

"Home is Where the Heart Is" 9/27/09 Rev. Elaine Bomford

To pay our respects to the Jewish High Holy Days which culminate in Yom Kippur tomorrow, I'll launch these reflections with a fable from the Hassidic tradition, about the much-beloved Rabbi Zusya.

One day the great sage came to his followers with eyes red from crying and a face pale with awe.

"Zusya, what's the matter?" his students asked.

"I have had a vision. In my vision, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

His followers were puzzled. "Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so worrisome?"

Zusya replied "I have learned that the angels will NOT ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'

And they will NOT ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

One of his followers placed his hands on Zusya's shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. "What, then, will the angels ask you?"

"They will say to me, 'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?'"

[adapted from <http://ronrothman.com/public/leftbraned/how-am-i-not-myself/>]

The question the angels put to each one of us - the question posed to us every morning and every hour - is "Are you being who you are?" The question is not "Have you escaped from the land of slavery in which you were born?" It is not "Will you arrive, at the end, in the promised land?" It is "Are you working through your struggles, are you expressing your gifts, are you living from your deepest, clearest self?" For when we are at home with who we are, we are at home wherever we are. Rabbi Zusya was humbled and shaken by this question, for knowing and being at home with who you are is not easy.

Each one of us carries as part of our identity the home and family into which we were born. And many, if not all of us, I imagine, have a deep yearning for a home which is beautiful and harmonious - where there is no strife, no sorrow, no pain and "the skies are not cloudy all day." Between the home of our origin, and the home to which we aspire, there are the homes we create for ourselves or find ourselves inhabiting in course of our lives.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote

"There is ground for taking the [home] as a tool for analysis of the human soul....Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are 'housed.' Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the [images of home] move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them." [The Education of the Heart, p. 135]

We dwell in our homes and in many ways they reflect who we are; at the same time we are shaped by the imprint of the homes we have lived in, and the homes we seek.

What has been the imprint of your childhood home upon your life? What rooms from that home do you still walk through in your memories, and in your dreams?

When I initially read this morning's story "Going Home Again," I identified with Bob Perks

when he spoke about the small attic room in his childhood home: "I would sing along [with The Beatles], holding a pretend microphone while standing in the light of a 60-watt bulb placed strategically on the pole lamp taken from the living room."

I will NOT ask for a show of hands, but I am pretty sure there are a number of you who, like me, are fully familiar with the finer points of how to use a hairbrush as a microphone, and you, too, may know all the words to "I Want to Hold Your Hand." You may have sung for imaginary crowds of thousands whilst gazing into the bedroom mirror.

Personally, I was active in The Beatles Club. My friends and I would sing along with the Beatles as we played air guitar. I was the President of our club, because our worldwide headquarters was housed in a small room built onto the back of the garage at my home. I mention this because although that little garage room was really rather dingy, I was happy with my friends there, singing. That room made a huge imprint on my life and sheltered a pattern of behavior that shapes me still.

When we consider our childhood homes, many, if not most of us come up with a mixed bag of imprints and patterns. In life, there are deep impressions of pain, and there are impressions of joy. Every home hosts times of turmoil and uncertainty - some homes are dominated by it. One can spend a lot of time rattling around in the more painful rooms of memory, repeating negative patterns because they are familiar, or because one seeks a way to understand and break out of them.

If you are a person who has a significant amount of pain associated with your childhood home, I suggest to you that in order to be who you truly are, it may be necessary to liberate your childhood self. You are here today, and you have a choice about what you wish to focus upon from the past. There were, I wager, spaces and times in your childhood where you were able to be yourself. Perhaps there was a tree in the yard where you felt free way up in the branches, or under cover of its foliage in a safe and secret place that was your own. Maybe you remember long afternoons, sitting in a favorite chair, reading. Perhaps you can readily find a memory of fragrant sweet peas or other flowers in a corner of the yard, or delicious soup served at the kitchen table, or the odor of Christmas pines brings you nurturing strength. These positive, light-filled rooms in our memories are every bit as powerful and significant as the rooms filled with painful, enslaving baggage.

In fact, I believe that the only aspects of our childhood homes that are relevant for present living are those that nurtured us. Hardships can nurture us too, fostering wisdom and compassion, when they are balanced with an appreciation of the simple joys we have had the resilience and resources to find. Each one of us is living proof that our childhood homes provided us with everything we needed to grow, and to blossom.

I invite you, at your leisure, to travel back in your minds to your childhood home, or homes, and rediscover something funny, something beautiful, some life-enhancing imprint from your childhood that will enhance strength, creativity and freedom in your present life.

