

“A Place Called Home,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on November 29, 2009

This past Monday morning, I drove up to Kennebunk, Maine, to conduct the funeral service for a man I met just once, three years ago, when I officiated at his son's wedding. The son had called me on Saturday to tell me of his father's death, and ask if I would lead the service. My first thoughts were, “I have a sermon to finish today,” and “Monday is my day off,” but I kept those to myself. I said, “It's short notice, but yes.” It was the right thing to do, and the truth is, it was a privilege to be with that family help them in that important time.

When I got home on Monday afternoon, I took off my suit and tie, and put on jeans and an old shirt. I said to my wife, “my soul just needs to be outside.” I had raking to do, and a couple of plants in pots that needed to go in the ground, that I should have planted months ago. So I got to work. Some time later, stepping through the door into the back of the garage, something called out to me to stop there, and I sat down on the threshold, my back against the door jamb, just sat there, on a November day, for a while. I sat there and looked at the dirt, and the leaves on the ground, the raspberry bushes with their tiny thorns and the stakes and rope I've put up, trying to keep them contained. I looked up at the sky and at the trees, and realized that I was perfectly happy in that moment, at home there in that place where we have lived now for almost twenty years.

This got me thinking about home. Maybe because we're at the end of Thanksgiving weekend, a time when so many people go home, in one way or another; when folks go back to where they grew up, or travel somewhere to be with family or friends, or invite people over to their home

When I was up in Canada a couple of weeks ago, Thomas Moore, the keynote speaker at the minister's conference there, said we humans are home-making creatures, and he observed that even when traveling, even when staying in a hotel, as we were there, we do little things in order to feel at home. He said we long for this feeling of home, because a sense of home is vital to the well-being of our souls. This longing for home is our soul telling us there is something it wants and needs.

Last winter, when Small Group Ministry started up again here, the first session was called “A Sacred Place.” Participants were asked to go back in their memories to a place that was special or sacred to them, to use their senses to re-member that place, and then to share those memories, those images with the others in the group. I did this myself a couple of years ago in a small group. The place I remembered was a piece of land in South Carolina, an hour's drive from where I grew up, property that my parents bought when I was five or six years old. It was out in the country, an old house and

barn, surrounded by fields and woods, with a creek and a pond. My Dad planted fruit trees and a vegetable garden there, and for years, most Saturdays my brother and I and our dog would pile into Dad's station wagon and we'd drive down there, where we'd spend all day roaming around that place. I loved it there.

Some years later, when I was just out of college, my Dad got into financial trouble, and had to declare bankruptcy. The farm was sold, and I've never been back. But a few years ago I realized that, decades later, that place still lives in my memory and in my imagination. When I'm daydreaming, I sometimes picture myself there. When I'm reading, I often imagine the place that's being described in the story as some part of the farm--the dusty, red clay road, the field that I walked through one fall with my grandfather, the land down by the creek where my Dad planted his corn.

Perhaps I love to spend time in our back yard because it reminds me of that place I loved as a child. I wonder, what are the places that you remember? What are the places that you go, to feed your own soul? Where do you feel at home? And are you able to make a home for yourself wherever you are?

In the reading¹ this morning, Barbara Kingsolver laments the fact that more people now live in urban than in rural settings. We are an urban church. And that feels like a blessing to me--we are right in the middle of the problems that we are called to help address. We don't need to go anywhere else--there are people right here who need us. At the interfaith Thanksgiving service on Tuesday night, we took a collection for the Open Hand Food Pantry, which we host and which Catholic Charities runs--a nice example of interfaith work right there.

We are an urban church, but some of you live in the country. And some of you, even though you live in town, are serious gardeners. Some of you keep chickens! We are a city church that has a plant sale in the spring. It is a lovely thing, and a nice illustration that's it's not either/or. Haverhill is a city with a rail line and some decaying buildings and problems with drugs and homelessness, and it is a city with working farms and lakes and ponds and a river that runs through it.

