**Finding Your Way Home**

December 27, 2015

Rev. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society, Sacramento

Music: *Hymns:* #231, Angels We Have Heard on High; #1011, Return Again; #1064, Blue Boat Home. *Piano:* We Three Kings; Fly; Winter Wonderland.

Chalice Lighting: “The Work of Christmas,” by Howard Thurman (read “brothers” as “people”)

Sermon:

For many of us, December holidays bring up thoughts of home. Some travel to familiar places with familiar faces and reassuring aromas, flavors, colors and sounds. Others devote work and care into building a sense of home where we live. Some feel torn by competing claims of HOME. For example, I know couples and families who divide their time among two, three, or more households at the holidays. They may try to touch all the bases, perhaps disappointing someone—or disappointing everyone, including themselves.

Holiday songs and Christmas movies play on that word, *home*. In 1943, Bing Crosby sang “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” to honor the military men serving in the Second World War, most of whom COULD NOT be home for Christmas.

So much about the holidays is about nostalgia, which has to do with home. In fact, in its Greek-language roots, *nostalgia* means the pain of longing to return home, longing to experience the familiar. For the Greek poets it meant the pain of distance and absence. They felt the loss that comes with time and change.

It’s remarkable that we got this word for a lost sense of home from the ancient Greeks, given that they lived in such a small piece of geography, compared to our lives today. Things didn’t change as quickly for them as they do for our culture, in our time. Yet the Greeks felt the longing for a remembered sense of home, a poignant spiritual sense. Perhaps we, in the United States of the 21st century, feel completely spiritually homeless. In their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection,* Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham say:

Modern humankind feels homeless in the deepest meaning of the word: not in the transient sense of having no place to sleep for the night, not even in the wider sense of poverty’s homelessness, but in a … universal sense of having no place wherein we *fit*.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The sense of dislocation can be terrible or it can be subtle. Consider the losses of a refugee family fleeing the violence of Honduras, Burundi or Syria. Most refugees and asylum seekers do not expect to go back home. Their nostalgia for the home they’ve given up must seem unbearable. First, however, they want only to survive. Then, they want to reach a new place, a safe place, a home for a fresh beginning. If they are lucky they have relatives or friends already living in a place that might become their new country, say Germany or the U.K. or here. If they are not so lucky, they might remain in a refugee camp. For a long and scary time, they have to create among themselves/ whatever sense of home they can in such a fragile uncertain situation.

On the other hand, a sense of dislocation can creep up on you, even if it’s not a life-threatening ordeal in a strange land. Here’s my version. When I was 14 years old my father died suddenly of a heart attack. A year later my mother sold the house in which I had grown up. We downsized, and moved a few miles away to a smaller home. Three years later, as I prepared to go away to college, my mother decided to move to an apartment. No unit was available in the place where she preferred to rent, so she took her second choice of apartment complexes. I came home from college for a weekend, one month after she had moved in. Her apartment was very small, a bit sterile, but not bad. As a home base, it felt okay. After all, I would be staying there only on school breaks.

A few weeks later, we had our weekly Saturday telephone conversation—at long distance rates, since my college was 50 miles from home. “Mr. Hathaway called me,” Mom said. He was the owner of the apartments she preferred, in the neighborhood she preferred. She said: “A two-bedroom came open, and he offered it to me. I said yes, so I’ll move at the end of the month.”

“Nooo!” I said. I tried to talk her out of it. I pleaded. It wasn’t that I’d have to do any of the work of moving her. Nor was the new place far away from the old one. In my hometown, nothing was far away. But for Mom to move, after I had left, seemed uprooting to me. Familiar ground had shifted. My unspoken fear was this: *Will nothing in my life be exempt from change?* By now I know the answer: Yes, that’s true.

When I was a kid my family would read aloud a hilarious parody of a mother’s newsy letter to her son who lives far away. “Dear Son, How are you, fine? We are fine. So much has changed here. If you came back you wouldn’t know the place. We moved.” That’s sort of how I felt.

