

Home Never Closes
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Back in 1990, my family and I lived in Dorchester, Massachusetts, (the Boston equivalent of living in Garfield or East Liberty) and an unpleasant consequence of our inner-city home base was tangling daily with the demoralizing traffic on the Southeast Expressway.

I recall one particular afternoon when I had packed up my then four-year-old son, Sam, in the backseat of my minivan and made a mad dash for the Charlestown Navy Yard less than 10 miles away, where a replica Viking ship was docked for the day. We had exactly 45 minutes to get there, park and scurry over to the dock. It would be a squeaker.

The minutes ticked away as we sat immobilized in gridlock traffic, and when it became apparent that we would *not* beat the clock, I turned to Sam and gingerly broke the news. "I'm sorry, Sam, but I'm afraid that by the time we get there, the ship will be closed." I braced myself for tearful disappointment (maybe even a tantrum) but instead he gazed out the window quietly for a moment, and then replied, "I guess it doesn't matter when we drive the *other* way, Mom, because *home* never closes."

Well, my heart flooded full with emotion and I was speechless. For in Sam's profound innocence or perhaps, his innocent profundity, my young son had told me what ever parent so wants to know...that he felt safe, welcome, worthy and loved in his home; that to him, it was a home that never closes. I knew then and I know now that it is a blessing and a responsibility to insure that the front door is never locked to him or his sister, Michaela; that the home fires will never be extinguished, especially after their father and I divorced in 2001, and "home" became a bi-nuclear reality...two homes, it turned out, in Concord, MA, that never closed, with an open path between. A reason for gratitude, then and now.

Neither of my children was with me this Thanksgiving. A first. We *skyped* - isn't technology grand? This was also my first Thanksgiving in Pittsburgh in more than two decades. These two facts are significant because no other holiday is so hard-wired in the American psyche to an idealized notion of "home" as Turkey Day. Everywhere there are images of dew-kissed Butterballs and sparkling cranberries being joyfully devoured by apple-cheeked intact families drawn directly from the Norman Rockwell sketchbook.

They gobble mountains of stuffing, pick the marshmallows out of the jello mold, fight over the last Crescent Roll, and perhaps, they even join in a rousing rendition of our own UU-written hymn, "Over the River and Through the Woods:" "*Hurray for the fun!*," they sing, "*Are the puddings done? Hurray for the pumpkin pie!*"

Although this homespun Thanksgiving image is not a complete fantasy, we remind ourselves that it is a "Home Sweet Home" so sugar-coated it could give us a cavity!

America clings to its myths, reveres them. Yet, I am more aware than ever that we, middle class folks, represent the lucky ones, with the luxury of choice, roofs over our heads and leftovers in the fridge, even if we are a far cry from the Rockwell myth.

This evening on "60 Minutes," Scott Pelley will revisit America families who have lost their homes in the economic cataclysm of the past several years. Last Thanksgiving, during his first report, home was a seedy motel room. A year later, home is a car or a tent or the street. Toxic capitalism has made nomads of our children.

At the Squirrel Hill Food pantry where I volunteer, former donors are now clients, supplementing their groceries with pantry offerings and food stamps. These are our neighbors...where is the home that never closes for them?

We're reminded at Thanksgiving, especially, by realities around us that home can surely be a loving place "where the heart *is*," a comforting place where there's love overflowing, even for families living in tents and motels. Yet, sadly, home can be a place where the heart *aches*, too. Perky holiday images pain us when the nuclear family has become lethally radioactive; when the gate is latched, the door is locked and the lights have dimmed in our homes of origin or the ones of our own making.

Perhaps that home is closed to us now because of differences in religious beliefs, sexual orientation, lifestyle, political leanings, or personality. Maybe we just don't "get along" together anymore. Perhaps the wrecking ball of divorce, alcoholism, mental illness, abuse, or some other disruption or suffering has made this original home a house condemned. So what can we do? where can we go? We can grieve and endure the agony of our damaged homes. Or we can grieve and carry "home" with us in our hearts to a new address.

In the beautiful and moving biblical story of Ruth, the title character chooses *not* to return to her father's home in Moab, even though it is the only place where she can be guaranteed protection as a vulnerable widow.

Instead, she casts her lots with her mother-in-law, Naomi; she bravely follows her heart into a new land, a new *home* in Israel.

Ruth pleads with Naomi,
"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people..."

How many of us are like Ruth, refugees from ravaged homelands forging new bonds of intimacy with those we have come to love, as I did when I left home for Boston and life with my future husband in 1978? These new bonds of intimacy are by no means emotional consolation prizes. When Ruth declares, "Your people shall be my people...where you lodge, I will lodge," she means it with all of her heart. It is as if she is saying, "Let us make a *home* together, Naomi, a home that never closes; let us *belong* to one another."

This is what so many of us have sought to do for ourselves and for our families...to courageously carry "home" with us to a new address and create that healthy place of belonging. It is certainly my story, but with a homecoming I could not have predicted thirty-three years ago when I woke at dawn, and steered my dented Orange Saab eastward, out of town, into the burgeoning sunrise.

My reasons for leaving were both simple and complex. First, I was too big for Pittsburgh, or so I thought. Too hip, too bohemian, and sophisticated for this gritty, little colloquial burgh. The world was big and I was ready to blow this pop stand to inhabit it. And my boyfriend was in Boston – nuf' said.

More significantly, my sense of home had been shaken to its core; the security and joy I had experienced in my baby boomer childhood of chip chopped ham, hand-dipped Klondikes, musicals at the JCC, and sandlot baseball at dusk on the corner of Phillips and Pocusset Streets, had imploded.

The decade after 1978 was grim - my parents divorced, my mother died of cancer at age 56 and my father remarried into an inhospitable situation. I was adrift and Pittsburgh did not feel like a home that never closes anymore. In fact, I convinced myself that Pittsburgh had said goodbye to me and handed me my hat. Easier that way.

Much like the writer Sandra Cisneros, I was a girl who decided she didn't want to belong. In her book, The House on Mango Street, Cisneros writes:

"We didn't always live on Mango Street, in the sad red house I do not belong to. I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. Friends and neighbors will say: What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? And why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who did not out."

Like Cisneros, I marched far away and made a life -- a good life --but Pittsburgh was in my heart and in my rearview mirror for more than three decades. Sometimes you have to travel a long distance, like Isaac in our folktale earlier, in order to appreciate the treasure buried under your hearth.

I began itching to leave Boston a couple years back, and considered marching off to Asheville or Boulder or Austin or so other clichéd destination for midlife reinvention. Pittsburgh would bubble up and I'd push it back down. Then last December, a way opened, and this Esperanza decided to come back for the ones she left behind, including herself.

I've returned as a prodigal daughter, I suppose, and also as a wiser woman with an open heart... coming home to heal, to exhale, to replant, to grieve, to make joyful noise in the Folk Orchestra, to wave my *Terrible Towel*, to have dinner down the block at Annie's, to become known again, to frolic in Frick Park with my dog, to stop yearning.

What I have found is a city much broader than the one I left and much greener, but just as embracing and unpretentious as ever...and thank goodness for that. Not a blade of grass on Beechwood Blvd seems changed, teenagers still hang out "upstreet," and the Incline glides gracefully down its slope on the Southside.

But now, there is kayaking on the Allegheny River (something that might have caused you to burst into flames back in the 1970's), Homestead has been re-branded as "The Waterfront," Chatham (my alma mater) has morphed into a University, and I finally know the shortcut over Polish Hill to the Strip District.

The leave taking in 1978, it turns out, was not mutual. Pittsburgh has loved me all along, holding me with her long steel-reinforced arms even as she set me free. Pittsburgh is like that. It's so good to be home.

In all of this talk about leaving and coming home, there is a metaphor to our spiritual lives. As Unitarian Universalists, nearly 80% of us are come-outers from various *religious* homes of origin. And most likely, the reason we've embraced Unitarian Universalism is because these houses of worship are no longer *homes* to us. Perhaps, we have been locked out because of lifestyle, religious beliefs, political leanings, or sexual orientation, and we have grieved and experienced the pain of this alienation.

