for resting and for nesting. In Ghana – the Yam festival, the harvest moon festival in China, Chu Suk in Korea, Holi in India, Sukkoth is a Jewish harvest and thanksgiving festival – native Americans celebrated the harvest before the Europeans came. Such festivals are celebrations of the bounty of the earth that makes life possible and makes home a reality. Home is the magical and challenging combination of nourishment of body, soul, heart...

Humans long to belong someplace – we like to nest – at least most of us. There’s a kind of magic that places can work upon us. Like that night when the city of Chicago became home to me. There are places – that by personal history, family history, or some other wordless call -- lay a claim upon us.

I remember a woman I met in England during college. As she drove me around Lancashire she could point out places where her family had lived two or three hundred years ago. She was rooted in her land – at home. Home is surely rooted in place – there are places that your family has known for generations that carry the imprint of ancestors and whose embrace you feel when you are there. It can be a place without any human feature – a mountain, or river valley, or a small town where everyone gives directions by saying things like – you take a right turn where the old store used to be and left turn where the old fair grounds were and if you stay on the old school road, you can’t miss it.

Wars arise when people have competing claims for the same place – sometimes equal claims for the same place. I own my home – well really the bank owns it – well – at this point I can’t really be sure who owns it – I only know that I have to pay my mortgage each month to be able to stay in my home. I own my home but the bank can take it away. Deeper than that I know that it was someone else’s home before mine, and someone else’s before that. And I cohabit with the squirrels, rabbits, foxes, and even a skunk or two periodically, who also have a claim on the land I think I own. And beyond those claims there were people here long before me – ten thousand years ago – who had a home in this place. There probably wasn’t a mortgage or a deed, a fence, or a house. But it was theirs. And it is mine. When I drive into our cul de sac I am so

happy to be home. I know my neighbors – we are diverse and argue about politics but we love each other. We make soups and offer meals to each other. We have parties and let our dogs play together and sniff each other. Everything we do together makes this place more and more home.

Home is where the heart is – where the people that we love are – so when the holidays roll around – if you are separated from the people you love – you may feel that wistfulness that is like homesickness – homesick for the people who nourish you and give you roots. There are wars around the world right at this moment – and at this very moment there are Americans who long to be home with their families, who long to be home and who are compelled to stay away until their country calls them back. At this moment there are Americans at home on American soil whose hearts are with loved ones who serve far away and for whom home feels strangely empty. At this moment there are people living in refugee camps, wishing they could go home but knowing it would mean death. Home is where we find refuge but for there to be real refuge there needs to be real safety, real welcome, real comfort.

So many people in refugee camps are there because there were competing claims for their homes – some just claims, some unjust claims. When I arrived in Israel and went to the wailing wall I felt as though I had come home. I wept with the grief of hundreds of years of the persecution of Jews. I have a family tree on my father's side that goes back to the 16th century in Poland. I thought of my family in Poland, France, in Germany, in Russia, and in those strange places where the borders and boundaries changed back and forth and back and forth from king to king, from war to war. I remembered the ones who had fled the pogroms and moved to Israel in the early 20th century and the ones who had fled the Nazis and the ones who had not been able to flee. And the stones spoke to me of the ages – of all the people who had come and settled and conquered and been vanquished -- era after era. Of the generations who had seen their homes destroyed and then had to wander in search of new home. Outside Jerusalem was a land that I had never before visited but that felt more a part of me – more home than almost any place I have ever been. In the deserts, on the lush hills of Haifa overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, on the steeps of Nazareth – at home and yet – it was not my home. And when I visited the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem during the same trip I was also struck – the people there were from 17 towns and villages who had lost their homes when the state of Israel was annexed in 1948. There was a large mosaic on a wall by the community center that listed all the names of the villages and portrayed a large keyhole that through which a family was peering back at the town they had lost. The key was pictured on everything. The longing to return home was as strong sixty years later as the longing of the people driven from their homes in Europe to find their Israel. I felt torn between narratives.