Mom and I ended our conversation. I hung up the phone and I sobbed. The ground was shifting under me. In hindsight, I see that my sadness at that moment was the emotional distillation of all the losses and life transitions of the past few years. My fear at having my mother move while I was away at school stood for my uncertainty about all the changes that would unfold in my life as a young adult. I wanted to hang on to every sense of home and belonging and familiarity that I *could* hang on to.

Through its Four Noble Truths, Buddhism teaches that life involves change. Change happens: in us and in what we count on. Even when we experience or feel things as constant, in truth change is the only constant. Suffering comes from attachment, from clinging to what is temporary. I think some attachments cause an honorable suffering, such as the grief after losing a loved one. We suffer as we learn to live without their touch, their voice, their physical warmth.

Other kinds of clinging, however, make us feel small or look petty. When we grasp for *more* or when we guard what we claim as OURS. When we try to control others’ perceptions of us, or constrain and control another person’s choices. But change is inevitable. It makes a difference to our souls whether we fight it all the way, or whether we look at it with tenderness and thoughtful reasoning.

In a life marked by transitions, losses and new ventures, in a world of turmoil, is it possible to find a sustaining sense of home? From outside appearances, I think the answer is yes for many people. Yet up close, I do hear of the struggles of living with change. People move or die, or leave us in some other way. Jobs change, the labor market shifts. Our times are filled with so much distracting change. Our world is full of events and behaviors and news that make the heart ache.

In the midst of all this, it can be important to make a home within ourselves, and around us, wherever we may be. Perhaps we can find our way home NOT by running toward some distant place but by looking nearby, and appreciating what surrounds us.

Many people find a sense of home in a community, especially a spiritual community. Every year several new families or individuals join this congregation as members. They make it their home. Every week, newcomers visit for a Sunday service. Nearly all of us were newcomers once in this community. What is it that draws us out of our habits and settled patterns to explore a congregation? What are we seeking? We may not even be able to name all that we have been seeking until we discover it. As an individual or as a family, you will have your own answer./

I have identified two categories of people who make the decision to join a UU congregation.

One is the type of person who lets the congregation grow on you. You take your time and evaluate. You attend, explore, question, wonder, and become acquainted with a number of people. You have some good experiences, and maybe some disappointments, but a point comes when you say, “I’m ready to make it official, and be counted as part of this community.” Some regular visitors gain such a feeling of home at UUSS that they don’t realize they’re NOT members until it’s time to vote at a congregational meeting, or a minister invites them to join.

Then there’s the other type of person. These are the ones among you who have a lightening-bolt moment. You come for a visit once, and then say, “I’m home. This is where I belong.” You say: “This is my family; I know it. Where do I sign up?” The chances are you are a lightening-bolt UU if you said something like this during coffee hour on your first Sunday: “Why did it take me so long to find a community like this one?” Okay, where do I sign up?” Every congregation has people of both types.

There are some special cases, of course. Some of you have grown up in a UU congregation, so this may always have been home, whether you wanted to get up and go out on a Sunday morning or not! Other people are newcomers, but you have pre-qualified this congregation, thanks to the World Wide Web. After listening to a few sermons online or reading them, after studying our website or Facebook page, you show up to confirm the virtual impression you have gained. In person, of course, there is the experience of music in community, both hearing it and being part of making it. There is the gesture of a hand reaching for yours in a greeting of welcome and fellowship. There is the thought of saying *Welcome* to someone else. That’s when you are home: when you wish to extend a welcome to others. When you are the one to say: “We’re glad you’re here!”

Long before I contemplated the ministry, I was one of those people who let a congregation grow on me, attending till I knew it was the best fit. I do know other ministers who represent the lightening-bolt Unitarian Universalist. They knew they were home right away. However you come to find your way home, it can be a blessing. Wherever that may be, here or elsewhere, we hope it is a durable source of meaning and hope.

