

Homespun thoughts

Michael Allen Fox¹

Of all the many places that we designate as special, salubrious, and worthy of fond reminiscence, home stands out in a singular way. 'Home, sweet home.'² 'Home is where the heart is.' 'Home is where you come from and can be yourself.' 'The longest road out is the shortest way home.' 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.'³ 'Been on the road too long. It's time to get home.' 'Welcome home!' But what do we mean by 'home'? For many, the meaning is simply assumed rather than articulated. Home is just the place we take for granted, the place where we belong, feel comfortable, and can be somebody, be wanted. It contains the objects with the most personal significance to us and is the theatre within which we act out and forge our identities. Home represents solace, welcome, warmth, love, acceptance—it's 'a place to hang your hat.' Thoughts of home open onto nostalgic vistas of remembrance—of family, childhood, heritage, lineage, and loyalties of various sorts. Home is the benevolent, smiling face within the crowd of chaotic frowns that characterize the places of everyday life. In a topsy-turvy, unsettling world, that's no insignificant concept.

Throughout the history of human culture, homes have been gathering places. The rich and famous boasted opulent salons and courts for entertaining, which were celebrated and invitations to which were keenly sought after. But even humble country folk and urbanites in various ethnic traditions have placed hospitality at or near the top of their list of social obligations that require careful tending, and a warm, generous welcome could be expected there as well.

Yet homecoming, after a prolonged period of absence, may be an experience fraught with emotional baggage that is difficult to deal with. For some, it will be a mixed blessing, for others a confounding, destabilizing, even alienating or toxic scenario. Everything's the same, but everything's changed. One doesn't 'fit' here anymore—or maybe one realizes she never did.

And what of those whose negative associations with home make it the place they urgently need to escape from and avoid ever returning to? Or those who literally have no home or lack a fixed abode in a particular place; or who feel they have no place to genuinely call home: the urban homeless, some expatriates, stateless people, illegal immigrants, itinerants (legal and illegal migrant and foreign workers, hobos, vagabonds, drifters, vagrants), victims of natural disasters, climate migrants, victims of war or forced relocations or expulsions or foreclosures or expropriations, orphans, mendicants, Gypsies, transient mobile home dwellers, roaming pastoralists, refugees, asylum seekers, people held in detention centres, fugitives from the law? Or those who have or have had many homes but lack a sense of where they come from or belong? These voices of everyday life, also expressed through various art forms, deserve to be heard on an equal footing. In the present era—and indeed in any era—home is not, despite the sentimental adages with which we clothe it, something that is by definition appealing. To put the point more accurately, it may be for some, even for most, but not for others whose life experiences exist at or outside the margins of an idealized and romanticized notion of home.

'A man's home is his castle.' In terms of today's housing prices, who could say otherwise? But in a more serious vein, the pressures and stresses of modern life make many people (male and female) feel that their home is a certain kind of sanctuary. There are those we call 'home bodies,' who 'keep themselves to themselves,' because they can't

deal very well with the outside world, are strongly introverted, or for other reasons. Some who experience their society in flux as a series of threats to all they hold dear have a besieged-castle mentality that verges on paranoid fantasy. An extreme and reckless example of this appears in a widely quoted statement by Wayne LaPierre, a prominent official and mouthpiece of the US-based National Rifle Association: 'In this uncertain world, surrounded by lies and corruption everywhere you look, there is no greater freedom than the right to survive and protect our families with all the rifles, shotguns, and handguns we want.'⁴ In this simplified fiction of a hostile world, where it's 'good guys' versus 'bad guys,' all we can do is raise our castle's drawbridge and prepare to repel the enemy's attack with everything we've got. In a watered-down sense, the same mentality underpins the notion of 'homeland security.'

Yet home may nevertheless survive these challenges of meaning as an aspirational or normative idea that persists in exercising an influence over everyone in some way, shape, or form. A series of research studies conducted over the past decade on three continents, for instance, showed that, contrary to what many might believe or predict, ethnically diverse communities promote tolerance over time rather than the reverse, and positively enrich the awareness of neighbourhood.⁵ The sense of home is bound to benefit as well.

