

**A SPIRITUAL HOME FOR EVERYONE**  
**October 1, 2006**

We have been exploring the ideas of home and spirituality the last two weeks. I was so inspired by my spiritual retreat at Torrey Canyon in Wyoming, that I wished to share as much as possible with you. I cannot bring the clear glacier water here, nor the cottonwoods that lined the banks of Torrey Creek. I can't bring the big horn sheep that walked majestically around the rim of the canyon, nor the little ground squirrels who darted about the dusty valley. However, I am attempting to share some of the wisdom I learned from the Rev. Jill McAllister, who led our retreat.

Two weeks ago we talked about home, and lifted up some lines of Robert Frost, "home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in." Our ideas of home are based on our childhood, but change as we develop.

And I gave you an assignment that many of you accepted. I asked you to make a list of the things you needed to take with you to make a home if you were moving to a far-away location. And last week I asked you to pare that list down to three things.

How many of you did that? Was it difficult? We'll talk more about it later.

Last week we talked about what it means to be spiritual. We explored the idea of credo, and that most of us have one, whether it is written or not. We liberal religionists give precedence to enacting our faith. Therefore, if one enacts one's beliefs in the world, they are living a spiritual life.

Now we are ready to move on to *A Spiritual Home for Everyone*.

Mary Oliver says,

What I know  
I could put into a pack  
  
as if it were bread and cheese, and carry it  
on one shoulder,  
  
important and honorable, but so small!  
While everything else continues, unexplained  
  
and unexplainable. ....

Let me suggest that this is an invitation to humility. We are bombarded with information daily.

Talk radio screams at us, NPR speaks more softly, but demands our attention. Television producers discovered that soft news is cheap to produce, and popular, and filled the airwaves accordingly. The blogosphere investigates, issues opinions, and demands our attention. We are, I believe, overstimulated by constant demands on our attention to the here and now—and never more than during an election season.

And yet—what do we really know? What of all this mish-mash of facts and factoids and opinions presented as truths, do we really know? We are assaulted with more words than any other people in history, and yet we must question always the truth of what we hear. What is it that we know? I will lift up three things. There may be more that you know, or think you know; however, these three seem to me to be critical.

We know the reality of our lives. We know the dailiness of living. We know that one must work to survive, and that one must rear their children to survive, (if one has children). Survival requires food, housing and clothing. If these three needs are met, we also need beauty, art, and the world of ideas. We know, most of us, from whence we came; our family of origin, the ethnic stock of our forbears. We may have speculated on how that ancestry affects our living.

We know the limits and idiosyncrasies of our own bodies. It makes a difference if we are left-handed, diabetic, or allergic to pollen. If we have really good running and catching skills, that's a plus, as is true if we are gifted with a beautiful voice. Our ability to bend over easily, climb stairs swiftly, or enter and exit low-slung cars with alacrity is affected by our age. We know the reality of our own bodies and we know the reality of our lives.

Second, most of us know history, and the history of ideas. For example, we know that Anglos are late-comers to North America. We know that this continent was already populated when we, who are Anglos arrived here. We know that there were struggles between populations for control of the land and resources. We may come to different conclusions about the meaning of these historical events, however, we share the knowledge of these historical facts, as well as many other events that helped shape us.

We know something about the development of ideas, including and especially religious ideas. We know there were aboriginal religions early in the history of humankind. We know there were matriarchal religions that evolved from them. We know that, all over the world, and within a fairly short historical time, patriarchal religions replaced woman-centered religions. And we know that during what we call The Axial Age, religions in most parts of the world developed further. Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus lived within a range of 500 years. Their teachings changed the faiths into which they were born significantly. One can trace this development of ideas through other branches of knowledge.

And third, we know that the world needs our help. We know that our society is threatened by many forces. We have differing ideas about how to help, but most of us who have met survival needs know that help for the larger society is needed. In other words, we know that we are not solitary creatures, but born into an interdependent web, and that we must do our part to mend the broken places of the web.

This much we can know. There are also many facts we can know—the facts that undergird mathematics, for example. We can know scientific facts, yet as more and more facts are uncovered, sometimes they call into question the facts we learned earlier. Einstein's theories modified and changed Newton's. Chaos theory changes how we view the world. And astronomers have now changed one of the basic facts that I learned as truth. Pluto is not really a planet, after all!

I think we have to adopt a certain amount of humility. I think we have to operate as *if* the facts we know are true, but keep our minds open to the possibility that new discoveries will modify—even change our understanding. Maybe what we know with certainty can be paced in a pack and carried on one shoulder. Perhaps we should think, then, about the unknown and unknowable.

