



"Home is Where the Heart is"
Lauren Lyerla,
Emerson UU Chapel Director of Religious Education
April 11, 2010

Sermon

I love the images in that Crosby, Stills and Nash song: a blazing fireplace, flowers in the vase, illuminated windows that look out on the yard where the cats play, "such a cozy room," and someone playing love songs, just for you. I am sure that it is "a very very very fine house," but more importantly, it sounds like a very very very fine home. My guess is that the only reason the lyrics are "our house" instead of "our home" is the assonance, the repeated vowel sound, in "our house." It just sounds more musical.

But really... what's the difference? A fine house, or a fine home – doesn't that mean the same thing? Not exactly. The words have similar denotations, but different connotations.

A house is a structure, containing living spaces such as bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, and common areas. A home is a place that is the "usual residence" of someone – it is lived in.

What do we mean, when we say we feel "at home?" We mean we feel comfortable, we feel safe, we feel we belong there. We can relax in our home. It is a refuge from the outside world. It is a haven.

The Simon and Garfunkel song we heard earlier, Homeward Bound, describes home as the place where one's thoughts keep turning, where one's love is waiting, and where there's someone to provide comfort.

Of course the way I am describing "home" is an idealized version. No one's home is perfect, despite what interior design magazines and parenting magazines may try to make you believe. And some homes are very far from perfect – unclean, unsafe, even abusive. For some, "home" is a shelter, a car, or a cardboard box. Sadly, too many people do not have a "home" in the sense of a refuge or a haven, a place to belong. For anyone for whom that is or was the case, may you find that sense of home, on your own or with a partner, a child or a pet, where you feel safe and at ease. We all deserve to have that kind of home – imperfect, to be sure, but serving our needs of body, mind, and spirit.

I grew up in that kind of home. Ten years in the same house, with mostly likeable neighbors, right across the street from Ocean Breeze Elementary School and its playground, and with a nearby Little League field where my girlfriends and I hung out, cheering on the Braves to their now-legendary 20-0 season in 1976. My parents, though they divorced during this time, always made sure my brother and I were safe and healthy and knew we were loved.

When I came to St. Louis for college, I really lost all that. I moved eleven times in 8 years – dorms, summer sublets, apartments, rented homes while a professor was on sabbatical, rented rooms in someone else's home, and so on. It wasn't until I was 26 that I finally was able to feel at home somewhere again – I rented a tiny studio apartment above what used to be Paul's Books in the Delmar Loop, now Cicero's. It had no air conditioning, and when you opened the windows in the summer, the bus exhaust came right in. But it was mine. My mom visited and helped me fill it with attractive, useful things so that I could be comfortable there. Six years and only a couple of moves later, I was in the home I now share with my husband Tim, our son James, and Frisco, our black lab, and where I've lived for 13 years. Once again, I have a playground right across the street, but this time it's my child who is over there climbing trees and playing on the merry go

round, instead of me. This time, along with my husband Tim, I'm the one responsible for making our residence feel like home.

So a home – *that* kind of home – is something you can't buy. You might buy a house, but until you're actually living in it, it's not a home. You have to MAKE it into a home. Despite this, my realtor friend Steve tells me that realtors call it a "house" when you're the seller, because at the point of sale, it doesn't help anyone for the sellers to be too emotionally attached to the place. But when you're the buyer, they call it a "home." This encourages emotional attachment, and gets the potential purchasers thinking not just about square footage and property values, but about how the place will fill their needs, fit their lifestyle. It sounds a little sneaky, but I think it's a fair approach. Buyers need to consider more than the structural and financial aspects before they sign (and sign, and sign, and sign), or they may experience buyer's remorse.

Remember in the story *A House For Hermit Crab*, Hermit Crab isn't so crazy about his new shell until he makes it his own. He makes it more beautiful, with the sea anemone, the starfish, and the coral. With the snail's help, he keeps the place clean. Once the fierce-looking sea urchin joins him, he feels safe and protected. With the lantern fish, Hermit Crab's house is well lit. The wall of smooth pebbles even gives him a yard. Then, he decides his house is just right. Interestingly, it is not until he achieves this stage of satisfaction that he ever uses the word "home." Luckily, by the time he outgrows that shell, he understands how to turn a house into a home. He approaches his next shell with enthusiasm – home decorating has become an adventure for him.

