

“The Journey Home,”
a sermon preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
July 1, 2007

When I was a child there was a book I'd beg my parents to read to me at night. It was the story of a little bear who runs away from home and gets lost in the snow. He wants to go home but he can't find his way back. My mom says she would read the book to me and I would sit there listening, the tears streaming down my face. And then next night I'd ask to hear it again. You'll be glad to know that in the end, the little bear does get back home, to his warm and cozy house.

I still identify with that character from a children's story—the one who feels compelled to venture out into the world, to leave what is known and safe, to see what it's like out there, even at the risk of getting lost.

And I know what it's like to long for home. Not to go back to the home of my childhood, but a place where I feel connected, where I belong, a place that feels like home.

Starhawk, a leading voice in earth-based spirituality, says, “We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place, half-remembered, and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.”

The author of the book of Hebrews, describing the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, says “they were strangers and exiles on earth . . . seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country...” (Hebrews 11: 13-16).

St. Augustine, a wanderer himself, wrote this famous prayer: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.”

We humans seem to be born with a built in longing, a hunger that will not be satisfied by food alone. Spirituality is what we do with that longing.¹

I naturally think of the spiritual life as a journey. I tend to see the faith life—mine and yours—as a path, a way, a pilgrimage. Without realizing it, I use these travel words all the time, and think of the spiritual life as movement, as going. Being “called” implies leaving one place and going somewhere else. But an essay I read in seminary helped me to realize this is just one way of imagining the spiritual life, and not the only way. It does not tell the whole truth.

¹ See Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 5.

This essay, by Sharon Parks, says there are two companion metaphors for the spiritual life: pilgrimage and home. Parks says that the images and metaphors we use are important, because they shape how we see and how we live in the world. They help to create our reality. The metaphor of pilgrimage or journey tells only part of the story. Parks says it “has been sheared away from and now dominates its companion, (which is) the metaphor of home.”²

She points out how gender influences the way we experience the world. I know this is a generalization, but men have traditionally tended toward the journeying, and women have traditionally been the ones to tend home and hearth. A scene from the movie “Out of Africa,” comes to mind. Meryl Streep, playing Karen Blixen, marries a man and comes with him to Kenya, only to find herself alone most of the time while he is off hunting with the other men. One day she slogs through the rain to find his camp, and simply asks, “When are you coming home?”

Of course, preachers often preach the sermons they themselves need to hear. This time of year, I’m longing for home—for time to stay close to home, to read and relax and garden and be quiet. For time that will nourish and restore my soul. Any of you feeling this way too?

But please don’t hear my description of home as only an escape from the cares of the world. There is the home that the little bear in my story was returning to—a place of safety and refuge. And there is a different kind of home—the kind Starhawk describes—a place we have never been, and have only glimpsed from time to time. This home is the Promised Land the people of Israel desired—a better country. It is what Dr. King described as the beloved community. It is often more promise than reality.

We live in a society in which the dominant message is to go somewhere, to do something, to keep busy. We are a pretty active congregation here, so I like how things quiet down in the summer--it invites us to enter into a different kind of space. What might we imagine if we sit still for a while? Where are we going in all our activity? Are we on a treadmill or a merry go round, or are we on our way home?

In my experience the life of the spirit is both a call to journey and a call to home. A call to hold both these things, to live in the tension between them. There is a bias in our society toward extroversion, toward action over contemplation. Doing one’s own inner work can be

² Sharon Daloz Parks, “Home and Pilgrimage: Companion Metaphors for Personal and Social Transformation,” *Soundings* 72:2-3 (1989) : 297.

dismissed as “navel gazing” or checking out. In my experience it’s anything but that. Prayer and meditation should lead us deeper into life, not isolate or insulate us from it.

We are at a time in human history when we are running out of new places to explore. Sharon Parks says there’s a real cost to all of our journeying—in a world suffering from an explosion of population and development, when are we going to start tending what we have rather than exploiting new lands?

So how might we do this? How might we restore the balance between our desire to journey and our longing for home?

On a personal level, it begins with tending one’s own garden, both literally and figuratively. For me there is both joy and monotony in garden tasks like weeding and cutting the grass. I suspect that, for those of us who have the luxury of tending a piece of land, a look at the plots we garden might say something about our selves, and our spiritual life. Right now I have a lot of weeding to do!

Doing one’s own inner work starts with paying attention to the longings and joy and sorrow in your own heart. I was talking with my spiritual director recently, and she said that plenty of people don’t know how to do this. She said it’s more common for people to do active things like work to help the poor than to consider how they themselves might be poor in spirit. A spirituality of home calls us to look at our own inner lives, to care for our own souls too.

On an institutional level, think about all the work we have done over the past year to renovate our church. It is going to be a more beautiful and more inviting place. Some might say we could have better spent this money by giving it away, but we need a home that’s a sanctuary, a place that nourishes and nurtures our own souls. I wonder how our new space might help us to connect in new ways, and in the fall I hope to help reinvigorate our small group ministry because it is a way to deepen our connections and explore our spirituality here at home. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation to GLBT folks is another way we have developed a spirituality of home.

Finally, on a national level, it’s obvious that we as a country identify with the metaphor of journey. Those who first came here were Pilgrims and explorers, and we celebrate this--we put a man on the moon, we still see ourselves as adventurers and conquerors.

One of the justifications for the Iraq war has been “to fight the terrorists over there so we don’t have to fight them here.” But is this kind of global crusading any way to make the world safer? It’s an example of how our national imbalance between journey and home, between testosterone and estrogen, if you will, has consequences on a global scale. In her

essay Sharon Parks recalls the myths of St. Margaret and St. George, in which Margaret travels around Europe taming dragons, only to be followed by George, who then slays them!

In our current foreign policy we are like St. George, (funny coincidence, that name) out slaying anything that looks like a dragon, and tragically, creating lots of new dragons in the process. What if we did some of our own work here at home? I'm not arguing for isolationism or America first, but rather that we have the courage to face our own selves, the shadow as well as the light. What if we, like South Africa, had a Truth and Reconciliation process with those we have wronged? What if we shined the spotlight on our own record of human rights abuses against Native Americans and against those brought here as slaves? How might addressing those wrongs humble us and inform our foreign policy? How might it send a message that our country stands for both liberty and justice? I pray that we as a nation begin to take responsibility for the violence we have brought into the world, and in doing so, might begin to make real progress in the struggle to free the world from terrorism.

We can't do everything. There is much that's beyond our control. But we can make a difference—in our homes, in our families, in our corner of the world.

This summer I encourage you to spend some time at home: to tend your own garden, to ask, "What does my heart desire?" to be grateful that you have a home, to trust that the spirit is very near you. There are riches close to home, if we will only be open to them.

Amid the changes of this life, there is a great Love in which we live and move and have our being. We might call it by different names, we certainly understand it in different ways, but that doesn't matter. It is a love that holds us even when we are apart, it unites us with those we have loved and lost. My prayer is that you will know this love, that you will feel its blessing, that you will trust in its power, so that you will do your own part to help build the kingdom of heaven right here on earth, which is, of course, our home.

Amen.