

COMING HOME

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This past April, when you called me to serve as your minister, we celebrated with a cake that read “Welcome Home.” In many ways, my acceptance of this call is a return home. My teenage years were spent living in this very area; I have fond memories of hanging out with friends at the Friendly’s just a mile away from here, of learning to drive on Route 22, and of working as a camp counselor in Armonk. Those times were a while ago (and receding further into the past every day), and my entire adult life has been spent living elsewhere and visiting Westchester as an outsider. Still, there’s something about this area that is home to me.

There’s something magical and familiar about seeing the sun set behind the Palisades, light glimmering off of the Hudson River, even though I’ve never before lived in Peekskill. There’s something that feels right about driving down the Taconic Parkway to my office, even though I lived southeast of here (and not northwest), even though I wasn’t even a Unitarian Universalist in my teens. I’ve found myself on more than one occasion with a silly grin on my face for very little reason—like when I put my New York license plates on my car, even though the last ones I had were long enough ago that they featured the Statue of Liberty in the middle of them.

So I, for one, am glad to be home, and I was glad for the welcome I got in April, and again in August, from so many in this Fellowship.

And having returned here, having set myself up in an office here at the Fellowship, having purchased a house with my partner, planted a perennial garden, unpacked any number of boxes and painted four rooms, I am glad to be able to return the favor. I am thrilled to be able, on this day of ingathering as a community, to welcome you home as well.

In thinking about the meaning of “ingathering,” I kept coming back to the notion of “home.” Of course, I was glad to be home. Of course, I wanted to welcome you back to your spiritual home. Of course, I wanted to challenge you to make this place feel like home to new people. And yet, something just didn’t sit right with me.

So I asked my friends: What does home mean to you? Their answers were, as I expected, thoughtful, often eloquent, and sometimes surprising. They quoted song lyrics such as “every spark of friendship and love will die without a home,” from Arcade Fire. They talked about places they called home and what those places meant to them. Several of them talked about their experiences when, as adults, their families moved away from the places in which they grew up—the feelings of disconnectedness they felt in places that were home to their parents, but not to them.

My friend and former housemate Lisa wrote that her undergraduate mentor was fond of saying (among other things) that “everybody needs a place to stand.” She reflected on this saying, telling me, “I remember calling him from the porch where we lived... to say that I finally felt like I had a place to stand, a safe place where I felt supported, rather than a place of anxiety where I couldn't entirely relax....”

Most of my friends who responded to this inquiry listed qualities that mean home to them: safety, comfort, belonging, healing from hurt, warmth, a place where the people there “really know who you are.” One even used the phrase “cosmic rightness” to describe the feeling he has when he is at home.

The community that is this Fellowship strives to be a spiritual home for all who seek—though we don’t use that word exactly in our mission statement. And that home needs to be welcoming, warm, and supportive. Here, in this place, with these people, we are both nurtured and challenged, sometimes at the same time. We are prompted to think and inspired to feel. We are given space to tell our stories and time to hear the stories of others. Here, we are invited to bring our joy and our pain, so that the joy might be increased and the pain lessened.

Those are, after all, the things that home is *supposed* to be, right?

As you might guess from the biography I used to introduce myself to you, or by the fact that members of my family and our friends have come from around the region to be here for this first worship of my new ministry, my experience of home has been all of those things—all of those wonderful things that we want home to be.

But not everybody has that experience. Not everyone gets to have a home that is safe, and comfortable, and warm. Not everyone gets to have a home that is stable, where wounds are healed, a place that feels “right.”

For many people, the notion of “home” is linked to memories of pain or abuse. For some who have been bounced from place to place all of their lives, it is a completely foreign concept. For many people, “home” is a privilege reserved for others, for some it is a dream that might never become reality. For some, it is a nightmare that they re-live on a daily basis.

It has been impossible for me to think about home in the beginning of September, 2007, without noting that August 29th was the second anniversary of the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. These past weeks have been the anniversary of the resulting devastation in New Orleans caused by the failure of the city’s protective structures and then compounded by the failure of our nation’s response. Unlike on the hurricane-ravaged Gulf coast of Mississippi, the aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans was anything but a “natural” disaster.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to spend two days in New Orleans. I slept at the First Unitarian Universalist Church there, at the time home to the UU Gulf Coast Relief Volunteer Center. There are three distinct memories of that trip I will share with you today.