Author Amy L. Rolfe, in her book "*Interior Decorating for the Small Home*," (Macmillan, 1917) says that "A house, to be a home, must be adapted to some individual or individuals composing a family group. It must contain only that which is useful and suitable to its daily occupants and should reflect their physical, mental, and spiritual activities." I take this to mean that the occupants of a home have taken what used to be a house (or apartment, or condo, or houseboat, or whatever), and put their own stamp on it. They have made it over into their own image.

This implies that the residents have some control over the place. They feel a sense of ownership, even if they are not legally the owners. Whether the owner is a landlord or a mortgage company, the residents have exercised their will in decorating the place, in filling it with the items they feel are essential - their books, their clothes, their favorite chair, their pots and pans. And perhaps most importantly, they have filled it with the people they love – family and friends. A home is a place where you can invite your friends over to hang out, or where you might host a family event such as a birthday party or Easter brunch.

So what makes a house into a home is the human element. As H.L. Mencken said, "A home is not a mere transient shelter: its essence lies in the personalities of the people who live in it."

This has some interesting implications for us as Unitarian Universalists and, more specifically, as Emersonians.

When you first came to Emerson, it was a house of worship. I hope that, over time, it has become – or will become – your religious home, your spiritual home, your church home. What are the qualities of a church home that distinguish it from a house of worship? Is the list the same as for a residence?

First, we said, a home must have people living in it. I don't mean that anyone should actually LIVE in our church building, of course. But we must have members. Active members. Regular members. People who are here, week after week, so that a community can grow.

Secondly, we said that a home must be comfortable, must be a place where we can relax, be ourselves, feel safe. Are these the qualities that make Emerson our church home? For many of us, other churches were places where we did not

feel we could be ourselves. Maybe we didn't feel safe being candid about our sexual orientation or living arrangements. Maybe we did not feel comfortable asking the kinds of questions that burned in our minds. Maybe we didn't feel we could speak out about our support of abortion rights or marriage equality.

I have heard some of our youth say of our district youth conferences that it's such a relief to have a place where they finally feel they can be themselves. I hope that you have that same sense of relief wash over you here at Emerson. I hope there is a sense of ease, of belonging, even for newcomers and guests. I hope you feel welcome here, no matter who you are, and no matter how many times you have joined us. I hope Emerson feels like a safe haven, where you can be yourself, and know that you will be treated with dignity and respect.

Just as Hermit Crab wanted to keep his shell clean and protected, we want to take care of our church home. We vacuum, wash the coffee mugs, weed the gardens, salt the deck when it's icy, trim the trees, plant flowers. We pledge money to keep the place running smoothly. We volunteer on committees to do the work of our church. We do this because we feel a sense of ownership of the place. If you've been coming to Emerson for a while, do you call it "the church I go to," or do you say, "my church?" At what point did you make that change in your vocabulary? When you signed the membership book? Before that?

For me, it took all of three visits. I first came to a service at Emerson over the summer of 2005. I was giving one of the summer sermons, and I wanted to check the place out and hear another sermon before I gave one. My son James and I were warmly welcomed. I was impressed with the sanctuary, as it hadn't been built yet when I came to a Buddhist meditation here one evening late in 2000. The next week, we came back, and I delivered my sermon. The week after that, when Sunday rolled around, James asked if we were going to "our new church." Obviously, he felt at home here very quickly, and I'm grateful to everyone who helped both of us feel that way.

Remember, also, that you can invite your friends to your home. The best way you can help your church family thrive is by inviting guests to join you here. If you know someone who seems spiritually homeless, extend a gentle invitation. We are not just here for ourselves. We are here to be a home to others like us, who have not felt that sense of ease and belonging in other religions, or at other churches, and who just haven't found us yet. We are here to be a refuge for heretics, skeptics, and people with more questions than answers.