I wonder about the folks who come to the drop-in center here during the week. Do they have any place that feels like home? Is our basement a kind of home for them five mornings a week? I feel so fortunate that we have this beautiful and sturdy building, and I hope when you walk in here, you feel that you have come home.

I had a conversation with a man this past summer, not someone in this congregation, who was telling me about his divorce. He said over time his previous marriage had died; he realized that there was no home for him where he and his former wife lived, no home in that marriage. I was struck by the loneliness and the pain of that--of not having a home where there is supposed to be one. I wonder how important, essential

¹ Barbara Kingsolver, "Knowing Our Place," in *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

even, to your health and happiness is the ability to make for yourself, wherever you are, a home.

The most common image for the spiritual life is one of journey, and I quite naturally go along with this. I'm comfortable imagining the faith life as a path, a way, a pilgrimage. I use these travel words all the time, and think of the spiritual life as movement, as going somewhere.

But that's only part of the story. Several years ago I read an essay by Sharon Parks, who says that people of faith, we who are interested in both personal and societal transformation, we need to remember that it's not all about the journey. She says there are two metaphors for the spiritual life--the metaphor of pilgrimage tells only part of the story, Parks says. and it "has been sheared away from and now dominates its companion, (which is) the metaphor of home."²

The images and stories we use are important, because they shape how we see and how we live in the world. They help to create our reality. Parks says gender plays a part in this--men have tended toward the journeying, and women have traditionally been the ones to tend home and hearth. Our male-dominated culture naturally privileges the idea of journey, and diminishes the value of home.

Journey implies going out to conquer, and home is about caring for what is close at hand. Parks recalls the myths of St. Margaret and St. George, in which Margaret travels around Europe taming dragons, only to be followed by George, who slays them!

I wonder, if women had been in charge, how might our history be different? Would the early settlers to this country have worked more cooperatively with the native people and the land, rather than subduing both in the name of God and progress?

We are at a time in human history when we are running out of wild, uninhabited places. Parks says there's a real cost to all of our journeying—in a world suffering from overdevelopment and overpopulation, when are we going to start tending what we have rather than exploring and exploiting new lands? She says, "The lure of the journey may actually distract us from the present, immediate, incarnate, immanent, intimate activity of Spirit in our midst."

To what extent is our journeying and exploring and busyness a running away? Could what we are seeking be closer than we think?

I have a new image on my computer desktop. It's one of those beautiful pictures of the earth taken from space. The earth looks like a beautiful blue marble, with white clouds

² Sharon Daloz Parks, "Home and Pilgrimage: Companion Metaphors for Personal and Social Transformation," *Soundings* 72:2-3 (1989) : 297.

swirling around it, floating in an expanse of black space that is punctuated by stars. That picture makes it clear that we only have one home.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the first of four Sundays leading up to Christmas. It's still Thanksgiving weekend, and two days ago was the biggest shopping day of the year. In this time of growing darkness, Advent calls us to wait and watch for what may come. At the same time the wider culture calls us to go crazy spending money and running around doing all kinds of things to get ready for Christmas. How do we live in the tension between these things?

I encourage you to question those messages that come from our consumer culture. The ones that tell you happiness is out there somewhere, in something you can buy. I encourage you to make time this season for what matters, for what will help you to be happy and whole. I encourage you to ask yourself, "What am I hungry for? What will feed my own soul?" Maybe it is being still and quiet. Maybe it is being active and productive. Maybe it is spending time at home.

Thomas Wolfe once said, "You can't go home again." He's right, in that you can't go back to that place of childhood innocence, or back to how things used to be. But that doesn't mean we aren't people longing to go home, seeking a place of wholeness, of connection, of liberation. To live in this world you need to be a home-finder, a home-maker. But that doesn't mean you have to travel to the ends of the earth. What you seek may be very near you.

This season calls us to be still and awake to what is unfolding in our midst. To trust that there is a place we can call home. To have faith that those who seek will find. To know that where we are, right here, and wherever you go, is holy ground.

Amen.