Home and the Holidays

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
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Dear friends, as you might imagine, my mind is reeling this week from the experience of losing my mother and returning to my hometown to attend and participate in her funeral. Jacqueline and I have been very moved, comforted and supported by the expressions of sympathy that you have showered on us. I thought about scrubbing the sermon topic I had planned, but there was such a strong overlap between that topic and what I had been through that I thought a useful sermon might be able to be forged out of my own experience. I know that what I have to say will be useful to me; I hope it will be for you as well.

In my law practice in Charleston, I once represented a pigeon fancier, a person who raised and raced homing pigeons. In order to build a racing flock of pigeons, you have to establish a coop and then buy breeding stock and breed them so that they are born in that place. To race them, pigeon fanciers from all over the metropolitan area select a few birds each and put them on a truck, where they are driven about 100 miles away, and then all are released at the same time.
Each pigeon flies straight for its own coop.

For some animals home is a very strong instinct. The red knot, which sometimes can be found on Monomoy Island, breeds its babies in the arctic, then flies down to the southern tip of South America before the young are ready to follow, but somehow the young know just what Argentine pond to go to.

Home. For us humans, the end of the year holidays are all bound up with the question of home. It is when our human instinct to connect with our family is at its highest. The day before Thanksgiving is the biggest travel day in the country – this year, it was a reminder of the recession we're in that most of the airports were not jammed.

Around this time of year, when we see each other in the grocery store, we often ask each other what our plans are for the holidays, who is traveling to where and which family members are coming home. For some of us, these questions can be
painful.

For holidays hold up a mirror for us, reminding us of how far our present reality of home is from the homes of our past or the ideal home we think we should have. If our family has suffered losses, or estrangements, or alienations, these come into sharp relief.

And we have different ways of dealing with home and the holidays. Many of us will have devoted many hours to feathering our nest, cleaning and repairing and decorating the old home place. Many others of us will have thought we ought to do some cleaning and decorating if our lives would ever stand still long enough. And some of us will simply refuse to recognize the place we are living as anything you could call home.

These are all manifestations of the longing for home. We all have it. We have some image of what home was, and what it should be again. Most of the time we live our lives without paying much attention to this image and the gap between it and present realities. But somehow, in late November we get all frantic about trying to get back home to make that house

we live in into something that approximates a home.

Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel called "You Can't Go Home Again." In one sense, this statement is true. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, you never set foot in the same river twice, the river of time has moved on, and even if you are returning to the same place this year as you did in years past, the people are all one year older and have changed.

And yet we persist in trying to go home, or to make a home to which others can go. But the constellation of arrangements are quite varied. Some of us have adult children who have moved in with them. Some of us are contemplating taking in their adult children. Some of us are contemplating moving off-Cape to be near our adult children as we move into a stage of life where our ability to live on our own comes into question. Some members of this church have made that move, and more do every year.

For those of us who were not born or brought up in this area, the Cape may have represented a summer vacation spot for years before it became our home. There were places near Boston or Hartford or New York which were home; we now have a new home here; has it completely displaced the old one, or do we keep several places in our heart?

Some Americans, and particularly Southerners, carry this idea of the house that will stand for all time as the Old Home Place, and in parts of the South and parts of New England there *are* places that have been lived in by the same family for three or four generations. But the reality for Americans in the Twenty-First Century is that for most of us, home is a moveable feast. Many of us feel like turtles, carrying our home on our backs.

As you know, my mother died on Thanksgiving Day and this week I went to my hometown of Columbia for the funeral. I wrote and delivered her eulogy, and that gave me a chance to look at her life. I'll have more to say on that later, but for now, I'll give you a telling statistic. Mother lived ninety years, having been born in 1919. The first 25, she lived with her parents, including a few years during World War II after she married my Dad while he was overseas. The next 35, she lived with my Dad, moving once. But the last 30 years of her life, she lived in 6 places.

In my 61 years, I have had a similar experience: the first years my residence was relatively stable, but in the 15 years since I left Charleston to go to seminary, I have had seven mailing addresses. My e-mail address is more permanent than my home address. The pace of moving has picked up in the last twenty years.

It is tempting to say that there is a universal homing instinct in humans, but then you have the fact that many humans seem to live very happily as nomads. At the outset of civilization, humans developed a skill of raising livestock, and then the skill of growing plants. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis is often said to be a metaphor for that primal conflict between pastoralists and agriculturalists. Only with agriculture do you get humans relating to a particular piece of land.