Mary Oliver continues her poem:

But mostly I just stand in the dark field,  
in the middle of the world, breathing  
  
in and out. Life so far doesn't have any other name  
but breath and light, wind and rain.

There is more to life than just what we can know with certainty. Oliver, like some of us, connects with this larger reality through the natural world. She stands and breathes, “in the heaven of the grass and the weeds.” Whatever this larger reality is can be referred to as The Great Mystery. Some people call it God, others the community of humankind, others the cosmos, others an ordering principle. Let us today refer to it as The Great Mystery.

For we cannot know with certainty the facts of the matter. We can decide that a particular faith path makes sense to us, and that we will follow it *as if* it were Truth with a capital *T*. We can use this faith path for the base of our credo, which we will follow, thus making meaning for our lives. However, certainty is elusive, and those who claim they know *Truth with a Capital T* is the one and true path can be come dangerous. We often call them fundamentalists.

The facts that we know, that we carry around in a sack “like bread and cheese,” are a part of what centers us, what gives us a sense of “home.”

I recently re-read an Hasidic Jewish story from Eastern Europe. It was re-told by Forrest Church in *A Chosen Faith*. “Once upon a time in Krakow, a rabbi dreamt three times that an angel told him to go to Livovna, and that in front of the palace there, near a bridge, he would find a treasure. When the rabbi arrived in Livovna, he told his story to a sentinel who told him that he, too, had had a dream in which he was told to go to a rabbi's house in Krakow, where a treasure was buried in front of the fireplace. So the rabbi went home and dug at his own hearthstone where he found a treasure. (p. 100.)

This story can teach at least two lessons. The first is, of course, that your treasure lies at home.

However, the second is that one must leave home to find the treasure that lies within. The rabbi must go to Livovna to learn that the treasure is in his home in Krakow. Or, one must go to Torrey Canyon to learn that the treasure lies in Muskegon. Or, one must go to a golf course to learn that the treasure lies in a faith community. One can make the journey in real time, traveling to a geographic place, or one can make the journey in one's mind. The treasure lies at home, in one's heart and mind.

What treasures did you put on your list, after I asked you to whittle them down to three? Were they objects, or people, or memories? Were they character traits that you thought would help you adjust to a new environment? What, after due consideration of all your things, your precious things, did you choose to put in your pack to take to a new place, to make it home?

You need not speak these aloud, unless you wish to do so. I ask you however, to consider the significance of each item. Did you find, perhaps, that it was not the stuff that crowds our homes, that was most important? Perhaps it was the things that you carry in your heart that provided a sense of home.

Home, then, is always with reach. We can always get there, for we carry it with us. I think it is tied to memories, just as Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge intuited about Miss Nancy. When he brought her the small gifts that stimulated her memories, she became more her true self. She was able to share adventures from her childhood, and the memory of her older brother who did not return from the war.

Returning home, to the home within, allows us to recognize the good and bad in our lives, past and present. It allows us to reach into the web beyond our selves and share our treasure, both spiritual and material. It helps us develop the serenity to bear the stresses of society, and the courage to try to change the world, or at least our small part of it, for the good, as we know it. Doing so will help you develop balance in your doing and resting, thinking and feeling, mourning and celebrating.

I am saying then, that your spiritual home lies within—within your heart and mind. With Mary Oliver, I say that “it is wonderful to follow a thought quietly to its logical end.” However, it is also wonderful to stand quietly and breathe, to return to the immediacy of the present, to experience the world in all its beauty, and to return to the treasure that lies within.

The last exercise our leader, the Rev. Jill McAllister, asked us to do was to write in our journals. Our charge was to gather what we had learned, and to think about what we would take home. My response came out in poetry.

Clouds, gray, pearl, bright white.  
Dancing creek flowing swiftly.  
Sun brushes mountain.

Peace feeds my spirit  
Wrought from beauty and silence,  
Sharing, respect and love.

The land is immense,  
Challenges never depart,  
I am only one.

We keep on with our work,  
Loving, caring, struggling,  
For this is our call.

Time to rest,  
Time to center,  
Time to explore.

Challenges for body, mind, spirit,  
Nurtured with beauty, leadership  
and fabulous food.

And now?

The challenges to take home:  
Hold on to the center within.  
Shape order out of chaos.  
Continue spiritual growth.  
Share it with others.

Shalom and Saalat.  
Blessed Be and Amen.