

The Home Within Us

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 17, 2024

And so, in our Story for All ages we followed the protagonist, Chapman, on a journey. In short, Chapman followed a persistent dream, leaving home to search for treasure elsewhere – only to find it, surprisingly enough, in his own backyard.¹ It is a story imbued with wisdom. First, we learn that following our dreams leads to treasure. Second, we learn that treasure is not found elsewhere, but in our very own homes. In searching beyond he was led within. What gifts did he find at home? The story alludes, I believe, to goods such as jewels or other precious items. What if, instead, we understand the treasure as something internal - love, self-acceptance, faith, or security. I argue, too, that this may not be a tangible home of wood or brick or shingles or windows. Instead, perhaps he was at home within, where those intangible treasures are all the more meaningful. Home and gifts held in his heart, mind, body, and soul.

I offer a second story to introduce us to this idea of home found within, this one personal. As a child and a young person, I lived a rather nomadic lifestyle, moving from state to state, or even switching houses and apartments within the very same town. In seventh grade, my family and I moved to New Jersey, where we would ultimately reside for years. In my middle school and high school years, we moved five times in six years, from varying apartments and homes in a very small vicinity. All of this is to say, I never understood the idea of a permanent home in the form of a dwelling – a house or an apartment. And so, I built one from what I held within. In those years, home became family. Home became the only thing that remained true and reliable and constant – my mother and sister. They were home, no matter where we resided. I also began to cultivate a home within that would protect my heart regardless of location – beginning to create a space of self-reliance, self-acceptance, self-love, those things that gave me security and stability no matter where I was geographically. This, I have learned, is creating home within. I have by no means perfected this – I will continue to work on this for years to come.

¹ “The Peddler of Swaffham” edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

What else can home be, beyond my personal insights? Conversely, what is homelessness? To respond to the first question, I want to introduce a stanza of Eliza Wolcott's poem "Home."

Home is a safe, a calm retreat,
To rest the weary soul;
Home makes one's happiness complete,
Where love commands the whole.²

Home, a place of safety, of retreat, of rest, of happiness, of unrelenting love, of gifts of faith and of the soul – not held within a building of brick and mortar, nor dwelling of any sort. This is a home we can intentionally cultivate and return to within. We learn to feel safe within ourselves, knowing that we have all that we need. We learn what makes us truly happy and grasp on to this. We learn what it means to intentionally pause and rest in this hectic, harried world.

What, then, is homelessness? Homelessness, from time to time, can likewise be a gift. It is a liminal space- time between two destinations – a time of sacred change and growth. Think of times between marked transitions – that space between teenager to adult, illness to health, self to parent. How much growth and wisdom is cultivated in the in-between? I introduce this as a transition to reflections on home and liminal space offered by the world's faith leaders. I will tell two short anecdotes of men whose immersion in liminal space cultivated them as leaders of two of the world's great religions. They went within, and, more than ever, found home.

Jesus' isolation was found in a cave. The Christian tale teaches that Jesus lived as an exemplary mortal for thirty-three years, was murdered by the Romans, and subsequently rose from the dead. His inner home transitioned from the meaning and purpose found as a healer to eternal life as Son of God. A healer, a leader, an exemplar, a prophet who rose from the dead, departing from that temporary time in his tomb, a cave, to the realm of eternal love beyond all mortal life. He traversed from healer and prophet to death and liminality, to eternal life with

² "Home" by Eliza Wolcott

God – finding a new home cultivated after a time of retreat in his cave. Or the Buddha, a faith leader who began his life in privilege, only to partake on a spiritual journey – a literal journey – which led to Buddhism. In his search for meaning, he found refuge beneath a Bodhi tree. In this transitory space of intentional pause, isolation, and meditation, he found enlightenment. He cultivated enlightenment after a liminal space of reflection and solitude. Natasha Che offers “[Jesus and the Buddha] went alone, they went within... periods of disappearance into the void.” More than ever, upon their return, they were home. May we pause to invite and welcome that liminal space – the space and time needed to cultivate the wisdom and growth which we can carry with us in each of our days.³

I wonder, too, of home as a journey, as taught by the asceticism modeled by the Buddha. Ascetics find home of a deep faith cultivated within. Their home is a space of spiritual reflection. Not one of the reflection found in liminal space, but instead reflection as a way of life, a worldview, a mindset – consistently cultivating a faith within. It is an intentional absence of sensual pleasures, renouncing worldly possessions as one instead finds purpose in cultivating spiritual goals. I want to lift up a quote here of asceticism as a way “to expand and connect with the infinite universal consciousness.”⁴ An individual connecting to the consciousness of all that is. How can we benefit if our home is one of a consistent faith journey? Not necessarily a life of asceticism, but an inner journey, an inner searching. How can this become a way of life, a new home? We question theologies and religious tenets, we cultivate spiritual practices, praying, meditating, or immersing oneself in nature, we intuit what God means to each of us and intentionally bring this great, divine mystery into our daily lives, we join in worship, we lean into the beauty of life, the improbability of life, the awe of life. And of course, this brings us home. A secure faith is one of home. No matter where we are geographically, we have with us all that is sacred, we have divine presence, we have blessed love and hope, we have connection to a great, beautiful, unknowable mystery, and we have practices that bring us close to what it is we hold holy. These are held sacred within.

