

**The Journey Home**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
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**Readings**

In this reading from Wendell Berry's novel, *Hannah Coulter*, the title character, an old woman from Kentucky farm country, is reflecting back on the experience of her husband Nathan following his return from serving in World War II:

Most people now are looking for "a better place," which means that a lot of them will end up in a worse one. I think this is what Nathan learned from his time in the army and the war. He saw a lot of places, and he came home. I think he gave up the idea that there is a better place somewhere else. There is no "better place" than this, not in *this* world. And it is by the place we've got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven.

Psalm 137:1-6

By the rivers of Babylon --  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
we hung our harps.  
For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a strange land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.

**Sermon**

"The Journey Home."  
Home.  
Is home a place? Or a state of mind? Or some blend of the two?  
To come at this from another direction: What is it we are missing when we are homesick? My first year at summer camp, I was for awhile homesick, missing the sound

of mourning doves outside my window at dawn, cool summer mornings on our porch, Mom, Dad, maybe even my brothers, routines I knew so well, favorite foods.

But is it just people, place, and routines we miss when we are homesick? Or is there something deeper, below or within all this, something at least as real even if harder to articulate... to which we wish to return?

Woody Guthrie wrote a song during his rambling years of the great depression: "I ain't got no home in this world anymore." The song is about being left out while the rich folks are doing just fine. But it also echoes more religious notions suggesting that our true home really is not in this world, but in some next world, heaven, with God... "farther along..."

In the first reading this morning, though, Wendell Berry has the narrator, Hannah Coulter, affirm that we can learn to be at home here, in this place given to us, and that if we do learn to love the place, the land, the people, this will link us to something we could call Heaven.

(Of course what do we say to people who have no place in this world to call home? Or whose home is a place of violence or abuse?)

So: What or where *is* our true home?

Well, this brings me to the *Odyssey*.

There is, as you know, a car named Odyssey. I assume it is named Odyssey because the idea most of us have about Homer's *Odyssey* is that it tells the story of an exciting and heroic adventure – the implication being that if you buy this car you too will have exciting and heroic adventures.

Well, Homer's *Odyssey* does tell such a story... in a way... to a point. But the adventures of which it tells are by no means mostly happy adventures and are mostly unsought by the title character, long-suffering Odysseus. He, after all, simply wants to get home: home to his dear wife Penelope, to their son Telemachus, to his beloved island of Ithaca, to his people, his kingdom, his routines. He just wants to be *home* after ten years of war and ten years of wandering; wants to be home, yet is blocked all along the way by this or that god or goddess, storm or ill-wind. Indeed, eventually he literally, the story tells us, has to go to hell and back in order to get home.

So. Back to the car for a minute. It seems to me that with a little more research a different name might have been chosen. For not only is the story of the *Odyssey* not particularly a story you'd want associated with a family car, most scholars believe that the very name itself is derived from the same root as our word "odious." In other words, the hero's name suggests that the tale is about someone who both makes trouble, sorrow, and pain for others and experiences trouble, sorrow, and pain for himself.

Of course, another way of putting this is to say that the *Odyssey* is about a human being. A human being who in the course of heroic-scale adventures and catastrophes learns to *accept* that trouble, sorrow, and pain are an inevitable part of the human condition.

(There is also, by the way, a golf equipment company called Odyssey – maybe that *is* appropriate, since trouble, sorrow, and pain are an inevitable part of most rounds of golf. Also an opera company named Odyssey – that makes sense too if you know anything about opera.)

But back to the first *Odyssey*: As one commentator on the epic put it, Odysseus learns “to accept pain as the only real basis of meaning in this life or the next.” Further, this same commentator affirms that the reason Odysseus must go to Hades, the realm of the dead, is “to discover the necessity of pain, and its value” – indeed, he affirms: “To know himself as Trouble, and to be so known by others, is the only way for Odysseus to possess his identity.” More than this, Odysseus learns that love – his love for Penelope and for his homeland – can only be truly and deeply felt in the context of pain and suffering... of mortality, the human condition: life as it actually is, not as we might wish it to be.

Tough stuff.

But maybe indeed the way it is.

At a certain point this summer I realized that almost everything I was reading seemed to have to do with the ways in which life implies and includes trouble. To begin with the *Odyssey*, then Geraldine Brooks’ novel *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, and some novels by Wendell Berry, all of which are grounded in the reality of life’s challenges and suffering, and *This Side of Brightness*, with its not fictional tales of life in the slums of Mumbai, Harold Kushner’s latest book, *The Book of Job: When Bad Things Happened to a Good Person*, and an essay by Helen Luke on the suffering that comes with old age.