People who have lived in the same town all their lives may seem to possess something a bit magical, something that is quite valuable and enviable: It may be identification with the locale and the land in a larger sense; perhaps it also includes a more precise understanding of one's place in society, one's range of possibilities, and a consciousness of having 'roots.' These attributes of place can encourage people to be content with where they are, or to venture forth and see the world, with the recognition that there is somewhere significant that beckons them to return to where they come from, a place that is always their end destination. A still stronger immersion in home informs the self- and group-consciousness of indigenous peoples worldwide. This idea arises from knowledge of ecosystem membership and dependence, where the landscape is an all-encompassing mythologized presence. Spiritual unity with the land is a striking feature of everyday discourse and behaviour, and expresses itself in the idea that one exists in an ancestral home. Home in this primal sense of 'country' is always with those who are born into it.

But equally possible (at least in mainstream cultures) is that those with a definite and circumscribed apprehension of home possess only a limited sense of self and possibility, a parochial outlook that may be far from desirable. They may lack the cosmopolitan perspective of individuals who travel a lot, have a greater sense of adventure, or see themselves in some fashion as 'citizens of the world.' We are not talking here of those who put on snooty and superior airs and behave condescendingly toward others who are less travelled and have had less exposure to different modes of living, being, and belonging. The idea is more that broadening one's experience (in various senses) can lead to greater understanding and empathy. During a year spent in a small farming village in the Swabian region of southern Germany, an elderly grandmother, dressed in a traditional style, expressed to me the view that 'Heimat ist immer besser' ('One's home [or homeland] is always a better place to be'). But is it? Such a statement is readily made by a person who has a satisfying and meaningful role in her customary ethnic and geographical setting, whose sense of expectation and purpose is relatively fixed, but who also may have little or no awareness of what life is really like elsewhere, other than from hearsay or biased and sensationalized media reports.

In the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne, French essayist and pioneer in charting the dynamics of self-knowledge, wrote at length about the need to broaden one's outlook beyond the safe harbour of what is familiar.

Human judgment gains a marvellous clarity from regular travel in the world. We are entirely constrained and wrapped up in ourselves, and our short-sighted outlook only reaches the end of our nose.... This great world ... is the mirror in which we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves properly.... Such an abundance of temperaments, sects, judgments, opinions, laws, and customs teaches us to judge ourselves carefully and teaches our judgment to recognize its own imperfection and natural weakness: this is no insignificant lesson.⁶

One can hardly imagine a better or more forcefully stated tribute to the life-education that is provided by going forth to keenly observe the world. But notice that Montaigne does not state that travelling and interacting with the strange and unfamiliar merely enhances our view of the world; it also causes us to engage in self-examination and questioning of accepted norms that prevail 'back home.' There is no question that Montaigne champions liberation of the mind from the stultifying influences of what we are accustomed to. And this contrasts strikingly with the sense of home with which we began. Dan Kieran, a contemporary writer, ventures well beyond Montaigne to suggest that we travel in order to recover culturally eradicated potentials for knowing the world, which are still preserved elsewhere.⁷ This fascinating thought truly runs some of the more complacent traditional ideas about home through the wringer. As an aside, we may note that it takes a certain kind of person to seek a broader vision of things in the first place, for as yet another proverb points out, 'If an ass goes travelling it will not come home a horse.'

We are witnessing here the unfolding of a dissonance or internal conflict from within the concept of home, which becomes more noticeable as we think more deeply about it. Actually, there are more than one. First, we have the clash between home as the welcoming place of belonging and shelter, and home as the place of unhappiness that is to be shunned. Some might suppose that these are second-order descriptions, layered over a more basic meaning, but this is not so clear, especially as it begs the question of meaning in favour of home as a positive concept. But there is a second issue that arises from Montaigne's remarks. If we assume that concepts are meaningful only in contrast to their paired opposites, then it seems that each somehow incorporates or hinges on the other in an inseparable way. Thus, 'away' is the opposite of 'home' (and vice versa), and the meaning or significance of each depends essentially on that of the other. So what one achieves by travelling, for example, is not just freedom from being at home (and being mired in the attitudes and values of that place), but also a state that can only be comprehended by reference to being at home. (Montaigne's observation about mirroring—that 'This great world ... is the mirror in which we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves properly'—clearly captures the point about reflected meanings.) Yet this new state of mind asserts itself as a nuanced contrast and (in a way) as a redefinition of what 'being at home' means.

