

HOME ON THE JOURNEY

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SERMON

An interviewer for Parabola magazine asked Thich Nat Hahn about home. Knowing that Thich Nat Hahn spends most of the year in the southwest of France in a Buddhist complex he founded called Plum Village – quite a distance from his original home country Vietnam where he was exiled in 1966 for being a peace activist - Hahn responded “I have arrived, I am home.” (Parabola, Winter 2006, pg. 25)

This was not the first time that Thich Nat Hahn had stated, “I have arrived, I am home.” He often responds this way when asked about home, no matter where he is. Physical location seems to be of little consequence.

For years, I have struggled with answering the question, “where is home?” Unlike Thich Nat Hahn, I always try to pinpoint a place on the map. When I was little, it was easy. Home was the town or city wherever I lived. When my Dad was transferred to a new town, my ‘home’ moved as well.

For years after I graduated from college I still referred to where my parents lived as 'home'. I moved several times during in my early working years and it was not until I attended seminary that I began referring to Greensboro, the city where I had lived for fifteen years, as home. To tell the truth, it really hadn't seemed like I had lived in any one place that long, the years seemed to add up without actually counting. But even then, when I was in Berkeley or Chicago attending school and living so far from home, if someone asked "where in North Carolina?" I would have a split answer, "I grew up near Raleigh mostly, and I live in Greensboro. But I was born in Atlanta. And I lived in Washington, DC for ten years." The add-ons might be an internalized response to the conservative, uneducated, backward image of my home state. And maybe my response is partly the Unitarian in me knowing that there are multiple truths and not wanting to give an incomplete answer!

But for me, home is hard to pinpoint. Where is home? When I am in Victoria or Vancouver, I say, "I am from Nanaimo". It is the one place this year that I don't live out of a suitcase. But when I am in Nanaimo, I respond, "I am from North Carolina".

So is home the preceding place you lived? When do you get to respond with your current place of residence? Is it a number of years? Is it the

place where your current family lives? Is it where your parents lived? Is it where you are born?

Most of us are not from British Columbia or Nanaimo originally.

Sometimes our accents give us away and we are asked, “Where are you from?” We might say “the south, England, Scotland, Germany.” The implication is that we might call where we are now home, but we aren’t really from here. So, “Where is home?”

In ancient days, we were transient. We were all travelers. We followed the herds and food sources and did not set up permanent homes. There are still some migrant populations, but now, we mostly live in cities or towns, in a somewhat fixed locale. We even ‘own’ property.

Today, with increased mobilization, we move for jobs, school or climate. Home is more like a way station on a journey. Our life begins at one point, stops for shorter or longer periods at another point or two, and then moves on. Again, “Where is home?”

In his book Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games, A. Bartlett Giamatti told an interesting story about home.

“Baseball is quintessentially American in that it tells us that much as you travel and as far as you go, out to the green frontier, the purpose is

to get home, back to where the others are, the pioneer ever striving to come back to the common place. A nation of migrants always, for all their wanderings, remembers what every immigrant never forgets: that you may leave home but if you forget where home is, you are truly lost and without hope.” (Parabola, Winter 2006. pg. 62)

Naming a place home can be like a shell game. No one wants to be homeless, but often there is no single answer. It can be confusing and even unsettling. It can also be a reminder of outsider status. Unless you are aboriginal, you don't have to go too far back in personal family history to discover your immigrant status. This is true even if you were born here or just a town or two away.

Lack of a sense of place can cause deep unsettledness in the psyche. One of the most basic of human needs is a desire to belong, to be accepted. If you are 'new' or transplanted, it is difficult to enter into or gain insider status. Try as hard as we might, learn as much as we can, engage at full speed, we are never 'from here'. In some way, we all have tourist visas.

So how do we become grounded and acquire a sense of place, a sense of belonging that is so critical to our psychological and emotional health? How do we answer the question “Where is home?” and respond without

doubt or confusion. At what point does this question not stir some deep embedded memories. When is home where we are now?

