

## “Home” - October 2, 2016

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reading: “At Home” by David Whyte

### Sermon

A little over a month ago I faced a 1784-mile-drive from Dallas to Sacramento to create a new home base for nine months. I knew I couldn’t bring everything I might like nor could I make the trip in one day or even two. But in the words of architect and philosopher Travis Price, “You can’t do everything but you can do something. Don’t let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.”

I knew that what I could do was borrow my husband’s car, pack it full of clothes and books, and divide my trip into three days. I also knew the drive would be more enjoyable and seem shorter if I belted out show tunes the entire way with the Broadway Channel on satellite radio. With the Village People’s advice to “Go West” in my head, I jumped in the car, and took off.

Between songs, one of the radio hosts, Seth Rudetsky, was talking about an upcoming benefit he is doing with Broadway stars for a charity that finds families for foster kids. Unfortunately, the older a child gets, the more difficult it is for them to find a home. But, of course, even college age folks long to have a home and family, and need the love and mentoring of parents and siblings.

For the benefit concert, they have former foster kids tell their stories, then they tell about a song that was meaningful to them during those difficult times. Seth Rudetsky told of choreographer and actress Rosie Perez, a ward of the state in Brooklyn, and how important the song “Home” from the 1975 Broadway musical *The Wiz* was in her life. She agreed to tell her story at the benefit, and broke into tears when she was told that Stephanie Mills, the original Dorothy, would be there in person to sing it.

The song begins:

When I think of Home  
I think of place  
Where there's love overflowing.

What do you think of when you think of home?

Put that question in the back of your mind for the next few minutes, as well as these two:

What makes a place ‘home?’ and

What breaks your heart?

Many of you don't know much about me, so perhaps as way of introduction I can tell you what I think of when I think of home. Like me, you may have sung "My Old Kentucky Home" in elementary school, the old Stephen Foster song with the hopelessly racist lyrics, but I actually have an Old Kentucky Home, not far from some hopelessly racist relatives.

I lived in two houses growing up, not at once, we moved. First, a small wood-frame house in Northern Kentucky where I lived until the fifth grade, then we moved to a modest brick ranch-style house further from town where the suburbs met farmland. My parents still live there.

Although uncommon in Texas and California, many of the houses in Kentucky have basements, and my friends and I spent many hours in the basement playing. I would produce elaborate puppet shows, I love the Muppets, and on the ping-pong table we would build intricate villages of Lego houses with a model train looping from one township to the other.

A real train yard was down the hill from my grandparents' house. My dad's dad actually built the house and was a brakeman on the railroad. Each summer I'd spend a week at their house. Not having air-conditioning, we left the windows open at night to take advantage of the breeze, and I can distinctly remember lying in the upstairs bedroom at night, the sound of the trains, and the mournful squeal of the wheels as the freight cars slowed down.

While I think of both of those places when I think of home, the place that seemed most lastingly, most historically home was the farm of my other set of grandparents. Just down the hill from the house was the curve in the road where my great and great-great grandfathers general store and post office stood. In the other direction still stands the tiny house where my great-grandparents lived, and where my grandparents lived as newly-weds until my uncle came along. The house is small enough to lead one to wonder how that ever happened. My grandparents built a house on the farmland between the tiny house and the site of the old general store. It was finished the year my mother was born, and it was the only place my grandparents lived until they died. On one side of the house is a detached, two-car garage with my name written in the floor while the cement was still wet. Being the only grandchild born when it was built, I was immortalized there in concrete as well as behind the house where a row of pine trees was planted the year I was born. On the other side of the house was the tall pine tree I famously fell out of the summer after second grade, breaking my arm and terrifying my grandmother.

You may be able to describe similar places and memories when I ask you what you think of when you think of home. You've already heard Linda's remembrance. I imagine your experience is quite different from ours. So what is it that causes us to

consider a place home? Looking back over my description, I've thought of a few things, but I'm hoping you'll think of even more as you reflect on this later.

First, perhaps obviously but well worth mentioning, a home provides physical shelter. The small, two-bedroom, one-bath wood-frame house I first remember as home certainly provided shelter. It's where I ran to when it began raining and came to warm up after building a snow fort on a winter day off of school.

Second, it was also home because it was where my immediate family lived, and it's where I felt loved and taken care of. It was similar at my grandparents' houses that I described. They were places where I felt loved and welcomed.

Third, I consider those places home because I felt safe there. Not just physically, from bullies at school and from the snow, wind and rain. Also safe to explore who I was, playing with puppets instead of throwing a football, enjoying reading, and doing art projects. Home is where I could be me.

Fourth, home was home because I knew it would be there. When I walked home from school, the house and my mom were going to be there. And soon dad would come home from work. It was even more the case with my grandparent's house. My immediate family moved, but my grandparents were always in the house next to the pine tree I fell out of. I moved away to college, then grad school, then Texas, and still they were there, like a perpetual underpinning to my life.

I am fully aware I am breathtakingly lucky to have such positive memories of home. A friend once described my upbringing as Ozzie and Harriett as painted by Norman Rockwell. It might sound like paradise to some.