The philosopher G.W.F. Hegel argues that we always progress in our lives to higher levels or new results of meaning that transform, but at the same time incorporate, the elements we think we've left behind. Becoming a citizen of the world, then, does not enable us to leave home behind entirely, even if this is our wish, because home travels with us in some form or another, and we cannot shake it off anymore than an atheist can completely shake off God when developing an alternative approach to life. The outcome, it would appear, is that the need to know what home means is inescapable for those who want to live their lives intelligently, whether they also wish to embrace or reject what being at home has meant to them until now.

A particularly poignant category of thoughts about home stems from and centres on the idea and experience of membership in a diaspora—a scattered or dispersed (sometimes persecuted and disenfranchised) ethnic or religious group. This condition is marked by the need to find a new identity that recognizes yet still expresses an older one, or to somehow merge old and new identities. Often a great deal of pain is felt by displaced persons who think of themselves as having left a traditional homeland behind, perhaps involuntarily and permanently, and who long for reunion with this place of spiritual, geopolitical, or environmental origin, a place where self-understanding was either formed or yearns to be formed. If 'Home is where the heart is,' then a *de facto* home (where one is actually living, even if unsettled there) may not equate to one's emotional home, which perhaps lies elsewhere and is in the nature of things beyond recovery.

The concept of having a 'heavenly home' widens this gulf even further. Traditional African-American spirituals contain lines like 'Better get a home in that rock, don't you see?' and 'I've got a home in Beulahland/Outshines the sun/Way beyond the sky' and 'Swing low, sweet chariot/Comin' for to carry me home.' A proverb from Benin has it that 'The world is a journey, the afterworld is home.' These sayings project the suggestion that our 'real home' is in a world beyond this one, so that an earthly home is but a way-station along the line of a personal journey, and is to be cast away or at least transcended

in favour of a better version in the hereafter. Embedded deeply within Christianity and other religions, this idea is expressed most poetically in a proverb attributed to Australian Aborigines: 'We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love ... and then we return home.'

But our earthly home is what we manifestly do experience in the here-and-now, and, as indicated already, this experience may not always be very positive or self-validating. An old piece of folk wisdom bluntly declares that 'A woman's place is in the home.' This does not sit comfortably with today's greater quest for sexual equality and freedom of self-determination, to say the least. It presupposes a notion of home that is too claustrophobic and one-sided for many to embrace or affirm. Who makes someplace into a home? This question is up for grabs more than ever before. We can no longer simply state that 'Men build houses; women build homes' and leave it at that. What this tells us is that in some ways, people expect from home more rather than less than they did in the past.

During recent centuries, scholars and other researchers have begun to think and write about the Earth as a home or dwelling place. Arguably this amounts to reinvention of the wheel within a new idiom, since indigenous peoples around the world, as we've seen, have conceptually and symbolically situated themselves in this manner for a very long time. But for most people, such a resonance, if it ever existed, has been lost and requires to be rediscovered and reasserted. Why? Because modern cultures have set themselves above and against nature and cut us loose from this anchor of our being.

Ecology, as a science of the relationships and interactions between humans and their environment, was born with the coining of this word in 1866 by biologist and naturalist Ernst Haeckel. Like 'economics,' 'ecology' stems from the Greek word *oikos* (house, or, more properly, inhabited house, domicile, dwelling, home). Thus, the overall project of understanding our place in the scheme of things became one that includes a knowledge of where and how we fit within the natural world, in contrast to previous erroneous ideas of humans as utterly different from and independent of (and even hostile to) nature, and as beings that occupy the pinnacle of a hierarchical order, the rest of which exists merely to serve our species' needs and purposes. There is every difference between a natural environment that is a 'storehouse of resources' to be ruthlessly exploited and one in which the definition of home incorporates the rich meaning of 'dwelling place.'

This sense of earthly home was augmented by the first globally shared photos of our planet taken from outer space, at least one of which has become an iconic representation of the twentieth century ('The Blue Marble' shot taken by Apollo 17 astronauts in 1972). Even before this, architect, futurist, and polymath R. Buckminster Fuller described, in his 1963 book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, the limited abundance and support systems on which we all depend, and which we must conserve and protect for our common good.⁸ But it turns out that this image, in one form or another, has actually been around almost as long as the concept of ecology itself, predating the space age by many decades.⁹ And it didn't take science fiction to give birth to it; for some time advanced thinkers have linked an understanding of nature, as a commons, with ideas like that of cooperative human development, the human family, and the Earth as a planet (literally a 'wandering star' for the ancient Greeks, who contributed this suggestive word to our vocabulary).

