

You Can't – And Must – Go Home.

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Once Christmas about forty years ago my new wife and I, just out of college, found ourselves in Ann Arbor Michigan with really low-paying jobs. We were seven hundred miles away from our hometown of Columbia, SC, and I think we were planning not to go home for the holidays, but at the last minute we phoned our parents and said we were coming. It was a 12-hour drive across Ohio and the Appalachians, and I don't know whether we did it in one day or two, and my actual memory of it is hazy but for the story that my mother always told afterwards. It was Christmas Eve and she was in the choir in the front of the church. She always had the alto solo from the Messiah, "He Shall Feed His Flock." She was in the middle of it when she looked up and in the back of the darkened sanctuary she could see two pairs of gold circles. My wife and I both had taken to wearing what were then called granny glasses. No one else at St. Michaels and All Angels Episcopal church wore such things. She knew that her children were home for the holidays.

We have made our holidays about touching base, about coming home, but what they hold up for us, this year as every year, is what a complex of relationships, ideas and feelings is encompassed within that little four-letter word, "home."

For most of us, this part of Cape Cod was not where we grew up, not where we went to school, not where we pursued a career, not where we raised a family. It is where we have come to live. For others of us, of course, it was one or more of these things.

When we move, does the place we call home move with us? I have been gone from Charleston for 16 years, and yet when I visit someone will inevitably ask me when I am coming home.

Maybe it's only me, but I suspect a lot of us feel this tension. You have a place you call home, and yet you leave it. You may leave it for good reason, yet ever after it will call to you. If you try to go back, it will sometimes turn out badly, and yet you have this gravitational tug. You can't go home and yet you must.

This being the Christmas season, it's not amiss to consider the story of Jesus; regardless of your theological orientation, these stories are included in our basic cultural architecture. If Jesus as the Christ makes you uncomfortable, just think of him as a folk hero. The nativity story recounted in the gospel of Luke says that Jesus' hometown was Nazareth, but Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be registered with the government, because that was where Joseph was from. A

decree had gone out from Caesar that everyone had to go to their home to be registered. Can you imagine the red tape that would entail? Suppose the government issued a decree today that each of us had to go to the place where we were born in order to fill out some forms. What chaos would ensue!

But as the story unfolds, of course, we know that the holy family doesn't actually get home in Bethlehem, but are homeless there, for there is no room in the Inn, which is why the child is born in a stable. One wonders, where were Joseph's relatives? Going home for that family meant giving birth in a barn. It is a paradox that so many people feel compelled to travel to the place of their origins on Christmas when the holiday is about homelessness on a basic level.

And that is only the beginning. Much of the story of Jesus is opposed to the idea of home. At age twelve, he gives his parents the slip to dispute with the elders in the Jerusalem temple (Luke 2: 41-51). He tells a disciple not to bury his father but to follow him instead, and let the dead bury the dead (Matthew 8:21). When someone tells him that his mother and brothers are outside the meeting, he replies in effect that all his followers are his family (Matthew 12:46).

Jesus is born in homelessness and in a way stays homeless for his whole story. He even says "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20).

But the best illustration of the maxim "you can't go home again" is the story of Jesus' return to Nazareth after he had begun his ministry in Galilee (Luke 4:16-30). After he had made a reputation in Galilee curing the sick and driving out demons, he returned to Nazareth and spoke in the synagogue. He claimed to be the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah about freeing the captives and bringing good news to the poor. Initially the Nazarenes reacted favorably, saying "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" No doubt some of them remembered him growing up. But then Jesus turned Universalist on them, showing how in several passages of the Hebrew Bible, God had bestowed special favor on individuals who were not Jewish, arguing, in effect, that Jews were not so special. This outraged the crowd and they took Jesus up to a high cliff and would have pushed him off except that somehow he slipped through the crowd and escaped. This is the source of the saying, the prophet is not honored in his hometown, which might also be translated, you can't go home again.

Jesus of course is not the only religious figure who leaves home; Prince Siddhartha has to leave his family palace as the start of the quest which will lead to his enlightenment. Mohammed must leave Mecca; Abram must leave Ur; Jonah must go to Nineveh. The shaman must travel to the other world. Ulysses must go to Troy. Dorothy must go to Oz. The quest of

the spirit, the pursuit of the holy or just of personal growth, often leads away from the bosom of the family that birthed us.

My own story has a bit of wandering in it, and I know many of you have wandered more than I. By my high school years, I felt a bit stifled, intellectually and politically, by life in Columbia South Carolina, and was delighted to be admitted to Yale off the waiting list. I left home to get a northern education, married Lee, my high school sweetheart, a semester before graduation, and when I had graduated, she and I stayed around in the north for a reason which might sound ludicrous today but made good sense back in 1970: we were hoping and expecting that a revolution was going to happen and we wanted to be where it was happening. We took two trips around the country in those years looking for signs and portents and trying to figure out how we fit in, and one year we landed in Ann Arbor.

But even then we would come back to Columbia to touch base at holidays.

Coming home meant the familiar rituals. The Christmas Eve service, mother's solo, roasted and salted pecans, bourbon Old Fashioneds, and especially my grandmother's Christmas party.

There were two things about my grandmother's gracious house that stand out in my mind: she had an elevator, which had been installed in the 1940s after my grandfather had a heart attack, and she had an electrical outlet in the middle of the living room floor. Most of the year this was covered with a rug, but at Christmastime the rug was rolled back and a cedar tree was placed in the middle of the room. It was often my task as a teenager to help put up and decorate the tree. The outlet meant that you could light the tree without having wires to trip over if you walked around it, and the payoff for this came at highlight of the Christmas Eve party, when the whole family held hands and circled around the tree, singing a carol that I've never heard anywhere else:

Shine out, O blessed star
Promise of the dawn
Glad tidings send afar
Christ the Lord is born!
Ring, ring, happy bells, happy bells
Bells of Christmas
Ring, ring, happy bells, happy bells,
Christ the Lord is born!

Now that illustrates a way you can go home: memory; memory is a path back home, but memory fades, new experiences crowd out the old ones, so it helps if there is a ritual that happened every year.

But we didn't come back to Columbia for good. When Lee and I got out of law school, we decided to move back to South Carolina, but to a place we felt had more character and charm, Charleston. For we were by that time thoroughgoing liberals, and being 100 miles away from our native city seemed like a good idea to avoid embarrassing our conservative family or being embarrassed by them.

Now all of this is several stages of life ago. The reason I couldn't go home back then was the cultural and political differences with my relatives and the society in which I grew up. The reason I can't go back today is because it isn't there. Some of the houses are there, but the people have largely scattered or died. And I expect a lot of you are in the same situation.

The last strong link was my mother, and when I went back to Columbia for her funeral two years ago, I had top face up to the fact that I left home as a young man and never came back to live. I gave the eulogy, and in it I confronted the awkwardness that not only myself, but all of my mother's five children had left Columbia and thus the care of her in the dementia of her later years had been borne by her third husband Stuart, a godsend to her and to all of us, and by the cousins who had stayed in town, and dutifully visited their Aunt Bessie. I tried to express that this was a debt the children could never repay.

Home, what is it? If it is the place I came from, I will always have a fatally contradictory relation to it in my heart. While I am away from South Carolina, I yearn for it, I make collard greens and wear hats with Palmetto Tree insignias on them, read the local newspapers online to keep up with the latest political outrages from that crazy state. But I have only to be in the state for a few hours on a visit to be reminded of why I left.

Fortunately, home is not just the place you were born. Fortunately, there is no decree requiring you to go back to that place. Most of us have the ability to nest, to make a home where we find ourselves. Most of you moved here from elsewhere, but you have made a home here for years or decades. I know many of you have established this as the place to which your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren repair for family gatherings. Maybe your original home place was Connecticut or Boston or New Jersey, but this is home in your family now.

In the poem "Death of The Hired Man," Robert Frost imagines a dialogue between a New England farm couple after Silas, an elderly man who has done farm work for them before, has suddenly shown up on their doorstep after being absent for a long time. Though Silas told the wife he wanted to help with some farm projects, she and her husband, in talking about it, conclude that he has come back to die.

"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?"

"It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

And in response to this statement, the wife gives her definition of home which is often quoted:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in."

In other words, my friends, home is not made of bricks and mortar or wood or glass.

Home is made of kinship, of obligation, of fellow feeling, of love.

This poem of Frost has a poignant cast when we read it against the parable of the prodigal son I read earlier (Luke 15: 11-32). The prodigal son, after spending all his inheritance, wants to come back to be treated like a hired hand. The father won't hear of it, and calls for the finest robe, to kill the fatted calf, to have feasting and dancing to celebrate the return of his son. But the eldest son, the good one, is outraged, for he has remained loyal, and refuses to join the celebration. The father answers him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." In this story, home is not just where they have to take you in, but a place that showers on you unconditional love even when you manifestly don't deserve it. Can any of our real homes live up to this ideal?

I was mentioning these ideas to my spiritual director Joel Baehr, who is a Buddhist and a UU minister, and he pointed out that the concept of home is a bit like the concept of the self in Tibetan Buddhism. There are three levels of the self. There is the outer self, how you are in relation to others, how you appear. There is the inner self, which is how you take in the world, how you process it, how you understand it. And there is the inmost self, which is the essential stuff you are made of, what the other two selves rest upon. And Joel said that home might be conceived like that. There is the outer home which is the place you live in and the people that are around you in that place. There is the inner home, which is the way you relate to the place and the people. And there is the inmost home, which is the foundation for your selfhood.

And enlightenment, and contentment, comes from realizing that these three aspects are not the same thing. In particular, we crave and cling to the outermost home as if it were the essential home. Most of what I have said about my own childhood home this morning is this

kind of clinging to something that is basically illusion. I did live in Columbia South Carolina once and I was happy there in the family in which I grew up, until there came a time when I decided I wouldn't be happy staying there, and then I moved. To the extent that I regard my childhood home as my only and forever home, I will never be able to go back there and I will be unhappy. That unhappiness stems from my own choice to regard that as home.

For the reality is that when I left that home, I took with me my inmost self, because that was the part of me that I was growing and tending. My intellectual curiosity, my power to do good in the world, my urge to make a family, all of these came with me. They were part of my inner home, formed by the interaction of my inmost self with the home in which I was raised.

In other words, we are all turtles. We all carry our homes on our backs. Or rather, in our hearts. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is within you. So is home. In fact, home may be the kingdom of heaven.

What about this Meeting House? This building is now identified with this church, but we all know that 15 years ago, this church did not have a building. We made this building our home. But this is our outer home. Our inner home is the people in the church and the way we interact; our inmost home is the covenant that binds together the people of this church.

What about people who are actually homeless? To say that we are turtles is not to overlook the homeless. Homelessness was the plight of Mary and Joseph, and it is still a terrible condition to be in; still today, many people find there is no room at the inn. There is an event in Hyannis at noon on December 21st, where among other things they will remember the homeless on the Cape who have died in the last year, and I am going to try to be there. Last year we heard Bill Bishop speak here about his organization Homeless not Hopeless. I think this name, and Bill's story, illustrates that home is an internal state as well as an external one. If the innermost home is warm and intact, one can face the loss of the outer one. Of course, many who are homeless have had abusive childhoods and are in the snares of substance abuse, so the inner strength may be compromised. But with proper nurture, ministry and support, many of the homeless can find their feet again.

What about Occupy? Occupy Boston, like its New York counterpart, staked a claim on a piece of ground in order to make a witness for economic justice. They are now officially homeless, having just been evicted from Dewey Square, and my prayer for them is that they use the demise of their tent encampment to find new ways of being in community and continuing the powerful witness they have been providing, as those of us who have not chosen to sleep out in the open will continue our witness in our towns on the Cape.

What is the takeaway here? You can't go home again, you must go home again. Whatever home is, it is more than a place, so going back to the place you grew up will not

constitute going home, and the place will have changed and the people will have changed and you will have changed. But that changing “you” carries within you the capacity to make a home, and you must exercise that capacity wherever you are. You must make a home. There is no room in the inn, the baby is due, you must make a home however you can. Most of us have made a home here on Cape Cod and if we move on from here, we will make another home somewhere else. You have always been able to go home in this sense. All you have to do is click the ruby slippers together three times and repeat, “There’s No Place Like Home.” Amen.
Reading for December 11 Parable of the lost prodigal son – Luke 15

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came

back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"