First was when I got to the church itself. At the time, more than one year after the flood, the doors were still sheets of plywood, the front door promising in spray-painted letters the eventual rebirth of the church, complete with neighborhood social justice center. Inside, the first floor was a shell—eight feet of standing water had meant that everything porous had to be ripped out. Every piece of sheetrock was gone, most of the wood had to be replaced. Mold that grew in the resulting dampness meant that ductwork, too, was unfit for reuse. Only the tiled bathrooms were left more or less intact.

The main floor was not much better—the sanctuary had been destroyed. There were no more hymnals, no more usable seats, no more piano. There were broken remnants of what used to be stained glass windows. There was barely a floor.

Only upstairs was there any sign that this church was carrying on. Upstairs, the six rooms that had been spared flood damage had been converted into a church office, an office for the minister, a small kitchen, and the volunteer center, complete with piles of air mattresses waiting for the promised waves of Unitarian Universalist volunteers.

The physical building that was spiritual home to so many people had been reduced to six small rooms, four of which had been dedicated to housing and coordinating those who might come to help the city rebuild. The congregation was forced to respond to this trauma without the comfort of a building in which they could even have regular worship. They were forced to minister to a membership scattered all over the United States as a result of the devastation to their home.

And they did. Traumatized, homeless and battered, with post-traumatic stress disorder prevalent throughout the community, those members of the First UU Church of New Orleans who have been able to return continue to minister to one another. They continue, though their spiritual home has still not yet been fully restored, the money to rebuild being slow to come despite some 15 partner congregations around our Association hard at work raising it.

Today, as we celebrate our own spiritual home, I ask that we do it with profound gratitude for the home that we have here. For the personal connections and for the physical structure in which we are able to come together as a community. Though we might bemoan the occasional cobweb and the age of our furnace, let us still be grateful for the amazing home we have. Let us honor our friends in New Orleans by not taking what we have here for granted.

Seared into my memory are pictures from the tour of the city I got the next day. From the church building, we drove through downtown New Orleans, seeing some neighborhoods that had barely been affected and others that were rows of empty houses marked unfit for habitation.

When we crossed the canal into the Lower Ninth Ward, the scene was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Now, mind you, this was more than a year after Katrina that I visited, not the next week or month. More than a year later.

In early October of 2006, the Lower Ninth Ward was empty. Here and there were piles of debris—smashed cars or remnants of roofs. Every fourth or fifth street had a house being rebuilt on it—they stood out like trees on a vast prairie. Most of the neighborhood was simply empty—tall weeds growing around the concrete pads on which houses once stood with nothing around them.

It was as if this bustling, energetic neighborhood had been completely vaporized. People's lives, people's memories, people's possessions, all had been swept away. Where neighbors once watched out for one another and children once played, only concrete pads and scattered trash remained—those people lucky enough to have survived no longer able to call the place home.

This wasn't the only devastated neighborhood we saw—I am haunted by memories of St. Bernard Parish, where empty, collapsed shells of former strip malls loomed over parking lots filled with FEMA trailers instead of customers. I was astounded crossing the canal that separates Lakeview—a New Orleans neighborhood of condemned homes and the uninhabitable building that was and will again be the Unitarian Universalist Community Church—from Metairie, an unflooded city on the “right” side of the canal, which looks pretty much

like Route 117 in Bedford Hills: car dealerships, supermarkets, restaurants and the hustle and bustle of American suburban life. But nowhere that I went was as stark as the Lower Ninth Ward.

Gini Courter, Moderator of our Association of Congregations, has been one of the many Unitarian Universalists who have spent countless hours volunteering to help rebuild New Orleans over the past two years. She has led group after group to the city, introducing them to community partners and keeping our attention focused on the woefully inadequate response to what happened there two years ago.

On August 27, just before the anniversary of the disaster, Gini spoke at a press conference in New Orleans announcing the beginning of a partnership between the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and several local agencies including ACT—All Congregations Together—to provide donated furniture to newly-rebuilt homes in the Ninth Ward and to call attention to the dire needs of residents of the city. Here is part of what she said:

“There are thousands of heroes in devastated neighborhoods throughout New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. I’m moved by these courageous citizens, and I’m humbled by their determination.