Speaking of paradise, there are those, especially back in Texas, who will proudly tell you that Heaven is their Home, and they'll often smile and add "But I'm not homesick." In the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee wrote, "There are just some kind of men who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results."

UUs are famously more concerned with this world than the next, and treating those in this world with compassion and respect. So when we learn of people who aren't as lucky as I was with a loving, stable home, we become concerned, and want to help. And I'm not going to pretend that everyone inside these walls has a perfect home, and those who need help are only out there, not a part of our community. The first thing I want to make clear is that a reason each of us is a part of this society, this community, is to help each other, and if you need help, let us know.

Let's go back through the things I thought of as qualities that make a home a home. I talked about home being home because I knew it would be there. When I came home it was there. But it didn't last. My grandmother died a few years ago, just shy of her ninety-seventh birthday. The land where their house stood was sold, and the new owners tore it down to build a bigger house. The garage with my name in the floor is still

there, but the house isn't. I only know all this because I've been told. I haven't had the heart to drive by when I've gone home to visit.

But this impermanence is nothing compared to those bombed or chased out of their homes without a moment's notice during a war or a country's internal struggle. I can't imagine having a home, then suddenly not having a home. And then not having a country, as many have no option but to flee.

This leads directly into another quality I brought up, we want to feel safe at home. With war all around, or even inner city violence on the street corner, and when some families even fear those sworn to protect them, people don't feel safe. And unfortunately, some don't feel safe within the walls of their own home. I recently attended a workshop for clergy where we learned about the rampant Domestic Violence problem in Sacramento County. On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. If I make nothing else clear this morning, I want to make this clear: if you or someone you love is a victim of domestic violence, and that isn't just physical, it can be emotional or verbal as well, please reach out to us or someone else you trust. You don't deserve to be treated that way, no matter what has been said to you, and we will connect you with resources to help.

I also spoke of feeling safe to be oneself at home. A place where a person can feel loved and welcomed. In America, it is estimated that 1.6 million youth are homeless each year and that up to 40% of them identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Let me be clear about this as well. Parents have not failed if they have an LGBTQ child, but they have failed as a parent if they have thrown their child out of the house for being who they are.

On the most basic level, a home is a home because it provides shelter. I just mentioned homeless youth. That was 1.6 million homeless youth in America – imagine if you were to count all age groups. On any given night just in Sacramento County, more than 2600 individuals experience homelessness, more than eight times the number of people in this room, and an estimated 5200 will become homeless over the course of a year.

There are many reasons for homelessness, including of course poverty and unemployment, poor physical or mental health and domestic violence. And tying directly into our theme of economic inequality is the problem of affordable housing.

My mom and dad bought that small house on only my dad's salary, my mom didn't work outside the home, and there were three kids. My dad has nothing beyond a high school education. Let's take a family like mine then, transport them across time and space, and put them in Sacramento County now. According to the living wage calculator online, a living wage for this family of five is \$30.13 an hour. The poverty wage for this family is \$13, and, of course, the minimum wage is \$9.

This is why there are people in America who work full time who are homeless. Working forty hours a week doesn't mean you can afford an apartment – let alone put a

down payment on a house. In Tarrant County, where Fort Worth is located, there are no apartments that someone working full-time for minimum wage can afford. None.

I know this because during seminary, I worked in a Mission in Fort Worth that did outreach for the poor and homeless. We had a free clothing store and food pantry, provided sack lunches, did laundry and each fall had a coat day where a new winter coat was given to each person. Yes, it can get cold in Fort Worth.

Perhaps most important, we saw each person. Not just looked at them, saw them. When everyone else in their lives, family and strangers on the street, avoid eye contact and pretend they didn't exist, we saw them, and listened to them.

In an essay, UU Minister Emily Gage names the truth that everyone deserves compassion and respect, which she sees as a combination of our first two UU Principles. She writes, "The second Principle of Unitarian Universalism – justice, equity, and compassion in human relations – is a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the first – the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Why else would we treat others with compassion? Why else would we work to promote justice and equity? Inherent worth and dignity is the foundation for our ethical behavior."<sup>1</sup>

I contend our work is here, for results now, not in a heavenly home. I believe social justice work is our work. And I believe that service can be a spiritual practice.

But what can we do? I've been a Debbie Downer this morning with a mind-numbing number of statistics, and I listed far too many issues for any one person to tackle, and I'm still on housing - I haven't even gotten to hungry people. I repeat the words of Travis Price, "You can't do everything but you can do something. Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

There was one more thing I asked you to keep in mind this morning. What breaks your heart? Perhaps it is one of the things I mentioned, maybe one I didn't get to, that breaks your heart. Begin there. Address that issue Share with us what you'd like to work on. You have help.

Perhaps you can work on something Lucy mentioned earlier. Or help bring systemic change by working with legislators for a living wage. Maybe you can join those in our congregation who help cook and serve meals for the homeless Perhaps you can work with homeless LGBTQ youth or help foster kids find a home. Maybe you would like to help support our Family Promise efforts to house homeless families four times a year or join our Habitat for Humanity group or our Refugee Team.

What do you think of when you think of home? What breaks your heart? Do something about it. "You can't do everything but you can do something. Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Brandenburg, ed., *The Seven Principles in Word and Worship*, 20.