Thich Nat Hahn, living in a country far removed from his place of birth, declared, “I have arrived, I am home.” Later in the interview with Parabola (pg. 26), Hahn replied with a saying that we’ve all heard, “Home is where the heart is.” And he continued,

“You are used to a landscape, a way of life, a certain atmosphere, and when you are away from that, you miss that home. But while you are missing that home, you are creating a home right where you are. And if you look deeply, you will see that one day you will have to leave this place and you will miss it also. A new environment, different kinds of people, different ways of life, different habits, and you are making it into another home.

With the practice of mindfulness, you are happy to see that you are making another kind of home, and when you see that, you don’t miss the previous home. In the beginning you believe that you will not be happy without that home, but later on you feel differently. You see that you have the capacity of living in the here and the now and making this place into your home so you don’t wait until you go home to be happy.” (pg. 26)

Being mindful of the present, of where we are now and of where we are at any moment, is a key to gaining a psychological and emotional sense of belonging. Being present with a keen sense of awareness and of curiosity goes a long way toward keeping us grounded. Often, a sense of gratitude unfolds, as does humbleness in regard to our own transience.

Last summer while I was serving as chaplain at a hospital, I heard a minister speak about blooming where you are planted. He said that we all are born with the soil of our childhood home under our feet. And that is where we should stay. The conversation wasn't speaking so much about where you lived as to your inherited religious home. If born into a Christian family, you should remain a Christian. It felt like a circle the wagons mentality of a beleaguered enclave. No room for doubt or exploration.

I agree with 'bloom where you are planted', but disagree with the implied acceptance of tradition as worthy of blind obedience. For me, I was born into a Christian home, although my Dad was an atheist. I soon found that my questions took me a long way from religious conformity. 'Bloom where you are planted' became a journey of exploration of various soil conditions so that I might thrive when planted.

Spiritual journeys are often a search for home. Unitarian Universalists acknowledge the journey aspect by shying away from the classification of ‘denomination’ and instead, call UU’ism a movement. Many of us are ‘come-outers’. We have come out of another religious tradition and into Unitarianism. Another way of looking at this is to say we are ‘come-iners’. Even if we are born into the Unitarian Universalist tradition, it is very likely that we have bloomed only after periods of intense inner search and discovery. And the journey continues.

So is the journey itself home? Is our exploration, our experimentation, our wandering enough? In *There Are No Final Answers*, Adin Steinsaltz says movement is twofold: “One is to go from home to find a new home; the other is to go from home, and [not] want any home.” Some people want answers and when they find them, they are home. For others, when answers are found, new questions arise. (pg 58)

Goedel’s Theorem tells us that there are no final answers. You reach ‘home’ or a point on your journey – it may be just a rest stop – and you declare “ ‘I’m satisfied’ – [this is a point] where you have enough knowledge to use for any practical problem or purpose”. (pg. 58)

I suspect that for many of us, finding new questions and treating life as a journey defines who we are. We always want to dig deeper, to know

more, to gather as much information as possible. We can never know it all, and there is always more to learn. But in this day of information overload, I don't know about you, but I am happy to take a rest every now and then.

So if life is a journey, when can make a personal declaration "I am home, I have arrived." Thich Nat Hahn has offered Unitarians and others on life's journey a valuable insight when taps into age-old wisdom when he says, "home is where the heart is."

Home might be a physical location on the map, but our inner journey and our awareness of the present tell much more about where we are blooming as spiritual beings than a particular plot of land under our feet either here or continents away.

Peter Matthiessen, author of The Snow Leopard talks about the search for home. He says,

"The search may begin with a restless feeling, as if one were being watched. One turns in all directions and sees nothing. Yet one senses that there is a source for this deep restlessness; and the path that leads is not a path to a strange place, but the path home." (pg. 63)

Then he adds a quote by the Witch of the North as she cries “But you are home, all you have to do is wake up.” (pg. 63)

I will wake up in a couple of weeks back ‘home’ in North Carolina. But when I return to Nanaimo in September, I will be ‘home’ here too. Over the years I have discovered that home is where I am planted, as long as I am being present to the moment and know where my heart is.

Thank you for making me feel so welcome this past year and for voting me back onto the island. May we all be at home.

Blessed be and amen.