“But I’m also dismayed by the lack of a timely, adequate government response. These neighbors are rebuilding—step by painful step. They’re reclaiming their homes and schools, and we can all be inspired by their hard work and courage. But we must ask our leaders—why have so many been forced to rebuild alone? Why have so few homeowners received the financial assistance promised to them many months ago?

“These questions matter to all of us, because a disaster like Katrina can happen anywhere at anytime. But the questions matter for a deeper reason as well. Katrina peeled off the cover of the other America—the one that is neglected, and easily forgotten, the one that rarely makes headlines. But it is an America that lives and dreams, that works and worships in every state, in every city. It is Our America. How we respond to the structural and economic problems exposed by Katrina says a lot about who we are as a nation. If we can’t get it right New Orleans, how will we get it right anywhere else? If we can’t get it right in New Orleans, how will we call our society just or compassionate?

“Yes, in New Orleans houses are being repaired, albeit at great personal cost, but many of these houses are still empty. Today’s efforts are an attempt to bring attention to the insides of the houses, because a home is more than four walls and a roof.”

Here, today, we are celebrating the ability of this community to gather again after summers of relaxation, time spent with family, and a month-long break from regular activities at our Fellowship. Since the end of July, this worship space has been silent on Sunday mornings, and yet with relatively little effort we are back here, once again a community. The Lower Ninth Ward is still mostly unrebuilt, two entire years after it fell silent.

As we gather here today, let us take some time to rededicate ourselves to creating the just and compassionate society that we strive for, let us understand once again the call in our Mission statement to provide service to those in need.

The last memory of New Orleans I’d like to share is less institutional and more personal. While there, I was invited over a friend’s house for dinner. I had met Jyaphia several years ago doing anti-racism work around our faith movement. She is an amazing trainer, and a wonderful, warm person who really understands what it means to open your home to people. The list of people with standing invitations to dinner there is astounding, and includes most of her neighborhood. Whoever shows up gets ample amounts of incredible home-cooked food.

So on that night, there were some fifteen of us gathered for dinner. I was the only out of town guest: there were folks from down the street, her best friend and next-door neighbor, a few UU young adults who had moved to New Orleans to participate in the relief and rebuilding efforts, and a number of folks from First Church, who were struggling with the day-to-day reality of living in New Orleans post-Katrina.

I heard lots of stories that night, many like the stories we've all heard on the news of people deeply attached to their home—to the place they were born and raised, to the city that had adopted them as young adults years ago, to a culture and a landscape etched into generations of their ancestry.

They were stories of deep and profound sadness for a city that was ingrained into their souls. They were stories of longing for a time before the belief that their home was somehow permanent and protected was washed away by floods.

They were stories that New Yorkers, whose own recent horror will have its sixth anniversary on Tuesday, should be able to connect to. Stories of a home that was violated, of a safety that was destroyed, of the unthinkable happening in one's own backyard.

And yet, they were also stories of hope. The folks I met that night told me about people coming together in community to help one another, about neighbors whose homes had been spared housing those who had lost everything. They told me about groups they were working with that were rebuilding, restoring schools, fighting for racial equity and economic justice.

There was hope in their voices that they might once again have a place to call home.

This past June, at our General Assembly in Portland, Jyaphia and I were talking about her home. She said to me, "Michael, there are ways I can drive from home to work that I wouldn't ever know what happened two years ago. I could, if I wanted to, choose the streets on higher ground and the ones that have been rebuilt to take every morning and every evening and pretend like everything was just fine. I choose not to go that way, because I can't forget that my home is still not whole. I can't pretend that things are all just fine again. Do me a favor and let your new congregation know that."

And so I have.

As we gather here today here in our community's spiritual home, let us take a moment to remember those who do not have what we do. Let us dedicate ourselves to creating a world in which every person can have a place of safety and healing to call their own. Let us use the pain of our past as a source of empathy for those who are in need today. Let us gather in gratitude and hope, in service and in compassion.

And finally, let us choose to keep our eyes open to the world around us, to keep our feet planted firmly on the Earth, and to live fully, making our home and our community open to all.