Of course, there is risk in making your home in any community, including one like this. Over the decades I’ve seen folks come to a congregation and fall in love. We find a place where we feel welcome in our imperfections as well as our strong points. It’s so refreshing to feel we are accepted for all of who we are. Eventually, however, we might experience disappointment at something. We could feel impatience, frustration, annoyance, or just plain shock. We encounter the less charming results of being part of a community: we get *imperfection* in all its glory and aggravation. This need not cause disillusionment, but it can. Depending on how much we have idealized our home, we might use a moment of dismay as a time to drop out or slip away. Of course, this dynamic is not reserved for spiritual communities. Any kind of membership organization, any kind of organized community, any kind of relationship can be a home, and it can be a home we leave.

 Finding home is one thing; sustaining it is another. Making a home is like making any kind of relationship: it won’t be ideal, so if we idealize it, we’re in for frustration. You may remember the famous *New Yorker* cartoon from the 1990s by Jennifer Berman: the scene of a large but nearly empty auditorium, with a wide banner hanging over the unoccupied seats: “Adult Children of Normal Parents: Annual Convention.” There are only two people in the room. It’s one of my favorite cartoons. On looking at it again recently, I noticed that those two people are smiling, but they are NOT talking to each other. Not even sitting in the same row. I’m glad, in my non-ideal places of belonging, in my imperfect homes, there are imperfect people who are willing to talk to one another, and hear one another. Finding the right fit calls for presence in the flesh.

In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, the authors recommend three ways to find our way to a sense of belonging. First is to “accept ourselves as imperfect,” not as perfect but not as hopeless either—a mixture of merits and flaws. They call this “fitting into our own being.” Learning to be comfortable in our own skin, as some say. Recognizing who we are, with gifts and strengths as well as flaws and areas for growth—that is the spirituality of imperfection.

We may still encounter frustration at our imperfections, but that does not mean we can’t experience a fit with others. On the contrary, if we apply the lens of “imperfection to relationships with others, … we learn to ‘see’ all relationships… in a different way.” We see relationships as potentially nourishing and valuable, but never as perfect solutions to the flux and challenge of life. By letting go of idealistic expectations a little bit more, we may feel and “learn how to fit with others.” By not holding on to our hurt quite as long or as tightly as we used to, we may see how others fit with us, how can feel at home.

The authors write that doing this “involves gratitude: being grateful for what we *do* have instead of moaning and groaning about what we *do not* have.” Through the lens of imperfection, we can see our families, our communities and all other kinds of relationships as gifts--not packages, but gifts. Kurtz and Ketcham say that we can see relationships as the source of lessons for living. In community, we can learn to value different perspectives, needs and ways of going through life.

Even if we can’t value differences in a celebratory way, we can value them as reminders that we all fit. We can remember that we are not here to engineer one another. What we can experience in community, in family, in relationship, is the opportunity to forgive mistakes, the chance to learn to “think of others before we think of ourselves.”

In a community of people “we learn that what we do affects others, that what others do affects us and that we are related to each other through need and through love.” The lesson and reminder of our mutual dependence is reason for gratitude. The practice of giving thanks can help us feel a sense of belonging and fitting together.

 Here’s a summary of how the spirituality of imperfection can help us find a sense of home even amid so many distractions. We practice learning how to “fit into our own being” because we accept our flaws and areas for improvement, but we also value our own gifts. We see relationships NOT as perfect solutions, but as sources of insight, help, and caring. We cultivate an attitude of gratitude for the ways that imperfect relationships invite us to learn and to practice our deepest values.

For all the communities and groups and people who offer us a sense of connection and purpose, let us give thanks. For the committed souls who make *this place* a source of warmth and hospitality, let us give thanks. And for every hopeful visitor and every curious website surfer, let us give thanks.

We are here: as new comers and long timers, as lightning-bolt Unitarian Universalists and seekers willing to let this community grow on us.

We are here, longing for a better world, a safe and peaceful home in the world, for everyone, everywhere. Let us wish and let us work for the day when every member of the human family can find their way home. Let us do what we can to help them along the way, and in so doing may we find ourselves at home.

So may it be. Amen.

1. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*, Reprint ed. (New York: Bantam, 1993), 230. All quotations from chapter 16, pp. 227-243. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)