Looking deeper still into the many meanings of home, we can discern some that are of special interest, emerging, like Montaigne's, from European philosophy. In the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal, philosopher, mathematician, early game theorist, and maverick defender of the Christian faith, wrote that the human condition is one of unmoored existence in the enormity of a universe we cannot comprehend: 'We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly....'¹⁰ But it's not just that knowledge of our origin, purpose, and ultimate destiny escapes us; living discloses our state of being as vagabonds or nomads in the cosmos, our condition of 'metaphysical homelessness.' Three centuries on, Martin Heidegger reiterates that we suffer from a 'homesickness' — a longing for wholeness and belonging within being, which, because our culture has taken a wrong turn somewhere, continues to elude us and to lead us into environmentally destructive choices. From this viewpoint, it seems more appropriate to describe us as pilgrims, on a quest for an outlook or condition that will replace the lost certainty of religious faith or foundational belief-system. His response is to posit a concept of 'dwelling' that has metaphysical and quasi-spiritual overtones. We dwell, properly speaking, when

we give significance and structure to the world in such ways that allow Being to reveal itself to us for what it is, and that allow us to experience ourselves as profoundly grounded in being. Whether this represents a struggle to recover meaning in a godless universe is much debated. However this specific question of interpretation is resolved, it remains to be considered to what extent there is a need for a cultural and/or individual project of recovering a larger sense of home in a postmodern and materialistic age, and what sort of project this might be.

A contemporary of Heidegger's, Otto Bollnow, argues that home is the reference point from which one constructs a world moving outwardly, but that the house identified as home is, inversely, defined by its position relative to the (generally) urban surroundings, populated community, and country of which one is a member.¹¹ Lived space, as revealed in this perspective, has both ontological and existential meaning—it helps specify who and what one is—but in addition, it has purely geometrical and geographical, navigational significance. The home, while it may be a centre of one's life, is nonetheless destabilized at the same time it is constructed, by being a marker within larger centres of meaning (city and nation, for example) that compete with it as designating where one is, where home is, and that make rival claims on one's sense of being located in a specially identifiable place.

We have seen that home, for all of its immediate and more traditional associations, is actually a highly polyvalent, elastic notion, and for many, an almost undefinable thing, a *je ne sais quoi*. Home is somewhere, nowhere, everywhere, I'm-not-sure-where, somewhere-yet-to-be, an imaginary and elusive place. It may be comforting and reassuring or scary and repellent. It may be a firm or a fragile, unstable presence. It may beckon from nearby or vanish over the horizon. This makes it a fascinating reality to investigate, for in one way or another (or in several ways simultaneously) it occupies some of the most intimate crevasses of our lives.

Notes

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- 2 Title of a song by J.H. Payne (1791-1852), American actor, dramatist, and song writer, from his 1823 opera *Clari*, or, *The Maid of Milan*.
- 3 Also from Payne's song 'Home, Sweet Home,' in his opera *Clari*.
- 4 Wayne LaPierre (2014), cited by C.P. Pierce (2014). 'The Hellscape World of Wayne LaPierre.' *Esquire* (digital edition) 6 March. <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/politics/wayne-lapierre-cpac-2014-030614>.
- 5 M. Bunting (2014). 'Rich Social Mix Makes Us More Tolerant.' *Guardian Weekly* 190/15 (21-27 March), p. 18.
- 6 M. de Montaigne (1579-80).. 'De l'Institution des Enfants' ('Of the Education of Children'). From M. de Montaigne, *Essais*. <http://www.livrefrance.com/Montaigne.pdf>; bk. 1, chap. 26, pp. 86, 87. Trans. M. A. Fox.
- 7 Dan Kieran, *The Idle Traveller: The Art of Slow Travel* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: AA Publishing, 2013), p. 186.
- 8 R.B. Fuller (1963) *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. E.P. Dutton, New York.
- 9 Wikipedia (n.d.). 'Spaceship Earth.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaceship_Earth.
- 10 B. Pascal *Pensées* (1995). Rev. ed. Trans. A.J. Krailshimer. Penguin, Harmondsworth, UK, sec. 199.
- 11 O.F. Bollnow (1967). 'Lived Space.' Trans. D. Gerlach. In N. Lawrence and D. O'Connor, eds. *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, p. 180.

