

A House of Possibility
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer
Sunday, September 17, 2017

First Unitarian Universalist Church
Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

House: Some Instructions by Grace Paley

If you have a house you must think about it all the time
you must ask yourself (wherever you are)
have I closed the front door
and the back door is often forgotten
not against thieves necessarily - but the wind
oh if it blows either door open then the heat

the heat you've carefully nurtured with layers of dry hardwood
as well as the little pilot light in the convenient gas backup
all of that care will be mocked because
you have not kept the house on your mind

but these may actually be among the smallest concerns; for instance

the house could be settling
you may notice the thin slanting line of light above the doors
you have to think about that
luckily you have been paying attention

the house's dryness can be humidified
with vaporizers in each room and pots of water on the woodstove
should you leave for the movies after dinner
ask yourself - have I turned down the thermostat
and moved all wood paper away from the stove

now we should talk especially to Northerners
of the freezing of pipe...
this can often be prevented by pumping water continuously
through the baseboard heating system
allowing the faucet to drip - drip continuously day and night

this is a regionally appreciated emergency

you may tell your friends to consider your house as their own
that is if they do not wear outdoor shoes
when thumping across the gleam of their poly-urethaned floors
they must bring socks or slippers

you must think of your house when you're in it - and -
when you're visiting the superior cabinets and closets of others

when you approach your house in the late afternoon in any weather

you will catch sight first
of its need, in the last twenty-five years, for paint
which has created a lovely design
in russet pink and brown
the colors of un-intentioned neglect

House! in the excitement of work and travel to
other people's houses with their interesting improvements
we thought of you often and spoke of your coziness
in winter your courage in wind and fire

your small airy rooms in humid summer
how you nestle in spring into the leaves and flowers
of the hawthorn and the sage green leaves of the Russian olive tree
House! you were not forgotten

Homesteading by Joyce Sutphen

Long ago, I settled on this piece of mind,
clearing a spot for memory, making a
road so that the future could come and go,
building a house of possibility.

I came across the prairie with only
my wagonload of words, fragile stories
packed in sawdust. I had to learn how
to press a thought like seed into the ground;

I had to learn to speak with a hammer,
how to hit the nail straight on. When
I took up the reins behind the plow,
I felt the land, threading through me,
stitching me into place.

SERMON

A member here recently told me about growing up in downtown Rochester. It was on a street line that had a lot of emergency vehicles going to and from the hospitals, so there was regular noise – the noise of a busy sidewalk during the day and sirens at night.

So when an aunt, who lived on a quiet farm in the country, came to visit, she asked, “*how do you sleep at night? It’s so loud.*”

And they said – well I guess we’re just used to it – yeah, it is kind of loud, but I sleep just fine.

And later, when it was time for them to go and stay at the farm, the first morning at the breakfast table, the family said to the aunt, “*how do you sleep at night – it’s so quiet.*”

Many things come to mind when you think of home, (our September theme.)

Maybe it’s a specific place or structure,
an old red barn and silo, or towering buildings on a city street,
a house or a church or a bridge -
built of wood or stone, or concrete shingles on a hillside –

maybe it’s a specific landscape or terrain,
the way the land lays across the prairie
how the winter wind seems to wake you up instantly
when you step outside...

or the rocky bluffs seem to reach toward the sky
or the waves hit up against the shore

how the colors of changing leaves strike just the right familiar hue,
how the road weaves toward the destination
through the farm fields
like a yellow brick road.

And maybe it's less about physical structure or places –
but is about the smell from the kitchen on a family holiday –
or the embrace of loved ones at the door
or the feeling of remembering
what once was, and what yet might be.

And maybe it's more about the stories living in a place – like Jerry Katzmann, your
Board President, carrying his own hammer from home, trying to nail something
into the wall of the conference room – and after bending three nails, realizes – this
building is quite sturdy –
we have a solid home here, he says.

Unitarian Universalist Ann Busnell writes,

*Where is the center, then?
Is it the place where soul puts up its feet,
closes its eyes, and knows no harm will come?
If so, when such a place is found,
soul sits down,
is home.*

Whatever home is
home of your body, your soul –
there's no place quite like it – it's the center of your world.

Poet Joy Harjo writes,

*My house is the red earth; it could be the center of the world.
I've heard New York, Paris, or Tokyo called the center of the world,
but I say it is magnificently humble.*

*You could drive by and miss it.
Radio waves can obscure it.
Words cannot construct it,
for there are some sounds left to sacred wordless form.*

*For instance, that fool crow, picking through trash near the corral, understands
the center of the world as greasy strips of fat.*

Just ask him.

*He doesn't have to say that the earth
has turned scarlet through fierce belief,
after centuries of heartbreak and laughter—
he perches on the blue bowl of the sky, and laughs.*

Sometimes words can't construct it, the poet writes –
can't quite capture what really is an embodied feeling –
a heart-deep awareness of the what, where, who
that builds a home.