Thomas Wolfe famously wrote that "you can't go home again." I think if we are talking about going back as adults to the places where we lived as children, he's got a point. If I were to return to Indian Harbour Beach, Florida, to stay, it would no longer mean playgrounds and little league games for me the way it once did. I might well spend a lot of time at those places, but as a parent, rather than a child. Our perspective as adults cannot match the way we saw the place or the people there when we were young. But as adults, can we ever come back to a former church home, once we leave?

Last weekend, an old friend of Emerson's was here for a visit. Janet Kennedy moved away to Indiana a few years ago, after being a very active member here. For several years, Janet poured time, money, and love into this place. In fact, I believe it was Janet who organized the summer services in 2005 when I first spoke at this pulpit. Certainly, Emerson has changed since Janet left. Does she still feel at home when she visits? I asked her just that question, and she gave me an enthusiastic yes. She feels very much at home when she comes back here, so much so that she even sang with the choir last Sunday! But she also said that she thinks the reason she feels at home at Emerson is because she worked to make it her church home. It is not just the associations with the physical space that feel so homey, though they certainly featured in her answer. The main thing, she said, is the relationships she has forged with people. Over time, however, the membership of a church changes. Will Janet still feel at home here in the future? I believe she will. For one thing, she

loves the place enough to come back for visits at least twice a year. For another, this past weekend I saw her visiting not just with her old friends, but making some new acquaintances as well. She continues doing the work, continues to forge relationships. Home, she said, is something that one creates intentionally. Home isn't something that just happens. You have to make it.

Thanks to the magic of Facebook, I also had the opportunity recently to chat with Devry Becker, a former Emersonian who moved to Washington, DC, in the summer of 2008. Devry was an integral part of my early experiences at Emerson. He and I rode to District Assembly in Madison, Wisconsin, together 4 years ago, and there's nothing like a six-hour road trip for a bonding experience. Devry was actually the very first person I met here – he greeted me as I walked through the doors that first time, and was warm and friendly toward me and James. He very obviously felt at home at Emerson back then, and was a gracious host. He was one of our young adults, here during some formative years, and he really found himself as part of our congregation. This past Christmas, he came back for a visit. So I asked him: "CAN you go home again? Did you still feel at ease when you visited? Did you still feel you belonged?" He told me that yes, it was a very special thing to have been back here again.

This makes me happy. I love that we keep welcoming Devry and Janet back home when they visit us. I am also happy when I see some of our graduates – former Youth Group members who have gone off to college and come back on their breaks. It feels good to know that they still feel at home here, and to see them welcomed back with open arms.

In fact, Robert Frost said that "Home is the place where, when you need to go there, they have to take you in." I wonder if our youth feel that way. I wonder if they know that if they ever need us, the people of Emerson will enfold them back into our community, no matter how long they've been gone.

From the words of H.L. Mencken and Robert Frost, I turn your attention now to another quote about home that I'm sure you have all heard. This time, our source is The Temptations. "Papa was a rolling stone," they sang. "Wherever he laid his hat was his home."

Have any of us ever tried behaving that way? Have we ever tried to hang our hats in other houses of worship, and did they feel like home?

"Papa Was a Rolling Stone" is a great song. I love the song. But don't romanticize Papa's behavior. Papa, in the song, is not painted as a sympathetic character at all. With three "outside children" and another wife, he never held a job, and leeches off of others. We are not meant to see his behavior as admirable. The next line tells the end of Papa's story: "And when he died, all he left us was alone."

This is not the heritage most of us want to leave for our children. We want to pass on to them something more than loneliness, something other than emptiness. A real home. Someplace that isn't just where you've hung your hat, but a home that is where your heart is. Remember that making a home takes effort, but it's worth the work. Home, even a religious home, a church home, is a place you create – and not just for yourself, but for your children. In a greater sense, that means that all of us have a responsibility to create a church home that is here for the next generation, those growing up now in our religious education program as well as those who don't find us until adulthood. A church home that will be able to comfort them in hard times. A place that will be here to take them in, if they ever have no place else to go. A church not made only of walls and beams, but built with love and dreams.