

## Whose Home?

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First Parish in Brookline

“*Really?* .... Tell me about your grandparents...you felt safe with them. What were they like?”

I was trying a new form of bodywork: the Rosen Method, recommended by a dear friend and mentor who I greatly respect.

Lying there on the practitioner’s table, my mind drifted back to wonderful memories of the two people who taught me the most about home. Floating on my back in the waters of Crystal Lake in Orleans, MA, daytimes filled with sun and tomatoes fresh from the farm stand, evenings filled with moonlit dips in the lake, card games and endless conversations about life and world issues.

It was last Thursday, the day before the big storm hit.

Driving to my appointment in Gloucester, it was the most beautiful of days. My heart was at peace, my mind open to what may reveal itself in this new bodywork I was about to explore. My light and happy spirit, however, kept being at first distracted and then jolted by these neon signs on the side of the highway, which spelled out in orange flashing letters:

“Flood warning. Make alternate plans.” One after the other.

Beautiful sunny day, driving along, lost in the spectacular feeling of the promise of spring, and then there they would be again:

“Warning...Coastal flooding predicted...make alternate plans...”

...ominous reminder of all that is happening—in our world, to our environment, to the homes of so many—literally and in their hearts.

It has become one of the heart-breaking truths of this time, hasn’t it? The need to live with ever-present reports that injustices are happening, danger is close, times and the world are changing. Generally, not for the good.

Warning...make alternate plans.

The dichotomy of the spring day with the coastal flooding.

The relentless tension between enjoying the gifts of our days, if we are so privileged, with the brutal reality of violence, deportation threats, and climate destruction. How do we live with these seemingly irreconcilable realities?

Can we be good people and still be happy, while others are experiencing such terror and inhumane treatment? Can we enjoy the sunny day knowing that our Mother Earth is changing, her rhythms and healing powers being injured to the point that we may never know her the same again?

It's really a silly question—more than silly—it is hubris. The truth is that we have no choice. We are living in the reality of these times. For sure we will not do it perfectly, we need help to do it well, and—honestly—we need a spiritual home from which to gather strength, guidance, and love.

We need a spiritual home—a place where our heart abides—to which we can return time and again. When we are wounded, angry, and sad. We need a place and we need a people that will simultaneously love us for who we are—imperfections and gifts—and we need a place and a people that will hold us accountable, remind us of the values that we hold most dear, and push us to become a better version of ourselves, again and again. We need a spiritual home.

When I asked you all what makes you feel at home in this world, you sent me (not surprisingly) the most beautiful answers. I had hoped to be inspired, and you did not let me down!

“Home,” writes one of you who is an artist, is “when I am in my studio, working on a piece of art... I am with my true self, solving something... Ultimately I am making something that I can share with the world, that others might enjoy or find meaning in...”

You say: “Home to my heart is when my children tell me or show me that they see my strength, my beauty, my patience, and when they see themselves in me...” and you also say: “...my loved ones, certainly, but also nature...my heart exists in the trees, clouds, grasses, flowers...ever changing, breathing, sensing, the wind.”

“Home to my heart is where I feel accepted and celebrated for who I am...” you write.

And another: “I often feel my home is in my partner. But then, it's in my family in another state, or when I'm singing, or even at my desk during a thrilling task.”

More: “...When I read the First Parish e-mail and was reminded to connect to the energy that's greater than myself, I realized—this is home.”

And this: “...the true feeling of home is this: connectedness, presentism, fully embracing this moment, and peace...the spirit that draws me and this stranger together...”

“...heart places,” one of you wrote.

A sense of home can be found in nature, with family, and in spiritual community.

This morning I want to go a little deeper into the meaning of a spiritual community as “home.”

Jan Willis is Professor of Religion at Wesleyan University. She has authored multiple books on Tibetan Buddhism and been recognized for her influence by *Ebony* magazine as well as *Newsweek* and *Time*. Willis believes that building community is a spiritual practice. She writes, “...we do not exist in isolation—and neither does our enlightenment.”<sup>1</sup> She is not alone in her belief. UU minister Reverend Rebecca Parker says that “We cannot be religious alone.”<sup>2</sup>

Here in a spiritual community, writes John Buehrens, we are “...taking refuge not from reality but within...a community, of hope.”<sup>3</sup>

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh reinforces this belief about the essentialness of community for our spiritual evolution when, during a 1998 Dharma talk on the need to love, he said, “I have the impression that maybe this time the Buddha will appear not as a person but as sangha, as community.”<sup>4</sup>

The Sangha, or community, is foundational in Buddhism. Called one of the three jewels, Sangha, along with the Buddha, or the enlightened one, and the Dharma or teachings are the cornerstones found in all types of Buddhism. When Buddha established his sangha some 2,500 years ago, it was radically different from its times. In a deeply hierarchical system, the Buddha created a community that was inclusive and diverse, accepting people from all castes as well as women.