When our eldest Lea, came back from Sri Lanka in June this year, she brought us mugs and tote bags. On one mug words were printed in Tamil and on the other words were printed in Sinhalese – the two languages of Sri Lanka. Both have a claim on the people – but Tamil is the language of the minority and Sinhalese the language of the majority who hold power. The two languages compete as the people are in conflict. But on one tote bag the Tamil was printed on one side and Sinhalese was printed on the other. The narratives that each people tell of their history are different –

and the very language used has become a powerful symbol of home and belonging and a ground of battle as well.

When I stood in the bakery on Dundee trying to talk with the proprietor through an interpreter, I knew that this was his home as much as it was mine. My family came to the United States a little over one hundred years ago and his – I can't be sure. My family came from far away in Poland and Russia and his from a place just next door. And there we stood – not having a good command of the language of the other. But we had a will to communicate and a person willing to help us out. I knew as I stumbled through my few words of Spanish, that it's a language taking its place here alongside English – neither language being native to the area and both having claims on our speech. And there was the woman who was helping us to translate, whose family had clearly been here for quite a long time. Her mother kept the traditions – but she was a busy American. Still, her daughter's grade school teacher was interested in the Mexican Day of the Dead and she had come to get some pastries to take to her daughter's school. And, as she was doing that, this country was becoming a more nourishing home for her and her family – a place where the home you find yourself living and the one you carry in your heart – the one made of stories, traditions, the legacy of history that -- combine as Home.

We all came from one family – or a small handful of families and parents – perhaps not Adam and Eve – but some ancient ancestors whose names are long lost and whose lives would have been far from Palatine or Barrington or Arlington Heights, or Lake Zurich or Schaumburg...

We all arrived here as immigrants – on foot from thousand year migrations or by ship or plane. We came from France and India and England and Ireland and Scotland and Germany and Russia and all over Africa and Poland and Canada and Japan and Pakistan and, so many places...

We left those places as people always have for these basic reasons – because of Religious or Ethnic Persecution, Natural Disasters, because our ancestors were not the eldest sons or heirs of land or titles, we left because of Famine, Economic Problems, War, Turmoil, Oppression. We followed family members or kindred spirits. We came through adoption, or were forced here by slavery, or other forced relocations – such as those that displaced the native Americans. We came for financial opportunity. We came and, because we are creatures that nest we arrived hoping for home – home in some way.

We were once one continent. We were once one family. But we have shifted and moved as the continents have shifted and moved. And somewhere, sometime some one thought it would be easier to drop borders around the narratives of our history – our histories. And that was when the harshest separations began. And we live with them still – with the legacy of those separations.

And on we move in our migrations. Out, even, to the stars – where, yesterday, two of the crew of the space station took the second of three scheduled space walks. And onward we move -- and change, and create new home and long for old homes and we yearn for belonging.

For us all – there are separations from people who are our home – or from places. In our cells we carry the memory of countless homes – long gone. Places for which we long and may always long – places we may remember or our grandparents

may remember – or perhaps places our branches of the family tree have not known for epochs of history.

As Unitarian Universalists we come together looking for a new kind of home – one beyond borders and divisions. Looking for a universal belonging – the sort of feeling of home that you might get a sense of from a space station or from a wide open heart. In this place we seek and strive to create a sense of belonging that transcends all the artificial divisions that humanity has created before us.

I think that I first absorbed this idea when my parents brought the international students to join us for Thanksgiving. This year, Mark invited the international co-workers in his department to join us for our family Thanksgiving. I'm looking forward to the time we spend together and the sense of belonging beyond borders that we will share.

I ask you, as you celebrate Thanksgiving to remember that the Wampanoag looked at the struggling white people and saw the danger and the risk and yet brought them food and treated them as though there were no borders and as though every person had a right to survive and find belonging. And they nourished them on the fruits of the earth and gave them home. I believe that each year we feast and remind ourselves that home is not something that belongs to the few and the privileged but that should be extended even to the stranger. Even in the face of risks. I trust our faith to help us hear one another into home.

I look forward to Thanksgiving – for I have much to be thankful for. And I look forward to the guests who will join us this year. For, in celebrating with them we will be taking more to heart the lessons of the season – that home is something we make together. May we be blessed with the deepest sense of belonging as we turn home for the holidays. May we ever be blessed with belonging as we return to this place from week to week. May we bless the world with our message of a more universal belonging.