“Home Economics”

Just as there are comfort foods that remind us of childhood—my own special favorites are spaghetti and grilled cheese sandwiches—there are certain comfort *words* in the English language, words that induce a sense of peace, safety, nurturance and satisfaction. There are words so full of memory and hope that just to utter them stirs a little chamber in the heart, the chamber where all our disappointments and yearnings are lodged. For me, one of those words is *home.*

We all have one, even the man with just a box under a bridge, the woman with four walls and a bed in a rented room, the family in a trailer park, along with the millionaire in his mansion; home is our sanctuary, our private get away, the place we call our own, where we curl up each night to sleep and dream. And though I don’t believe that every symbol has just one meaning, when we dream of homes, houses with hidden rooms or unexpected interiors, we’re often really dreaming about ourselves, the unexplored dimensions of our own inner world. Home is the outward manifestation of who we are inside, the organization and chaos in our lives, and when I have the opportunity to visit members of our congregation in their homes, it’s always illuminating, some dwellings Victorian and overstuffed with creative clutter, others minimalist and Nordic as an Ikea showroom. A person’s home almost always reflects their peculiar taste and personality.

The home where I grew up was singular. Other houses in the neighborhood had all been installed by a developer, with a uniform look. But my mom and dad designed our house and then built it themselves, literally block by concrete block, Tid pregnant with my older brother as she and Al labored to lift the joists to form the roof. It was what you might call Eisenhower contemporary, with stainless steel counters in the kitchen and a built in ironing board that folded out of the wall when you opened the cupboard door, with lots of other features they invented as hip young professionals in 1951, like putting radiant heating in the floor so your toes never got cold. An open floor plan, very functional, really a machine for living.

They paid for the house themselves, too, nail by nail, out-of-pocket with money they’d saved early in their marriage. They never had a mortgage, no loan from a bank. Because my dad had a kidney ailment, and couldn’t get life insurance, they knew they needed to be thrifty and avoid any big debts. So it was pay-as-you-go. In effect, the house was their insurance policy. If anything happened, it was theirs to fall back on. And that’s just what happened.

When my dad died, my mother was left with two little kids to provide for. But at least she had the house. And though she re-married and divorced several times (five times, to be exact), and though I moved away from home more than once to live with step-dads and blended assortments of step-siblings, sometimes changing school districts, my mother was savvy enough to always hold on to the family homestead. It was a source of stability in what was otherwise a rather erratic childhood. It was the dependable place you could always retreat to, when the rest of the world seemed to be coming loose at the seams.

Home played that role, and also the church. Husbands might come and go. But we were part of the congregation at All Souls Unitarian, where the minister I knew in grade school was also there for me in high school, and also there when I was in college and divinity school, over forty years in the pulpit, retired now but a good enough friend that I can still call him up and ask for advice, and where friends, too, were of the long-lasting kind. Church for me was a kind of home away from home. And if every room and corner of the house where I grew up sticks fast in my memory—where I had my first kiss, for example, or played Monopoly on summer afternoons—I can also recall the nooks and crannies and good people of All Souls. It was an extended family. A community. So that when my brother spilled burning hot grease on his hand one day by accident at the stove, he didn't go running next door or across the street, or call 911. He ran to the Buchner's house in the next block, because Ruby was the Sunday School director at the church, and her boys Mark and Russell were our friends, our playmates (and being a little older, sometimes our babysitters), so it just seemed like the natural place to seek help. Somewhere along the way, my brother and I must have absorbed the instructions, "in case of emergency, go to church."

It's funny what people value. Last summer, for example, my brother and I went back to Tulsa and cleaned out Tid's house. We rented one of those big dumpsters, the jumbo size, and parked it in the driveway. We gave away everything we could, clothes and towels and housewares to the Goodwill, loads of books to the public library, some of her art equipment to the local university and museum. The piano and dining room ensemble ended up in re-sale shops. We both took everything we wanted. And still, by the end of the week, the dumpster was full to overflowing with yard after cubic yard of god-knows-what, the accumulated debris and flotsam of a lifetime, items that must have seemed well worth the price whenever they were purchased but that in retrospect had become just a lot of unwanted junk.

It's almost enough to make you question whether owning more stuff is really the point of living.

