

3 May 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

As I write, I'm seated in a comfortable chair at a messy desk. Ministers have messy desks – the good ones do, anyway. But St Paul never did. He had no book-lined study, poor soul. He spent his life on the road and at sea, living out of a rucksack, nurturing the little Churches he established. Like Jesus, he had “nowhere to lay his head” (St Luke 9:58). He came from Tarsus in present-day Turkey. But when Jesus knocked him flat on the Road to Damascus, he never had a settled home again. Yet he knew people with whom he could *be* ‘at home’.

He told the Romans, “I’m longing to see you” (Romans 1:11). He levelled with others in ways only friends would dare: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). He missed the comradeship of the Thessalonians. “We long with great eagerness to see you face to face” (1 Thessalonians 2:17). I can picture their reunion: mounds of food, storytelling, and loud laughter; sitting by the fire, refilling glasses, and staying up too late. Our memories house similar homecomings, don’t they?

I’m envious of those whose roots are all in one place, who can point to the one house they’ve lived in all their lives. I grew up in different houses in different towns. It makes me feel I’m from nowhere.

My adult life repeats this pattern. I’ve lived in bungalows, cabins, manses, apartments, flats, and college dorms in many towns and cities. Also a leaky tent. Yet each one had its own personality; and like a close friend, each one left its mark.

People fantasise about living one day in their ‘dream house’. But it’s not uncommon for our real dreams to re-visit the real houses we’ve lived in. I once had such a dream. It took me to a spacious room I’d never known was there. When I awoke, I felt excitement and joy.

I asked a friend, who is a learned psychologist, about this. He told me our dreams sometimes depict our truer, larger self as a house. Perhaps this dream was telling me there are ‘unvisited rooms’ within me, unknown potentials I should get to know, an inner chamber for larger ways of living

that awaits my arrival. "In my Father's house are many rooms," said Jesus (St John 14:2).

Over the years, I've had the chance to re-visit some of the real homes of my past. Each time, I'm forced to swallow the truth of the saying, 'You Can Never Go Home Again'. "Why not?" I want to quarrel. "*There's* my old bedroom window, *here* are the trees I planted with my father, *that's* the playground where I got a black eye."

But time doesn't care about any of that. Other people inhabit this house now. The life I lived here is over and gone. The person I was is also gone. Only these buildings remain, and not even all of them. The experience I wanted to re-experience, the *feeling* of home, is gone.

So, a trip I'd hoped would bring joy brings me sadness instead. Not grief, exactly, but the bittersweet feeling we call 'nostalgia', a Greek word that means something like 'homesickness.' 'Heimweh' in German. 'Le mal du pays' in French. Every language has a word for it.

Many stories are about homesickness and the search for home. One of the oldest in Western literature is Homer's *Odyssey*. It recounts the adventures of Odysseus, after the Trojan War, on his epic voyage home to Ithaca, where his wife, Penelope, awaits him (spoiler alert: he makes it).

As a child, I borrowed *The Incredible Journey*, by Sheila Burnford, from my town's little library. Three pets – a cat and two dogs – trek through the wilderness, surmounting terrible obstacles, finding a way back to their human home and refuge.

When I was twelve, an uncle gave me a copy of *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams. Construction workers, building new houses, bulldoze the warren of a colony of rabbits, forcing them to flee. They thread their way through dangerous territory to make a new home in greener pasture.

An elementary school teacher introduced me to Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*. It's a terrific tale of two boys lost in the far north. They build a shelter, survive the winter, and make their way home after the spring break-up – but not without plenty of adventure *en route*. I wanted to be one of them.

Then there's *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy discovers the meaning of home ("there's no place like home"). She returns with great joy, grateful and wiser, to a life in Kansas with people she loves. And Toto too.

Such stories and dreams touch something deep within us, a universal longing for the kind of home – that is, the kind of *life* – we’re meant for. Isn’t this why we desire it?

For many years, I’ve read at least one poem every day. Good poets play well with words. They put the right words in the right order to say precisely and beautifully just what they want to say. It’s extremely difficult to do well. But there’s joy in it, and to read a good poem aloud is to share in that joy.

Sometimes, though, in the midst of a poet’s play with words, the words themselves take charge. They surprise the poet with truths and beauties he or she hadn’t even known were there. The *words* show poets what they wanted to say but didn’t *know* they wanted to say – not until the words taught them to say it.

Poems can be like dreams that way. Or like the angel Gabriel, whispering words that gave Mary great joy, even as the Word was becoming Flesh within her. He ‘tabernacled’ here. He made his home with us.

A poem I read recently gave me some of this joy. It’s by D.H. Lawrence, the author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (Google it). Lawrence was never pious in any traditional sense. He visited some rooms in his life that the traditionally pious traditionally fear to enter, and therefore forbid others from entering. But he did. And that makes him, in some ways, wiser.

Even so, this poem isn’t lewd, despite its author. But I trust, having read this far, you’ll want to read it nonetheless! It’s about the peace and contentment we equate with being finally, fully ‘at home’ – at home with ourselves, with each other, with creation, and with God. Some call this dream-like state ‘heaven’ – ‘Himmel’ in German, ‘les paradis’ in French. Every language has a word for it. Here’s the poem:

Pax

All that matters is to be at one with the living God
to be a creature in the house of the God of Life.

Like a cat asleep on a chair
at peace, in peace
and at one with the master of the house, with the mistress,

at home, at home in the house of the living,
sleeping on the hearth, and yawning before the fire.

Sleeping on the hearth of the living world
yawning at home before the fire of life
feeling the presence of the living God
like a great assurance
a deep calm in the heart
a presence
as of the master sitting at the board
in his own and greater being
in the house of life.

As usual, worship material is attached. If you haven't yet used it, I dare you to try it this Sunday, and to say it aloud when you do. If you wish, tell me how you are, what you're thinking, and how you're feeling these days.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew