

The Journey is Home
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Rev. Beth A. Johnson

A little girl wandered away from her mother one day as her mother window-shopped in a rather small town. The child had gotten hopelessly lost, and she was starting to become afraid. A police car pulled up to a stop sign and she approached the officer telling him of her dilemma. The officer took her in the car to drive her around a bit on the way to the station in hopes that she would see something familiar. As they turned a corner the girl exclaimed, "There's my church! You can drop me off here. I can always find my way home from my church."

This story, told by Anne Lamott, points us to the deep sense of familiarity, surety, and comfort that comes from being part of a community in which we feel as at home (or almost) as we feel at the place we call home.

Home. Now there's an idea can stir love or terror, longing and ambivalence. It's a dense and sometimes loaded concept. Webster's defines it as: "the place where one lives." "The place where one was born or reared; one's own city, state, or country." It is also "a place where one likes to be; a restful or congenial place."

But we know it often as an emotion-laden idea when attached to our first or early homes – the ones we were born or brought into. Books and poems, movies and TV programs, comedies and tragedies, center around the notion of home – the lovely and the profane aspects of it.

There is a nostalgic sentimentalizing of home on Hallmark cards and in maudlin songs. And some of us have had, if not idyllic homes, then places of support and nurturance. Yet the truth for some is that the home of childhood was unpleasant or even brutal. Even our own homes now may not be the places of solace and comfort that we would like them to be. For these, any notion of "returning home" may be fraught with danger or aversion, at least unpleasantness.

Home is a complicated concept.

When I say I am going "home for the holidays" to be with my family – meaning back to Chicago – sometimes people will say sympathetically, "Oh, that's too bad. Hope it isn't too long." Now the reality for me, most fortunately, is that I love to go there. It 's not wonderful all of the time, rest assured, but it is the place where I am most known and loved in spite of that. It is home in many senses of the word – the place of my birth, the place where I find rest, and support. Although we are all grown up, still when I go there I am "Bethie" to my older siblings, they are Paddy and Mar to me - through the years we deepen in our understanding of each other, see each one through different eyes and our knowledge of each other gains another layer.

Whether it is a comfortable retreat, a recurring nightmare, or a neutral zone, nevertheless, there seems to be in many, if not most of us, a longing for home – a longing sometimes for our childhood home, a longing for a place to call home, a longing ultimately, I think, to find home within one's self and in the world.

And for a number of years after I moved out here to California, when I was going to visit Chicago, I would say, "I'm going home." And when it was time to return to California I would say, "I'm going back." For the first year I would occasionally call the airlines and reserve a one-way ticket to Chicago, never, of course, confirming within the 24hrs that would secure the ticket. I just liked knowing that I had a ticket home if I wanted one. I hadn't yet developed a sense of place here. A place where I was known, had connections. And, truth be told, I had not yet fully grown into my own sense of self. I was recently divorced, struggling with who I would be and become - still young at 33 y/o.

I remember my first Christmas-time in California. I'd moved out here on November 15th and so began shopping for presents about three weeks later. I found my way to the local mall. It

was all so unfamiliar, and I floated through the mall a bit dazed and confounded. Christmas music filled the air. “Have a holly, jolly Christmas...” I was not jolly. I was lonely.

I wandered through the mall, the strains of Christmas music providing the soundtrack for this drama, and you may be able to anticipate what song should I hear, piercing my grief but, “I’ll be home for Christmas.” I was drowning in sadness, and you know, I can still feel that feeling in my body when I am most fragile or lonely.

There is that, in many of us, which when we are most vulnerable, longs for the familiar and for solace in real or imagined recollections of simpler times, wrapped in the warmth of home like a mother’s arms. There is something very basic in the need to be known, to ourselves and to others, and to be rooted in connections, and when we don’t have that, or even never had it, we long for that, grieve for that, cherish that, often idealizing what we did have. And while we recognize the natural tendency to be homesick when one is fragile and lonesome, we know, too, that we could not function for long if we stayed in that state; for that would prevent us from moving into a our personhood. And yet the longing shapes us, and hints to us of greater insights, about ourselves, and our place in the world. Vast unexplored territories beckon us to journey on - to plumb our inner depths and to discern the mysteries of the cosmos.

Nelle Morton, in her book, *The Journey is Home*, is speaking to feminists about the transformational journey to the self away from the strictures of patriarchy, but it works here to elaborate on the complexities of growing into a sense of one’s self and of returning home.

Morton writes, “to return to one’s birthplace, one’s relatives, after living many decades ‘on the road,’ is to take off, as it were, one’s own skin. So much of what one has become includes ‘gatherings’ along the way that have helped to create one: the loving involvements, the commitments, the unbreakable connections beyond blood ties, first loyalties, intimacies across color, class, nationality, and age...”

“To affirm one’s roots with those who have the same roots is to embrace with love one’s whole life and one’s kin. But to return to one’s early ways, to one’s child faith, to one’s baby language, is never to have left. In that sense, going home would deny connectedness with the world as one people and the earth as a home for us all.”