³ “7 Signs You’re Experiencing a Major Spiritual Transformation,” Natasha Che

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asceticism>

I wonder, too, what we build our inner homes of, and so, in this reflection, I return to Christianity. Matthew 7:24 offers, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.” Conversely, “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”⁵ I bring this to our discussion not because I expect us to follow the words of the Christian God or of Matthew, but as an introduction to foundations of rock versus sand. What does it mean for an inner house to be built upon rock? Just as is alluded to here, it is a house of faith. We are called to listen to our own God; our own sacred; just as those of the Christian faith are. Furthermore, it is a house of love and introspection and self-assurance and self-confidence and self-acceptance. It is one that has been arrived at through periods of intentional liminality, of pause and retreat. One of deep, introspective faith journeys. We are engaging with our inner selves to build a foundation that serves to ground us and sustain us. A house of sand? One built upon outward acceptance, accolades, wealth, prestige, status. One that appears beautiful and pristine but is built of the superficial, highlighting appearance and not substance. This creates a space of insecurity, of vanity, of greed, of self-centeredness. This house can crumble at the slightest disturbance. What are we left with? A void deprived of meaning and purpose. And so, I invite us to love ourselves. To center in faith. To live lives of compassion, purpose, meaning, and justice. To accept ourselves. To live lives interspersed with reflective, contemplative liminality. This will sustain you no matter where you are geographically; you are always home. You are held no matter what trials and tribulations come your way, no matter what rain and floods and winds beat upon your house.

Let us transition out of the wisdom of these faith traditions. Shannon Ables offers reflections serving to interweave the thoughts of Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle. Chopra, author and alternative medicine advocate, wrote, “The road to freedom is not through feeling good; it is

⁵ Matthew 7:24

through feeling true to yourself.”⁶ What can this mean? Well, what can feeling good mean? Seemingly - Gluttony, wealth in excess, vanity. Where does this road lead us? To a house built upon sand. Conversely, what does it mean to be true to oneself? Interrupting racism, deciding not to have children, following a passion no matter the lack of societal standing – actions that build a house of rock. When we feel true to ourselves, we do that which we may have previously suppressed for fear of embarrassment or judgment, that which could lead us to the fringes of society as an outsider, that which involves great personal risk. What delight and freedom! Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle offers a different yet parallel insight on finding our way home. Tolle writes, “Pleasure is always derived from something outside you, whereas joy arises from within.”⁷ How can we elaborate? I offer that pleasure is indulging the senses in excess, whereas joy is that internal, inherent delight. The inner warmth felt by the embrace of a beloved. An unsuppressed smile at a newborn baby, or the first bud of spring. A laughter that brings tears to one’s eyes, grasping a sister or a dear friend. In many ways, joy comes from honoring just who we are - perhaps hold this in your heart above all else. We rejoice in ourselves. That is true, unfettered, humble, joy. That which brings delight from the innocence and goodness we hold inherently within. That is home. Sincere, simple joy brings that delight needed for a life of happiness and wellbeing. And so, it is these two states of being that cultivate a strong and beautiful house: Being true to oneself and cultivating sincere, inner joy – this is home – and it shapes how we live our daily lives; how we build and sustain our futures. Truth and joy become our expressions of self, our way to orient ourselves in the world. We no longer have to fear the critiques of others – we are simply us.⁸

So may we, in this moment, cultivate the strength, wisdom and insight needed to build our own inner dwellings. May we cultivate a sense of home by finding that treasure in our own backyard, looking within, not beyond. May we find home as my nomadic family did, focusing on the wonder that is, indeed, constant and beautiful, regardless of geographic location. May we create a space of self-reliance, self-acceptance, self-love, those things that offer strength,

⁶ *The Book of Secrets: Unlocking the Hidden Dimensions of Your Life* by Deepak Chopra

⁷ *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle

⁸ “The Joy of Finding Home Within Yourself” by Shannon Ables

meaning, and purpose. May we reside in a space of safety, of retreat, of rest, of happiness, of unrelenting love. May we find this under our own Bodhi tree, within our own cave, retreating into that liminal space which cultivates wisdom, maturation, growth, and insight. And may we build this house of rock – that which will not disintegrate, fall in the wind, nor succumb to rising waters. May we find home – it is truth, the truth of self. It is joy – that delight held eternally within. It is here – right within our grasp.

May it be so, and Amen.