I remember, when I was in late Elementary school,
we took my oldest brother to college.

It was worlds away –
farther than I could imagine –
norther Minnesota.

But barely – it was Moorhead, so almost North Dakota –
I mean – that's a whole other state.

Anyway, it was maybe a scene you're familiar with –
the packing up of the minivan, the loading and tying down of the trailer.
My parents making sure he had all the right clothes
and shelves and office supplies –
my brother making sure he had his posters and CDs –
and I
quietly
scoping out his room.

We loaded in the van –
we loaded in
to this wagonload of words and stories
and hopes and possibilities and fears and dreams...
and we put the trailer on the hitch
and headed up the interstate.

For me, little brother,
with my middle brother already away at basic training,
it was a weird, surreal kind of day.

It was a flurry
of registration forms and desks,
navigating around campus –
finding the semi-truck with the multi-piece lofts
that needed to be assembled –
it was meeting the roommate,
and trying to awkwardly interact with their family
as both families tried to bring in too much stuff
in one shared room.

And as the afternoon sun began shining through the window,
and my brother stood at his new dresser, quietly,
unpacking socks –
I could tell, as we were ready to go –
he wasn't quite ready for us to go,
and he wasn't quite wanting to have that show through.

So we said our goodbyes
and got in the now spacious van
trailed by the empty, rattling cart.
I made it a few miles –
and as the sun set
on the flat lands of northern Minnesota in late summer
I sat in the back of the minivan
with no brothers to fight with -
and I cried.

And in some ways, I don't know why.
My brother was 7 years older than me, and at that younger age,
I don't think he loved having a very little brother trailing him everywhere. Or
copying everything he did.
Even as I still try to say, to this day –
that I found Billy Joel and Andre Agassi on my own.

Which is a blatant lie.

But I cried, and made my mother cry,
because that's what happens sometimes
when your house, your home,
becomes something different –
when your experience, your understanding
of what *home* is, feel like,
and the familiarity of it changes –
it's like the ground beneath you begins to shift.

We found a new rhythm, in time.
I figured out pretty quick that this new
being the only child at home
was going to work out well for me.
But it takes time for the heart to shift
and find a new rhythm.

And it seems kind of funny to me, now,
that Billy Joel had some words about home
to help put this into context
that home, at its core, is about relationship:

*Home can be the Pennsylvania turnpike –
Indiana's early morning dew –
high up in the hills of California
home is just another word for you...*

*as long as I have you by my side –
there's a roof above, and good walls all around...*

For some, these thresholds are frightening and daunting.

For some, they are exhilarating and filled with possibility.

Poet Jan Richardson writes of it in this way:

Think of the year
as a house:
door flung wide
in welcome,
threshold swept
and waiting,
a graced spaciousness
opening and offering itself
to you.
Let it be blessed
in every room.
Let it be hallowed
in every corner.
Let every nook
be a refuge
and every object
set to holy use.
Let it be here
that safety will rest.
Let it be here
that health will make its home.
Let it be here
that peace will show its face.

Let it be here
that love will find its way.
Here
let the weary come
let the aching come
let the lost come
let the sorrowing come.
Here
let them find their rest
and let them find their soothing
and let them find their place
and let them find their delight.
And may it be
in this house of a year
that the seasons will spin in beauty,
and may it be
in these turning days
that time will spiral with joy.
And may it be
that its rooms will fill
with ordinary grace
and light spill from every window
to welcome the stranger home.

A recent article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune tells the story of a local artist – Nancy Ann Coyne – putting large black and white photos of immigrants in the windows of skyways in St. Paul. The art installation is entitled, *Speaking of Home*.

It tells the stories of people from Romania, Kenya, Laos, Sweden and dozens of other countries. Like many, a sense of home shifts and changes depending on circumstance – much of which is outside of an individuals' control. Here are just some of the words about what home means included in the project:

*Tamim from Afghanistan writes,
“Home is a place of being anchored down.
I feel I contribute to the society through my job
and volunteering in the local Muslim community.
Having come from a war-ridden place,
security is important and it means
not being attacked, robbed,
or fearing that bombs would fall on your house.”*

*Nese from Turkey writes,
“Home is the place just to be you.
The fact that we run our own lives, independent of other people’s expectations,
makes me feel like we truly found ourselves here in Minnesota.”*

*Olga from Hungary writes,
“This photograph reminds me of our hard times in Austria
and why we left to begin a new life.
We first became indentured agricultural workers in Alberta, Canada.
A decade later, we came to Minnesota where my husband joined the University of
Minnesota geology faculty.”*

*And Elizabeth from Poland writes,
“The terrible political and economic environment in Poland
during the 1970s led to my unexpected, permanent stay here.
Minnesota really became my home when I started my own family.
People by nature will often discriminate against things new or different. When I
got my first job, some people welcomed me
while others accused me of taking the job from Americans.”*

For so many, home is something they yearn for –
for the physical place, or the soulful place –
a place where their soul can sit down
where they have relative safety
a sense of belonging and familiarity and affirmation and acceptance.