Morton tells us here that we do, and ought to, grow beyond the home of our youth, while still recognizing all that it gave us. We take our first tentative steps towards selfhood when we are very young, but the journey is long, and the way sometimes hard, and road often obscured, and there’s no map – at least not one with explicit and clear instructions as to how we are to navigate or even where we are going. “Turn here. Go there. Look out! Don’t take that job! Oh no, not that relationship!”

There *are* lights along the way, sometimes dim flashes and only the rare thunderbolt, companions and fellow travelers – seen and unseen, known and unknown who guide us along the way. We find ourselves, first, by moving away from our early dependencies, creating a self out of our past, our environment, our choices. We establish ourselves as separate from others. We become comfortable in our own skin...at least on good days. And we believe that we have arrived. We are captains of our own ship, free to travel and move about where we will.

We create families and ties perhaps to our congregations, our local community or the nation; we have our boundaries. We focus on our immediate surroundings and loves, and this is as it needs to be practically speaking, but home and the road there do not end here at our doors, our small community, or even our nation.

Nelle Morton extends the notion of home as a place, to home a process as well. She says, “Home is a movement, a quality of relationship, a state where people seek to be ‘their own,’ and increasingly responsible for the world.”

Morton’s notion of “increasing responsibility for the world” is a reminder for us to guard against narrow interests that excludes rather than embraces others, that constricts rather than expands our understandings, that limits rather than widens our vision of who is family and what is possible – interests that limits home to include only those who are like us and hence limits our dreams of who we can be, and what is possible.

Rumi describes this road and journey this way:

“An ant hurries along a threshing floor, with its wheat, grain, moving between huge stacks of wheat, not knowing the abundance all around. It thinks one grain is all there is to love.

So we choose a tiny seed to be devoted to. This body, one path or one teacher.
Look wider and farther.

The essence of every human being can see, and what that essence-eye takes in, the being becomes.

Saturn. Solomon!

The ocean pours through a jar, and you might say it swims inside the fish!

This mystery gives peace to your longing and makes the road home, home.”

The road it is wide and deep and connects us all. Morton says, “road building becomes inseparable from the journey.” Our interdependence is inescapable, and once it is apprehended, our sympathies extend then to all others and their interests are our interests. Our notion of home expands as our notion of ourselves expands.

When we risk the journey we are rewarded with relationships and ways of being which at once root us and summon us to travel beyond our shores, to seek new companions, to take big risks, making us brave in the knowledge that we are never alone.

Like the little girl in our story – we have a compass point from which we can move with the confidence, the way lighted by love.

And when we return to our assorted homes, we return changed from visit to visit as new experiences, new learnings, and other loves shape our becoming.

Now when I make plans to go to Chicago I find myself saying, “I’m going home,” and when it is time to return to California I say, “I’m going home.”

Last month an agent from the moving company came to my house to assess the move. He knows I’m from Chicago and as we were walking he asked me, “Are you going home?” I hesitated as my mind did some flips, and I had to think about where home was. I almost said, “yes,” but that would have been a bit too philosophical because I knew what he meant.

But, indeed, I *am* home. And when I am looking into the eyes of another creature, I am home. As I get older I am more and more (thank God!) at home wherever I am, and where ever I am is more and more home. Our connection to our family, our communities, the earth, can foster a still dawning and ever deepening awareness of our interdependence with the Love that is both the journey and the road.

Morton, and Rumi and Patton all tell us that this enlargement of the self and, hence, our sense of home includes other places, other people, and other beings, and deepens our ability to create communities that are a part of the journey home. These would be “intentional” homes – homes that we choose and choose us: they can be our fellowship, a circle of comrades, a grove of trees – places where we choose to gather ourselves in ways that lift us up, nurture us, prod and

cheer us on, where we are challenged and loved, changed and known, which open us to ever greater possibilities for Love.

Let us not, though, idealize *these* homes either, for they are complex and messy, but it is in the struggle that we become more than we would otherwise be and these homes become hallowed. And they (and we) become beacons of light for those whose journey finds them bereft or lonely, oppressed or downtrodden, afraid or lost.

At the Quebec General Assembly in 2002, Barbara Pescan the minister of the Evanston, IL church, whose words I read at the opening of this service, was the preacher at the Service of the Living Tradition. She began her sermon with lines from a version of “This Little Light of Mine” that I’d never heard before. She sang:

“Gonna let my little light shine, shine, shine,
Gonna let my little light shine, shine, shine,
May be someone down in the valley tryin’ to get home.”

There may be someone down in the valley tryin’ to get home.

Sometimes those in our midst are tryin’ to get home – home from alienation, home from loss, home from worry.

And there are those right outside of our doors, down the block, around the corner who are tryin’ to get home – home from poverty, home from prejudice, home from blind materialism.

And there are those, a world away, who are trying to get home, who are tryin’ to find a home – a home free from fear, a home with clean water, home to safety.

And so for those of us fortunate enough today to have a sense of place, a home within ourselves, a home within this loving and just community, a sense of home on this earth, we are called to let our lights shine, to guide someone on their journey home.

And so we mark our time together, we make new beginnings over and over; we celebrate our good work and commit to the work to come. We gather ourselves this day and will for the days to come because there may be someone down in the valley tryin’ to get home.