Every person's experience of home is as unique as the homes we create for ourselves. Sometimes when I am traveling at night and I see the houses lit up along the streets or highway, I think of the dramas being played out in those homes. Each house contains an intimate play with characters and script known only to its inhabitants. Wherever there are lights inside, there is love and anger, life and death, joy and sorrow. There are actors who are at home, and there are actors in the play who are present only in the hearts and thoughts of those who inhabit the house at any given time.

"All of life," writes Thomas Moore, "is a rhythm of coming and going from home, to the world, and back. We make our homes and we seek adventure. Out in the world, we long to return home; sitting at home, we dream about wandering the world. Some make wandering the style of their lives, while others stay at home and imagine the world. Both ways are of infinite value, and both make life worth living."

[Thomas Moore, p. 126 *The Education of the Heart*]

Are you a person who has one place you call home, from which you go out and to which you return, sure of your foundation and your place in the world? Or are you a wanderer - deeply connected to several or even many places, but not tethered to one in particular? It seems to me that many folks are naturally of one kind or the other.

I recall an afternoon when I was sitting by a stream in a Colorado canyon. I walked up this canyon every summer afternoon in my youth; I knew and loved it - this canyon was my home ground. All at once, I felt a wave of longing for the brick and concrete canyons of New York City. I'd spent two years in the city - and in some ways I hated it. I didn't like the smells, or the crowds, the blaring noise. Inexplicably, among the melodious Aspens and sweet breezes of the mountains, I wanted to be in the buzz of Manhattan. From that moment, I became aware that I was a woman with a longing and love for two very different homes. Each was and would always be a part of me.

Which is as much to say, I am a wanderer. If you are a wanderer, you know what it is to love more than one place; you may call several places "home." Many of us are wanderers by disposition, some by necessity. We move a number of times in our lives, and with each move we learn to love and make our home in a new place. I think of those who stay in one place as the hub of a wheel, and those who wander as the endpoints of the spokes. We need each other - wanderers need homebodies to anchor and ground them, and those who stay in the center need the energy wanderers embody. Perhaps, ultimately, because everything changes, we all need to learn to be wanderers and homebodies at different times in our lives.

Whether we make ourselves at home in many places, or stay in one place, the need for a safe home which in some way feels like our own place is basic to us all. You may have a big home with toys and books for your grandchildren downstairs and an attic above filled with heirlooms from generations of your family. Or you may have one rented room with only a few things in it you call your own - a tablecloth, a keepsake, a picture. The objects with which we surround ourselves in our homes help to remind us of who we are, where we have been and those who love us. This poem, "The Cabbage," by Ruth Stone says it well:

You have rented an apartment.
You come to this enclosure with physical relief,
your heavy body climbing the stairs in the dark,
the hall bulb burned out, the landlord
of Greek extraction and possibly a fatalist.
In the apartment leaning against one wall,
your daughter's painting of a large frilled cabbage
against a dark sky with pinpoints of stars.
The eager vegetable, opening itself
as if to eat the air, or speak in cabbage
language of the meanings within meanings;
while the points of stars hide their massive

violence in the dark upper half of the painting.
You can live with this.

You have, no doubt, heard the saying that a good cook is one who can look in the cupboard and fridge and come up with a tasty meal, whatever he or she may find at hand. A good homemaker is the same. I have visited tents of homeless people camping out in the woods that were more graciously inviting - however squalid, however unjust - than antiseptic homes in the fancy parts of town. We approximate "The Promised Land" of home in the home we create for ourselves with whatever means we have at any given time, wherever we may be.

Hestia is the Goddess of the hearth and home. In ancient Greece, her sacred fire was always kept lit. A person establishing a new home would light a torch from Hestia's sanctuary hearth in the center of the town hall, and then carry the flame back to their house to light the chalice on their home altar. This domestic light was kept burning at all times. "Each day began and ended with a ritual requesting that Hestia protect and nurture the family within" the home.

[http://www.goddessgift.com/goddess-myths/greek_goddess_hestia.htm]

The promise and sanctity of every home, it seems to me, is found in the light within it. This light shines for as long as we begin and end each day with an attitude of reverence, or perhaps a simple promise to persevere. It shines for the wanderers who pass by, wondering about the lives of those secure within, and for those inside, dreaming of their loved ones far from home. -----

Thich Nhat Hanh says "Home is where the heart is. 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 for living in the here and now and making this place into your home so you don't wait until you go home to be happy....With practice, it is possible to live in the here and the now. The here and the now is our true home. If you do not live in the here and the now, you miss everything." ["Parabola," p. 26, Winter 2006]

Wherever we are, we may be at home. With whatever means we have at hand, we do our best to secure a safe place and light a flame of hope and promise. We furnish our homes with the memories and patterns we freely choose to bring forward into the present . In this here and now, this home of our choosing and creation, we may become fully ourselves. And when the time comes and the angels ask us "Were you able to be yourself in your life?," let us find ourselves at home with the question.
AMEN