Far beyond the ability of words
to capture the deepest experience
of what home means
to someone who lives on land their family has been on for generations,
or for someone who must find a new home because of circumstances beyond their
control
or for someone whose sense of place is as wide and fluid as a boat
drifting on the sea –

What does it take to make a home –
as Joyce Sutphen writes,
to build a house of possibility?
To clear a spot for memory
and making a road so the future could come and go?

One day,
a woman, Alice, received a call –
a familiar number, a familiar voice –
but something in the voice
was a little different.

“I have something to tell you, Grandma”
the voice said – it was her Grandson, Charlie.
“Can I come over later today?”

“Sure, honey – you come over anytime.”

Alice was upstairs in the kitchen off the living room
when she heard the knock downstairs
as the door opened.

“Grandma” the voice called – it was Charlie.
“Up here, honey...come on up.” Alice replied.

As Alice moved from the kitchen
and came around the corner from the living room –
she heard another voice – similar,
but a little higher, a little softer –

“Hi Grandma. I have something to tell you.”

She looked –
it was still Charlie –
but dressed quite differently than was his norm.

“Honey – you are dressed a little different.”

“Yes, Grandma –
I’m still Charlie –
but I’m a *her* now, or *she* – I’m a girl.”

“Okay” said Alice. “Would you like a cookie?”
And they sat down.
The 16-year-old and the 86-year-old.
And they had cookies.
And they talked.

Charlie, the name she was keeping
in her newly expressed identity,
brushed her long hair behind her ears
and said, “you’re the first person that knows.”

Alice wasn’t sure what to do, exactly.
She was of a generation that was taught not to pry, too much –
but she was a Grandma that wanted to know –
wanted to listen, wanted to understand – her grandchildren.

As Alice asked
about how long Charlie had felt this way,
and when, or if, she would tell her parents,
who were far less open-minded than Alice –
Charlie settled deep into that chair –
sunk down deep
into the embrace of her grandmother’s heart
held by the threads of love and a slightly tattered easy chair.
Because when Charlie needed to tell her story –

to expose her heart, to celebrate who she was becoming –
when she needed a space, a place,
for her soul to set down
for her body to feel held and comforted and affirmed
even as their body itself was changing
even in the uncertainty and the wondering
of where the story would go from here –
she went home.

She went to the home her soul needed
which was the smile and the loving questions
and the plate of sugar cookies
on the coffee table she bumped her head on as a toddler –
she went to the place
where she knew deep in her bones –
I am still and always welcome here.

*Here, let the weary come,
let the aching come,
let the longing come
let them find their rest,
and their soothing,
and their delight.*

Where is that for you?
Where is the home of your soul –
the place so familiar, so comforting,
so natural – it's as if your lungs have filled with fresh air
and you can ease into it, and you can breathe - knowing it will hold you.

In the familiar room,
in the familiar smile,
in the way the afternoon sun
shines on the coffee table
and the invitation and the taste of the cookie
is like healing balm –
where do you fall back into place

like dropping in an easy chair
when you know
the threads, though worn with age,
will hold you – all of you – even after all these years -
no matter how far you have travelled?

In my grandparent's house,
there was a framed welcome to guests;
it was from the Saturday Evening Post in 1925 -
we now have it in our home:

*Guest, you are welcome here,
be at your ease.*

*Get up when you're ready,
go to bed when you please.*

*Happy to share with you,
such as we've got –
the leaks in the roof,
or the soup in the pot –
you don't have to thank us
or laugh at our jokes –
sit deep – and come often;
you're one of the folks.*

Sit deep – and come often.

To sit deeply –
in the familiar chair in the living room,
testifying to your heart's deep longing and identity –

to sit deeply –
in the church row
hearing a word of blessing on who you are
and encouragement to bring your gifts to bear in the world –

to sit deeply –
in a place that will hold you
when the world rocks you back
and you just need a place to fall back into
and know it will catch you –
with just the right balance
of soft cushion and sturdy support
you need to rest, be renewed,
and get ready to face whatever is next.

To sit deeply
is to know where you go
when you need the balance of cushion and support –
and perhaps it's many places, many people –
and to love it deeply,
and to know and honor that home means many things
to many people – and to find a way
to love the sky and earth above and below you –
and to wish the blessings of sky and earth and home
on people you have never known.

Whatever house you are living in –
whatever home, or habitat in which you find your body, your soul –
you have to pay attention to it.

You have to think about it all the time says the poet –
the thermostat, the freezing pipes –
the way it settles into the ground beneath it.

What ground are you on?
What people and places,
what values and hopes are your foundations made of?

Where is the place,
where your soul can set down –
put your feet up and settle into
something that holds you –
like an old worn chair
that envelops you
and you feel held –
what people,
place,
terrain, sky, water, mountain,
street, tree, building,
sounds, sight, smell –

where is it not too quiet,
not too loud
and the soul sits down
and is home?