In the Genesis story, both Cain, the farmer and Abel, the shepherd, offer a sacrifice to Jahweh[1]. Abel's sacrifice is a young lamb, and Cain's sacrifice is of some crops. Abel's sacrifice is more pleasing to God, and that is why Cain becomes jealous of Abel. Cain meets Abel in the field and slays him. God finds out about it because the blood of Abel

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[1]Genesis 4: 1-16

cries fromt eh very land. God's punishment is to banish Cain from the land: "You will be a fugitive and a wanderer upon the earth." When you read this banishment in the light of the banishment of Cain's parents, Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, you realize that for these early writers, banishment from home was indeed a severe punishment. In fact, Cain complains to God that his punishment is so great he can't bear it.

So the Bible starts with two stories of exile, of banishment as punishment. But there are stories of moving away from home throughout. There is a kind of theme that in order to pursue religion or serve God, you have to leave home. Abram leaves his hometown of Ur in Mesopotamia to follow God's command. The children of Israel leave their homes in Canaan to go down to Egypt in a time of famine. Moses leads the Israelites out fo Egypt 300 years later, but they wander in the desert for 40 years before finding their way to the Promised Land.

Jonah is a great example – he doesn't want to leave home, he doesn't want to obey God's command to go to Nineveh and prophesy, but tries to get on a boat to run away. In the middle of the voyage, though, a great storm comes up and the sailors, learning what's up, cast Jonah overboard, where he is swallowed by a big fish and cast up on the shore at – Nineveh.

I have the sense that this opposition between the religious quest and the homing instinct in the Hebrew bible was distinctive to that religion because for a lot of the ancient world, the home was the locus of religion. The Romans had household gods called Lares which were at least as important in the everyday life of the people as the official pantheon of Jupiter and Juno. I remember my visit to Bali, a Hindu island in a Muslim country, being struck with how the statues of household gods were treated with honor and respect; every day, new offerings of flowers and food were placed before them and the brightly colored cloths they wore were changed regularly. So the idea that the religious quest took one away from the home was contrary to a strong tradition.

On the other hand, in folklore and popular culture to the present day, leaving home is often portrayed as essential to personal fulfillment. The archetypal character is the shaman, who leaves the homeland to travel to a distant land of the spirits, performs wondrous feats there and comes back to the homeland. Jesus is kind of a shaman; church doctrine says that in the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus descended into Hell and saved the souls of the denizens of the underworld who had lived before his coming.

Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz is a kind of shaman. She goes to a distant land and consorts with all kinds of miraculous creatures. At a certain point, though, she wants to go home, and Glinda, the good witch, tells her that it has always been in her power to go home. All she has to do it to click her ruby slippers together three times and say, "there's no place like home." Glinda explains that she didn't tell Dorothy this before because she wanted for her to find out for herself that she didn't have to leave home to find her heart's desire.

So the lesson of the movie is that we can always go home again, and we don't even need to leave to find our heart's desire. It's kind of remarkable to me that both of these statements are both true and false. We can't ever go home again if going home means to find the same place we left exactly as we left it. And yet as long as memory holds, we can

visit that place we left in memory. We can't find our heart's desire at home – that's why we leave. Yet we can adjust our heart's desire, in the words of Forrest Church, to want what we have. At least we can appreciate what we have.

All of these reflections are swirling around in my head amid the welter of emotions I have been through this past week. In my biography, I left my native Columbia at the end of high school in 1966, and only returned there for visits in the rest of my life. I returned to South Carolina in 1975, but decided to settle in Charleston rather than Columbia for two reasons; as a liberal, I didn't want to be in conflict with the conservative majority of my relatives and second, since my parents were related to half of the state, the cast of characters I would have to keep in mind in living Columbia was greater than that of a Russian novel; it was much simpler to live 100 miles away.

The emotions that came up for me this week included, naturally enough, great sadness and grief at losing my mother, though the sadness was tempered with thankfulness that she had avoided severe suffering in her last weeks, that she died peacefully with my sister in attendance, and that she died knowing how much we all loved her. In addition to that sadness, the preacher in the family got tapped to speak, so there was the need to write and preach a coherent eulogy, with its attendant performance anxieties. The performance anxieties were heightened exponentially by the fact that I was facing almost all my surviving kinfolks on my mother's side, and a fair number of them on my father's.

