

"Finding Home Within"
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier
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This past spring, my family and I were delighted to see that a robin had decided to nest in our breezeway. A breezeway may not typically be a natural place for a bird's nest. But, in our breezeway, we have hanging a pair of deer antlers. And, it turns out that with careful construction, a nest can sit securely in the base of the antlers. The breezeway offers protection from the elements, like wind and rain, and also from predators. So, this turned out to be a good spot. We enjoyed watching the baby robins emerge from their eggs and finally fly off after a few weeks.

This summer, we were surprised when a robin again took up temporary residence in that nest. The second time around the robins were even more intensely attached to their dwelling place and would swoop down at us as we tried to pass from the driveway or our yard onto the breezeway and into the mudroom.

This was clearly their home now. And, they were going to protect it from whatever or whomever they saw as encroaching upon their safe space.

Home, is, indeed, a precious place, and the longing for home is a part of our shared humanity.

Maya Angelou writes, "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

We all know when we feel at home.

There is something that relaxes in us just a bit.

There is the sense that you could just stay here, contentedly, in this particular place or in this particular time.

When we are at home, we are welcomed just as we are and grounded in who we are.

“Home” connotes the sense of dwelling or lingering.

Theistic religious traditions insist that ultimately God is home.

In Judaism, one way of referring to God is as *shekhinah*, meaning the dwelling or settling of the Divine Presence. Interestingly, the root word of *shekhinah* is often used to refer to the nesting of birds.

For Muslims, the Divine Presence is the manifestation of tranquility, the spirit of God that extends shelter and blessing to the faithful. They believe that God dwells specifically in the Ka’bah, the House of Allah, toward which they face when they pray.

The Hindu Bhagavad Gita describes the divine that dwells within and that connects all living beings.

Whether you call it God, or spirit, or inner light, or personal identity and integrity,

I believe that we all have within us the dwelling of something soulful and sacred.

It is that part of us that truly makes us human **beings**.

To feel rooted, we must be able to feel at home in and with that inner self.

...

Yet, we all experience at times a sense of uprootedness.

One particularly unsettling time in my life, a significant time of transition, was when I made the move from Washington, DC to New Haven, CT to

begin seminary. I remember in those first few days feeling incredibly stressed. Jared and I moved together, and we had barely gotten all of our things to fit into the U-Haul truck we had rented. We were downsizing apartments, going from a spacious 1200 square feet to about 700 square feet. Though we were downsizing our living space, we hadn't really downsized our stuff. As we struggled to fit our belongings into our new apartment, I got exasperated. At one point, I just needed to go outside and take a walk. I circled the block several times. In hindsight, my circling was reminiscent of a cat that might circle a spot a few times before finally settling down to rest.

My feeling of uprootedness was intense, and it threw me off balance. I was making a new home and a new start and was not yet feeling settled.

We can feel uprooted and off balance for a variety of reasons. In times of transition, moving from one place to another, facing new health challenges, losing a loved one.

I think that this fast-paced time we live in can also lead to a sense of uprootedness. Information is coming to us from all directions, and we are increasingly attached to our devices that beep and ping to alert us to something that needs our attention. Many of us are plagued by the disease (or dis-ease) of busyness, as the writer and speaker Omid Safi, calls it,¹ in which there is more and more to do and less time for leisure, less time for reflection, and less time for community.

The theologian Thomas Merton writes about this frenetic pace and the shadow-side of activism and overwork in a way that I think has resonance for all of us. He writes, "The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

¹ Omid Safi, "The Disease of Being Busy," <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-disease-of-being-busy/7023>

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his (or her) work... It destroys the fruitfulness of his (or her)...work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."²

It kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

This is strong language to be sure, but also truth being spoken.

Now, I don't think you have to consider yourself an activist for these words to resonate with you. Many of us are caught in the frenzy of life.

Demands are placed on our time, some of which are fulfilling and some of which just drain us away.

Many of you are in helping professions of various kinds and in your vocations feel the pull to do that extra little bit to be of service, to be useful and helpful to someone else.

Yet, as Merton says, this frenzy is at danger of destroying the root of inner wisdom.

That root is within us.

It is that place of knowing, the place where our deepest truth resides, the place of wholeness and peace found in the dark hours of your being.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, the Quaker activist and educator Parker Palmer reflects on the ways we are pulled away from ourselves and how it is we find our way back. He writes:

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 81.

“There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives...

The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home.”

“My own experience of the blizzard,” he writes, “which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that...the soul's order can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.”³

That root of inner wisdom housed within us is never that far away. It is always there close at hand. Sometimes, we just need a little help to be able to find our way back.

...

I believe one of the most important places for us to start tying that rope out the back door is right here in our spiritual community.

³ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, pp. 1-2.

My hope is that we create here at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier a place where we can offer one another that rope, that lifeline to find that sense of home within ourselves. That we create spaces and opportunities for our inner selves to feel the trueness of who we are.

As we deepen into our ministry together, I want us to be reflecting on this and addressing those parts of our mission that say we “build a loving community” and nurture each person’s spiritual journey.” These are the “being” parts of our mission more so than the “doing” parts. These are the parts that address who we are on the inside before we can go out and do the work of making change in the world beyond these walls.

To address our “beings” and nurture our spirits, we must offer one another the chance to feel grounded and rooted.

Engaging in spiritual practice is, I believe, an antidote to uprootedness.

Robert Wuthnow, a scholar of American religious history, says “The idea of spiritual practices encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own spiritual development by spending time working on it, deliberating on its meaning and how best to pursue it, seeking to understand the sacred through reading and the counsel of others, and seeking to have contact with the sacred through personal reflection and prayer.”

A spiritual practice can take many forms. And, many of you already engage in one or many spiritual practices:

daily meditation, prayer, journaling, Sunday morning worship, community service, activism, yoga and other body practices, spiritual direction, writing, reading.

The practice that I want to lift up in particular is the practice of creating space with others to allow the soul, that inner wisdom, to come forward. In these kinds of safe and trusting space, we can ground ourselves more deeply in who we are - both who we know ourselves to be and who we might become.

For many years, UCM has offered a Small Group Ministry program which will continue this year. This is one primary way you can offer yourself and others that space to root back to your inner wisdom.

And, this year, we will be experimenting with a new program to build on our introduction of themes into our worship services which began last year. This will be like Small Group Ministry in that it is a covenant-based group in which active listening is the foundation for deep sharing. The program is called the "Soul Matters Circle," affirming the truth that our souls matter to our wholeness and well-being and that we will create together a circle of trust and listening that will allow us to tap into that root of inner wisdom.

Whether it is through one of these groups or another adult religious education offering or some other circle of trust in your life, I hope that you will tend the root of your inner wisdom and hang onto that rope that connects you back and leads you to a safe place.

When we are rooted within ourselves, we are able to be present to others. We are more able to feel a sense of wholeness. We are more receptive to joy. And, we are more able to fully engage in the work of bringing forth peace and justice in the world.

On your own spiritual journey and in our journey together,
may you greet yourself arriving at your own door
that you might welcome yourself to sit and re-discover
the root of your inner wisdom and
return again to the home of your soul.