So, out of our spiritual homelessness, we have carried our longings with us to a new *religious* home and forged new bonds of *soulful* intimacy around our flaming chalice.

Like many come-outers to our faith, I came home to myself spiritually when I found Unitarian Universalism. Church was a strange land, to be sure, for a nice Bat Mitzvah girl from Squirrel Hill. Yet, like Ruth, I cast my lots with the Naomis of the First Religious Society of Newton MA and the First Parishes in Concord and in Wayland and in Acton, The UU Church of Reading, MA, the UU Fellowship in Storrs CT, and now with this vibrant and welcoming community of fellow travelers here at First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh.

I admit, with some embarrassment, that I never once noticed this place during my childhood, had never even heard it mentioned. But then again, I didn't know how to get Mt Lebanon either, until I moved back here! Such is the way of life in the Jewish ghetto, even one with a Mercedes standing in for the proverbial milk wagon!

Upon my return this past summer, it was only a matter of time before my childhood friends began quizzing me (especially at a HS reunion in October – oy vey!) about whether I was still Jewish, whether I believed in Jesus, whether I think of a “church” as my home. “Yes, I am still Jewish,” I would say patiently (as if I could ever not be in the tribe!); “No, I am not a Christian...I view Jesus was an exceptional teacher, preacher and prophet”; “Yep, I'm really into this “UU thing” (Um, I'm a minister!).” “Here's the deal - I'm a *Jewnitarian*...that's my story and I'm sticking to it!”

This threatens some people and that's okay. I am at home here...one of the so-called chosen people or not, UUism is *my* chosen faith. Isn't this notion of a home, a sanctuary for all seekers, what we aspire to?

In the words of The Rev. Richard Gilbert:

"Once again we have come home to the Source.
We feel the collective power of our companions,
The warmth of their welcome, the support of their caring.
We who have been wanderers, groping for something,
we know not what.
Are again at home.
Here is the place for us."

I am reminded again of Ruth and of my young son, Sam, when I consider what we stand for in our UU congregations, what we offer to those wanderers and refugees who seek a home with us. To paraphrase, I say to them and to you: "*We will not* turn you back; *we will not* lock the door; in the heart of our flaming chalice, *we will* keep the home fires burning for you; your people *will* be our people, *we are* and *shall be* a home that never closes for *you*."

It's my hope that you perceive this church as a landmark where, through spiritual searching and growth, you'll find the compass bearings that lead you home (like the girl in Annie Lamott's story), and where you might discover how to create a safe, inner home for your core self, a place where you feel welcomed and sheltered for the worthy and lovable person you are, no matter where you roam.

So, how might *you* make it home safe to this home that never closes? Is it time to rediscover the treasure under your hearth or are you due to march away from Mango Street? If you are in any form of self-exile, how might you make your way back? Only you know what specters pursue you in the shadows, as they did me, as you make this journey homeward to a place of belonging or healing.

In her book, No Place Like Home, fellow UU and former Boston Globe columnist Linda Weltner, recalls this memory from her daughters' youth.

Weltner writes, "Night after night, through the long summers and into the autumn, the neighborhood children used to play hide and seek, streaming out into the gray twilight as soon as the dishes were cleared from the dinner tables. Gathering in the street, they quickly divided into hidiers and searchers, fanning out behind the garages and backyards that encircled the steps that represented home base. In the dark my husband, Jack, and I would often see small figures sneaking past our wall, their bodies tense and ready for the long sprint to the steps."

“In years past, one or the other of our daughters would return from the game so far past her bedtime it was never mentioned. 'How'd you do?' we'd call out to a child radiant with the glory of late hours and a star-studded sky. 'I got home safe,' she'd whisper proudly before slipping up to bed. 'Home safe.'”

This is my Thanksgiving prayer for us all. Whether it be around a bountiful dinner table or around a glistening chalice, in a makeshift tent or a brick castle, may we make it through the creeping shadows, through streets devoid of landmarks, and through the dead of night.

May we find our way home to the embrace of beloveds, to this community of acceptance, and to the sanctuary of our selves, where we may rest, with grateful hearts, home safe in a home that never closes.

So may it be. Amen.

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