Larry Yang, author of *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*, is one of the early visionaries of the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, CA, one of the few racially diverse meditation centers in the United States. He is deeply committed to addressing issues of racism and creating access to the Dharma or Buddhist teaching for multicultural communities. In his new book, he writes, “the Buddha was inviting us to explore, as deeply as meditation itself, what it means to awaken together in community...to explore community itself as a practice of meditation or cultivation.”<sup>5</sup>

Here in the West where Buddhism is still overwhelmingly practiced by white people of a higher class, the focus on community as a necessity for spiritual development is underplayed. As is common when a dominant culture adapts something to mirror its own values, Western Buddhism tends to be about mindfulness, meditation, and individual evolution. This is not the case in its original inception. In its origin Buddhism is communal.

“The Buddha”, writes Yang, “did not design a container for spiritual awakening that depends solely on personal effort.... The Buddha’s path is not a spiritual practice that encourages

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<sup>1</sup> Yang, Larry. *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 2017, page vii.

<sup>2</sup> Buehrens, John and Parker, Rebecca. *A House for Hope, The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA 2010, page 37.

<sup>3</sup> Buehrens, John and Parker, Rebecca. *A House for Hope; The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2010, page 89.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.buddhist-canon.com/PUBLIC/PUBNOR/NHATHANH/1998%20Jan%2001%20%20The%20Need%20to%20Love.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Yang, Larry. *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 2017, page viii.

practitioners to go into a cave and escape the world, somehow becoming enlightened by the separation from others. Rather, the Buddha is inviting us into a practice of awakening using the full energies of our ever-evolving collective experience of community. This is awakening together.”<sup>6</sup>

Reading this reminded me of how a colleague told me that in America, spirituality is depicted most often by images of nature and individuals. Curious, I went onto the internet and searched for images using the search term “spirituality.”

There were 30 images that had either one person, or no people, before there was finally one image that had 4 children in it—though even then, the children were in a line not touching one another. There were 37 images before there was a photo of a group—folks meditating in a circle, and approximately 112 images before there was another. If Google is any indication; spirituality is most definitely not associated in the West with community.

Here at First Parish in Brookline, you know this. You told me. When I asked you what makes you feel at home here you wrote; “the people, the history (wood, stained glass...the oldness of it all), the music” and “I feel that First Parish leads with acceptance, not judgement. This makes me feel it is a home for my heart.”

Another of you said: “...coming to the services, I often find my heart opening...I can truly feel what has been going on in my life, have the deep feelings of gratitude or sorrow. It is good the Kleenex is there! Being there brings me a sense of peace. Knowing that other people are probably having a similar experience is enriching.”

“Places that inspire peace, like First Parish, are what anchor me and so many other people, to remember that life goes so much deeper than our jobs and our appointments suggest,” one of you wrote.

One more: “I may have only had a few visits, and who knows how many more I’ll have, but I thank...the congregation for bringing me home: to peace.”

One of the paradoxes of life is that we cannot find home in community without also having a sense of home within ourselves.

In our reading this morning, *Journey Home*, Rabindranath Tagore says: “The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long. ... It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself...The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end. My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said ‘Here art thou!’”

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<sup>6</sup> Yang, Larry. *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 2017, page 49.

We all must connect to that home within ourselves. Many of us did not find that in our upbringing or home of origin; and perhaps because of that we give up on ever finding it. The impact of our early experiences cannot be overstated.

In her essay entitled “Home,” Maya Angelou tells us this: “I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one’s skin, at the extreme corners of one’s eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe.

“I am convinced that most people do not grow up. We find parking spaces and honor our credit cards. We marry and dare to have children and call that growing up. I think what we do is mostly grow old.... We may act sophisticated and worldly, but I believe we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do.”

So that is the truth of it my friends, like the challenge of finding a way to allow ourselves to be enriched by the joys that we have in our daily lives—painting, spending time with children or friends, eating good food—while at the same time caring and acting to stop injustice.

Allowing ourselves to be renewed by the beauty of a sunset while changing our consumption and working for policies that move toward saving our planet.

Being at home within ourselves and knowing that we only find that in the warmth and love of community.

Bringing us back to the story I told about last week. The day that I shared with the bodyworker my memories of my grandparents who lived on Cape Cod. That day when the signs on the highway kept interrupting my sunny disposition by warning of a coming flood. Warning...they said. That day, while I was regaling the bodyworker with the stories of my youth.

That very evening the storm hit Cape Cod, too, and demolished a structure on Nauset Beach called Liam’s. A shack that sold the best onion rings on the Cape. The shack where my grandmother and I would steal away to, order onion rings after the crowds had gone home for the day and sit together on the beach—talking about my future and the ocean and the world. That shack, destroyed by the storms of global warming, was demolished. Its remains will be torn down by the town.

Somehow, we have to hold it all. Be strengthened by the home inside of ourselves and the spiritual home around us.

You have something very special here...this...First Parish in Brookline...*is* a spiritual community. It is a home. It is a necessity. You have an amazing future ahead of you. It is time to move forward boldly. Don’t stop here. Figure out your next steps together, take your mission beyond these walls, get clear on your vision for how you will dismantle racism, care for the living earth, and love one another. Figure it out, and then support it. Give as you are able—give to the annual canvas, give of your time, most of all—give of yourself.

“Whose Home?”

First Parish in Brookline

This world needs you, and you need one another.

Amen and Blessed Be