And then, when the house was empty, we sold it, for not very much money, because a crack had appeared in the foundation. Not the foundation my father laid, but in an addition a contractor had put in a few years later. And nothing in the sales price reflected the real value of the house, because our economic indicators never seem to measure things that matter. Did the price reflect the sweat equity and hard work, the hopes and dreams invested in the home's construction? No really, because no one got ever paid for lifting those joists, and there was no debt, so my parent's labor never showed up in the GNP. Most of the work we do at home--like gardening, or cooking, or quilting, or sewing a patch on your old blue jeans—never gets accounted for. Think about parenting--all the bed times moms and dads spend reading with their kids, or nursing them when they're sick. No doctors are involved, and no billable hospital hours, so caring for children has no real value in our economy. In a marketplace that measures everything in terms of dollars and cents, goods and services that are free, or priceless, or that just can't be quantified, tend to be overlooked.

Barter tends to get overlooked, as well as home made presents and hand made gifts, like baking cookies for a friend, and also all those activities we pursue purely for the fun of it: youngsters playing a game of sandlot baseball instead of buying uniforms and playing in a league. The kind of treasures I keep in my top drawer, hidden behind the socks—the little Valentine hearts sculpted by childish fingers inscribed with L-U-V out of modeling clay--have no re-sale potential on E-Bay. The statisticians just can't figure out any way to reduce these things to numbers on a scale of material prosperity. So they become invisible, neglected, assigned a lesser worth or given no worth at all.

And of course, it tends to be the same with our spiritual home. We've got a Ph.D. with a degree in early Christian scripture teaching our kids Bible stories, but because it's Sunday School, and a volunteer position, some people don't' really consider providing religious education for Fourth Graders a very important activity. For years, running the church was considered women's work. Stay-at-home moms were the unpaid labor force for religious institutions; now that more women have professional careers, we have to pay people to type the newsletter and so forth, so that we can still afford to give our services away for free. But because there's no admission, no monetary exchange involved, we don't really know how to value the time we spend in worship, or the music or the flowers we enjoy or the simple beauty of sitting quietly in this sanctuary, listening to poetry. Intangibles never show up on the nightly business report. Relationships have no value. Friends don't count, at least not in banker's arithmetic. When we're balancing the check book or figuring our net worth, love doesn't add anything appreciable to the total.

Except, of course, that in the end, love is the only thing that matters.

I know that for me, home is the place where I return to get grounded, to get real, to clear my mind of the emails and committee minutes and headlines and remember what's important. When my kids were young, for instance, I got grounded by peeping into their rooms before I'd go to bed and just looking at them, tucked in and fast asleep, simply breathing and lying still, non-productive as all children are, expensive from a certain point of view, but just about the only thing in my existence that completely made sense.

Spiritual homes, churches, synagogues, temples, mosques, societies like this one, are also places to restore our priorities, to remember what makes life worth living.

It's interesting to me that the Greek word for "home" is the same as the word for "church." *Oikos.* The ancient Greeks used the same term for the house of God, the temple of the divinity, and the homes that people made of flesh-and-blood lived in. And o*ikos* is also at the root of our English words "ecumenical" as well as "economical." Economics referred to the art or science of managing a household, while ecumenism was concerned with managing the household of faith.

I think we could use more courses in home economics these days. Not economics of the Milton Friedman or John Kenneth Galbraith kind, and not learning how to make a potholder out of yarn, but economics as one of the humanities, whose study enriches

the spirit. The curriculum might be partly experiential: to spend twenty-four hours being mindful, for example, trying to notice what parts of your day leave you stressed and distracted, and which ones produce greater feelings of peace and pleasure. Class discussions might focus on fundamental questions: How do you measure success? What are you most grateful for? When do you feel most alive? And at the end of your life, what are the things you'd like to be remembered for?

And as we continue our study of home economics, we could also ask ourselves what we want for our spiritual home. Students might inquire, why do we spend so much more on private dwellings than on public spaces? Beyond individual gain and loss, doesn't community have some intrinsic worth? Isn't happiness real only when it's shared? After all, Americans live in bigger houses today than two generations ago. Cars are larger. Per capita incomes have increased. But the average citizen is pessimistic, dissatisfied, less likely to say they have trusted companions they can talk to, less involved in social and civic organizations, less likely to belong to any congregation where they feel connected to realities that can't be easily measured.

The lessons might be hard, like learning how to say "thank you," instead of "I deserve more." Learning how to give and share, as well as get and spend. Learning how to fill our homes with things that matter–more kindness and laughter–and fewer accessories that need dusting or remote controls.

There would be no grades in such a course. There would be no final exam or right or wrong answers at the end. But we just might finish up and find ourselves at the Great Graduation with dumpsters that tended to be a little emptier, and lives a little fuller and more joyful. Possibly we could even walk through the world and more often feel at home.