

Home

The Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation words by Lori Monson

Home. A myriad of thoughts and feelings come with this simple word. Perhaps recalling memories of a childhood home evokes warmth, security, a sense of belonging. Or, perhaps chaos, fear, and recollections of longing for the day of emancipation come. Childhood now gone by, finally finding and creating home. Many a thought and activity have been devoted to making this home comfortable and attractive. A recliner that glides, paint for the porch, cleaning products when the paint spills. Amidst these countless domestic concerns, do we notice an evolution gradually taking place? Almost imperceptible at times, the spotlight on this structure is fading. There is another direction, a directionless direction, to which our attention is drawn to find home. It is the haven for which our souls yearn. This ever present place, nameless and within, is both beckoning and elusive. Elusive, that is, for one distracted by countless external domestic concerns.

Reading by Deborah Tall

To say we dwell somewhere implies permanence, or at least continuity. But at root “dwell” means to pause, to linger or delay... So what does it mean to dwell somewhere? How long do we have to stay?... It used to be easier. A home and its land were once widely understood as belonging to a family forever. Even today, most people in the world are born and die within a radius of a few miles. But 20 to 30 percent of [us] move each year, and the average [person in North] America moves 14 times over a lifetime... To change not just your home or your town, but the region of the country you live in, is understood as a way of life.... Numerous milestones—college, marriage, [the] birth of children, a new job, divorce, retirement—almost [all] require a change of location. In fact, to stay in one place for life is often interpreted as being unambitious, unadventurous—a negation of [our] values. Moving up in the world [often] means moving on.

Hymn 1011: “Return Again” (this hymn includes the line: “return to the home of your soul.”)

Homily: “Home”

I wonder if you know where to find “the home of your soul”?

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I just plain forget.
There are times when I can’t find the path back,
when I seem to lose the trail and spend a lot of time walking in circles.

There are moments when it seems the home of my soul
has up and moved without bothering to leave a forwarding address.

In my 41 years on this planet, I’ve spent a lot of time searching for home,
and judging by the comments I hear
as people leave here each Sunday, I suspect many of you have, too.

Almost every week, there’s someone who comes up to me,
with eyes welling up with tears, who says something about home—
that it’s so good to be back again,
or that finding this place is like finally “coming home.”

It’s funny how often we use that word—home.

There’s really very little about this place that resembles a home.

I’m guessing that where you live
you don’t have hundreds of hymnals and chairs,
that there aren’t six enormous coffee pots,
or a pulpit parked in the middle of your living room.

And, of course, there are all kinds of things that one does at home
that aren’t typically done here.

Though we’re a pretty casual bunch, it’s unlikely
any of our ushers will greet you here in a bathrobe and slippers.

We’re not really set up here for sleeping or showering.

And, I'm pretty sure that no one is thinking of inviting everyone over to First Unitarian to watch Game Three of the Stanley Cup finals.

(And, in case you're wondering, even though I'm from Boston, I am hoping the Canucks win. . .
I mean, it would be kind of hard to live here, if they didn't, right?)

And, yet, there is something to be said for when a house of worship becomes a spiritual home.

As Unitarians, we celebrate that a spiritual home can be found in many places—
from a temple to a stand of trees,
at centre ice or at coffee,
with a beloved person or with our most sacred memories.

But, when people tell me that they feel that they've come home, what I hear is not so much that they've found a specific place to go, as much as they've found within themselves a place where their hearts are broken open, where they encounter the depths of who they are, and where they become aware in ways they can't deny or sometimes even describe, that they are in the presence of something sacred, something precious, powerful, and profound.

It's a beautiful, life-changing thing when it happens.
I love when it happens to happen here.

And, yet, how very easily we can move away from it when it does—
how quickly we can back away from an encounter with the sacred because its beauty overwhelms us,
or we fear its potential to completely upend our world if we were to take it all in, if we were to take it seriously.

So, we move away, and too often forget the way back.

We end up homeless,
uncertain of where to begin to find the home of our soul,
let alone to return to it over and over again.

And we are left with a yearning
we don't begin to know how to satisfy.

Or so we tell ourselves.

Robert Fulghum shares the story
of sitting next to a young woman several years ago at a Hong Kong airport.

She sat there quietly, wearing faded blue jeans and an old T-shirt,
when, suddenly, she began to cry.

He tried to ignore her at first but her crying grew louder.
After a few long minutes he looked at her and asked,
“What’s wrong?”

She told him the whole story.
Through the tears, she explained
that she was returning home sooner than she had planned.

Her money had run out and she had been waiting to fly home on stand-by.

For two days, she had been waiting in that airport terminal,
and had just received word that a seat was waiting for her.

Her problem, though, was she had lost her ticket,
and the plane was about to leave.

Fulghum frantically helped her look through all of her possessions,
but the ticket couldn't be found.

His heart was breaking for her and the only thing he could think to do
was invite her to get something to eat.

After dinner he would talk to the powers that be and try to get her home.
She accepted his kind offer of warm food.

But, when she stood up to collect her things, she suddenly screamed.
There on her seat was her ticket.

She had been sitting on it the whole time.

She gave Fulghum an enormous hug and thanked him for his kindness.
She then ran toward her gate, and he never saw her again.

So often, we are sitting on our ticket home, aren't we?

So it is with the home of our soul.
The path there is always closer than we think.

In their book *No Foreign Land*, Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole write:

Wherever you are is home
And the earth is paradise
Wherever you set your feet is holy land...
You don't live off it like a parasite.
You live in it, and it in you,
Or you don't survive.
And that is the only worship of God there is.

"Wherever you are is home."
"Wherever you set your feet is holy land..."

May you live to learn the truth of these words across the days of your life.

May you find yourselves at home,
by living fully into each precious moment—
here, and wherever the journey of your days may take you.

May you know that wherever you set your feet is, indeed, holy ground,
if you walk with the intention to make it so. Amen.

Closing Words

Theo Peltier says: Home is a place where you can catch a dream and ride it to the end of the line and back. Where you can watch shadow and light doing a tight little tango on a wooden floor or an intoxicated moon rising through an empty window. Home is a place to become yourself. It's somewhere you can . . . open your heart. Home is what we create together. *May it be ever so.*