The fact which I felt so keenly hanging over the proceedings was that my mother's children and grandchildren had all elected not to live among them. Most of cousins on my mother's side still live in Columbia, but none of my brothers and sisters do.

As I said a moment ago, my reasons for leaving my home town were partly political and partly social. Coming back, and addressing my kinfolks in such a public fashion, I felt a need to apologize. I didn't exactly do that; what I did was to express my deep gratitude to those who were in town for taking care of mother, particularly in her last illness. But in my mind what I was doing was apologizing for having left in the first place.

And yet I cannot imagine myself having been happy if I had stayed there. I felt reasonably happy with my twenty years in Charleston, but that was because I adopted the role of the public liberal; I was fighting to reform South Carolina's regressive ways, and that fight gave great meaning to my life.

In writing the eulogy, I was conscious of the great political and cultural gulf that still separated me from my relatives. I was tempted to claim my mother as a closet liberal, for I felt that a lot of my liberal values had their seed in what she taught me as a child. And yet, that would have led to a distracting political controversy at the very time I should be trying to unite us as a family in saying good-bye with grace and dignity. A political swipe would not have engendered fistfights, but it would have been a dishonoring of the occasion.

For the striking thing to me was how deeply we all felt about her. If we had gotten into a discussion on race or Obama or the Confederate Flag we would have had almost no common ground. But we had ties of blood and ties of love and ties of grief that indeed made the political differences seem very much beside the point.

So in a sense my experience of the last week shows that you can go home again – you just have to watch what you say when you get there, stay focused and know where the

landmines are buried.

The turtle carries his home on his back. This is all well and good, provided that the home adapts to the turtle. If a turtle shell didn't grow, it would get to be a very tight home very soon.

I have been reading Moby Dick, and I was struck with the passage I read earlier, which examines why Bulkington, a mariner who had just returned from a four-year whaling voyage would sign up immediately for another voyage. Melville analogizes his troubled soul to a ship in a storm, which is safer in the deep water and tried as hard as it can to avoid being driven into the Lee shore. The plight of the mariner is summed up in this sentence: "all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore."

As I read this I wondered for how many generations of Chathamites it might have been true, that they felt more at home on the boundless deep than they did in their tidy houses in this town.

There is a homing instinct in many animals; but there is also in humans a restlessness, a desire to throw off the shackles, to hit the open road, to go to sea, to leave home. The turtle shell becomes confining, we have to find another. Our lives are strung on this axis, leaving home, and returning home.

I know myself and know my relations well enough to know that I am not temperamentally suited to live in the town in which I grew up, but I rediscovered on my visit this week amid all my own anxiety and grief, my relatives' fundamental decency, kindness and love for me and especially for my mother. In a sense I did go home again, as I ushered my mother into her final home. But I was aware that most of the strands of that umbilical cord have now been severed.

I have lost the companionship of my mother. But I am left with her love. I will close with the last paragraph of my eulogy. My Episcopal audience didn't know it, but I was preaching pure Universalism to them at the end. The context of this eulogy in the funeral service was that it followed a reading from the Epistle to the Romans which said that neither principalities nor powers will separate us from the love of God[2].

"St. Paul said 'All who are led by the spirit of God are children of God.' (Romans 8:14) Christianity, like many of the world's religions, uses parental metaphors for God because in the unconditional love of our parents we find the closest temporal analogue of the love of the Creator. Bessie lived, moved and had her being in the love of God and in the love given her unconditionally by her parents, Sarah Boykin Heyward and Edmund Rhett Heyward. In turn, Bessie bestowed her unconditional love on her five children, twelve grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. As I looked into her eyes for the last time in September and said my good-bye, I realized that all my life I had been swimming in that love as a fish swims in the sea, without even feeling or seeing it. Whatever we may believe in resurrection or life after death, it is clear that we the living carry love such as this in our hearts all our lives, and that the love which one such as Bessie has given us only

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[2]Romans 8: 38-9.

increases as we pass it on to others. It is in that sense that I understand that a death such as this does not separate us from love."

Yes, you can go home again. All you have to do is click your ruby slippers together and repeat three times, "there's no place like home.."
Amen.

Reading

Moby Dick, by Herman Melville Chapter 23, "The Lee Shore"

Some chapters back, one Bulkington was spoken of, a tall, new-landed mariner, encountered in New Bedford at the inn.

When on that shivering winter's night, the Pequod thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in mid-winter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!

Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God - so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing - straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!