

“When ‘there’s no there there’”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
25 October 2020

I don’t know about you, but I’m always captivated
by the stories that crop up every so often—
the ones that tell the tale about how some scrappy dog
or a very determined cat made it back home,
back to their humans, against all odds,
often travelling great distances to do so.

I recently learned about a cat named Holly,
who got separated from her people
when they were all on a vacation in Florida.

When the family packed up their RV on the last day to head home,
four-year old Holly was nowhere to be found.

The family searched high and low.

They stayed on a couple of extra days,
but eventually had to leave, broken-hearted.

They only hoped she was okay,
and that just maybe she would find a new family.

But everyone knew that would not be an easy thing.

Evidently, to put the best possible spin on it,
Holly was a one-person cat.
And Jacob Richter was her lucky person.

She shunned everyone else, including the rest of the family.
“Holly Golightly” she was not.

She was said to be “feisty, particular, prickly and picky.”
And she would often hiss to be sure everyone knew it.

And so Jacob counted himself especially blessed
that Holly had somehow taken a liking to him,
even to the point that she would curl up in his lap and purr.

Given all of that, one has to wonder
how sincerely the rest of the family missed her.

But Jacob most certainly did.

And, so, when he received a call two months later
that she had been found a kilometre away from home,
Jacob was over the moon.

Holly, over the prior eight weeks,
had trekked over 300 kilometres to find her way back.

Scientists don't yet understand how cats and dogs do this.
They just know that, from time to time, they do.

Looking to other animals,
we have learned so much about how they navigate,
how they travel vast distances,
yet can also find their destination,
though it may be a place they've never been before,
or a place where they lived for only a short time.

Salmon will often spawn in the very gravel beds
in the upper reaches of the same river where they were born.

Monarch butterflies, in a chain across multiple generations,
make the trip south for the winter to the same place every year,
and then others across generations
journey back to Canada each spring.

Studying seagulls and pigeons, sea turtles and sharks,
scientists have come to understand
that animals use a variety of tools,
from the sun by day to the stars at night,
as well as the earth's magnetic field
to get where they need to go.

And what of the animal we know best?
What of homo-sapiens?

While we, too, have at times found our way
by the light of sun and stars,
these days we are more likely to rely on a GPS,
with little thought to the constellations swirling overhead.

But this morning I'm speaking less about literal, physical travel,
and more about the journey so many of us make
at various points in our lives—
the journey to find our way home.

A journey we ultimately navigate by heart.

It's a well-worn proverb that reminds us
that "You can't go home again."

And, so you can't.
Not really.

Anyone who has returned to the playground you knew as a child
or the school you attended as a youth,
knows that the passing years have an extraordinary power
to shrink them down in size.

Same with the places we've lived in,
and even the people we have known.

Gertrude Stein famously quipped about Oakland, California,
the place she grew up, that "there is no there there."

This phrase has come to be used
to describe a place that lacks culture and refinement,
a boring backwater one would do well to steer clear of.

But writing in her book *Everybody's Autobiography* in 1937,
she was actually making a decidedly different point.

She was speaking to that unsettling sense
that the place she was hoping to return to,

to experience once more, was gone,
swept away by the passage of time and the currents of change.

In the fuller context of that passage,
written after a 45-year absence from her hometown,
Stein was lamenting the loss of her childhood home.

The fields that surrounded the house she had grown up in
had across the years become the site of multiple homes,
as the population of the small city she had once known
had grown tenfold to a population of 300,000.

I know many of you who've spent all or much of your lives
in Toronto have witnessed similar shifts.

Even after just fourteen years, I'm struck by how much
our city has changed in the time I've lived here.

The number of skyscrapers has almost tripled
in that relatively short period of time.

That kind of growth means that, quite literally,
the places—or at least the buildings—
we used to know are no more.

There is no there there,
at least when it comes to our memories.

This, of course, plays out on an emotional plane, as well.

As we reckon with the changing nature of our relationships over our lifetime,
and find ourselves missing people
who have changed, or moved on, or passed on.

I often ask people at a wedding, or even a funeral,
to look around the room—
to take in the faces of those around them.

And then I point out that any such event is a singular occasion,
as it is highly unlikely this same constellation of people,
this particular web of love and care, of memory and hope,

will ever be reconstituted in exactly the same way.

Such moments are ephemeral.
Shining, but always fleeting.

As the inscription on the Queen Street Viaduct reminds us,
“this river I step in is not the river I stand in.”

Or, put another way, “You can’t step in the same river twice.”

To these translations
from the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus
could also be added his observation that
“change alone is unchanging.”

And yet there is this longing we sometimes know in our bones.

This deep desire for the unchanged, for the unchanging.

A wistful feeling that moves us
to want to or to try to return to some place,
some circle of people,
some set of circumstances,
some enduring sense of home.

The Welsh word *Hiraeth* (pronounced “here-eyeth”)
so beautifully describes “a homesickness
for a home to which you cannot return,
a home which maybe never was;
the nostalgia, the yearning,
the grief for the lost places of your past.”

Part of this is simply the consequence of aging,
and the passage of time.

As we take our place in the procession of life
and travel through the years that are ours,
the motion is always forward,
and the past always retreating into the distance,
becoming a place to which we can never fully return.

As the writer Madeleine L'Engle describes it:

We are all strangers in a strange land,
longing for home,
but not quite knowing what or where home is.

We glimpse it sometimes in our dreams,
or as we turn a corner,
and suddenly there is a strange,
sweet familiarity that vanishes almost as soon as it comes.

But just because we can't really go home again
doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't revisit the past,
if we feel moved to do so.

The past holds the story of our origins,
whether it's wrapped in lovely, loving memories,
or pain we struggle to put away,
or some bittersweet blend of both.

The path of healing, of personal and spiritual growth,
often runs right through our past.

The examined life usually entails
making peace with our past,
even if only in part, and even if imperfectly—
that we may come to better understand
who we are and the meaning of the life that is uniquely ours.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher,
once said that while we live our lives forward,
we only come to understand our life backwards.

I love the way the poet Stanley Kunitz gets at this
in his poem, "The Layers," as he looks back across
the life he has lived and is very much still living.

What he does here is nothing less than meaning making.

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,

and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!

How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,

not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

And it is a statement of fact that none of us is.

We are not done with our changes
until we breathe our last.

And that, I believe, is the life-giving message to be taken away
from any attempt to return to some point in our past—
any attempt to harken back to some historical sense of home:
that because we are still alive,
we are still changing,
and that because we are still changing,
we are, blessedly, still alive, now,
in this present, precious, fleeting moment.

Put another way,
the recognition that “there is no there there”
can be the very thing to help us embrace the gift
of knowing that there is here here.

The writer Paul Monette,
in his autobiography, *Halfway Home*, said
that “Home is the place you get to, not the place you’ve been.”

This being alive, this being human,
is the ever-unfolding process of finding our way home
by making our home as we go, here and now.

This month, as we have explored our theme of home,
we have reflected on home as a noun—
as a physical or metaphorical place—
but home is also a verb,

meaning to return, to focus one's attention
or to move towards a particular goal.

Let us, then, take up homing
as the spiritual practice that it is.

That we might home in on the here here,
today and every day we are given.

Blessed Be.