Uplifting summer! Maybe, I thought, I needed to see a Woody Allen movie for some laughs. Nope, that didn’t do it this time around with Woody – I do not recommend “Blue Jasmine” – not for uplift anyway.

In light of all this, then, you may not be surprised to learn that one of the last books I read this summer was *The Hermit in the Garden*, a history of the idea of the hermitage in ornamental gardens. (Did you know that in 18<sup>th</sup> century England hermits were sometimes advertised for and hired by “fashionable country landowners” to live in their gardens – and required not to wash or cut their nails for months at a time?)

In short, after all the other reading I’d done this summer, you could perhaps forgive me if I might want to answer one of those ads for a resident hermit – to get away from all the trouble that being a human being can entail.

But here’s the thing.

With the troubles that life inevitably brings, and admittedly in dramatically different proportion from person to person, also really does come the opportunity to discover meaning and purpose, to discover a deeper love in the midst of trouble, to discover, paraphrasing Hannah Coulter, right where we are, right in our place (our home wherever it is) an earthly heaven that is not a utopia (which means after all “no place”) but that *is* filled with beauty, meaning, and love all the richer because in the context of one or another measure of trouble, sorrow, pain, and suffering – our real lives.

So then: how do we find our way to or back to *that* sort of experience of home?

A little more about Odysseus may help:

It is sometimes said, using contemporary terms, that his story is a story of his suffering and growing through post traumatic stress disorder. And if you’ve read the *Iliad* you can see that this way of understanding the *Odyssey* makes complete sense. For the *Iliad* is filled with astonishingly graphic descriptions of war’s violence, not least the

violence that Odysseus inflicts again and again on others. How could he not be deeply wounded by it all?

And out of this woundedness, this experience of brutality given and received, what is the first thing he and the crew of his ship do as they begin their journey home? They sack and pillage a completely innocent village.

So, yes, we may indeed justifiably read the tales of Odysseus' unsought adventures and catastrophes, encounters with gods and goddesses, journey to Hades, as depicting his experience of a kind of PTSD, as he slowly learns or re-learns the ways of peace and of love, learns at the very end to break the cycle of violence given and received.

Is this not also a message we need today, in our lives and among nations? The verses of Psalm 137 which I left off seek in response to exile and torment revenge upon enemies, wish for the children of our enemies to be "dashed against the rocks."

Well... understanding the emotions, we need to put an end to the ways we destructively act on those emotions, put an end by learning ways of peace.

How does Odysseus learn the ways of peace, how does he mature, how does he become re-civilized – so he can return home? Well I would suggest that at the heart of this process, this growth, is hospitality – a theme threaded throughout the *Odyssey*. It would be illuminating to count the number of feasts shared in the *Odyssey*, and the number of gifts given by hosts to guests. Illuminating too to notice how often a host offers the feast, offers clothes to replace rags, offers gifts, even before learning the guest's name or his story.

In other words, *genuine* hospitality in this world of woe is not conditional. It comes *first*: Genuine hospitality (same root after all as "hospital" and "hospice") is about healing and is filled with kindness and understanding. Genuine hospitality, a port in a storm, recognizes that in a world filled with troubles, often the best thing we can do for another is simply to offer if not a feast on the scale of ancient Greece, at least a cup of tea, a casserole, a plate of cookies, a friendly welcome – to create, to put it another way, a sense of home away from home. (The sort of thing we can do, strive to do, right here, after all, every Sunday!)

In this spirit, some of you will remember the poem "Red Brocade" by Naomi Shihab Nye, which begins:

The Arabs used to say,  
When a stranger appears at your door,  
feed him for three days  
before asking who he is,  
where he's come from,  
where he's headed.  
That way, he'll have strength  
enough to answer.  
Or, by then you'll be  
such good friends  
you don't care.

Beautiful.

One final thought this morning: It seems to me that Yom Kippur, celebrated in the Jewish community yesterday, reminds us of another dimension of homecoming, already implicit in all I've been saying. This is a coming home or return to our true selves, our better selves, the way we really do wish to be in the world as it is, wherever we are, home or away from home, truly at home: kind, compassionate, considerate, seekers of justice and peace.

And Yom Kippur, at the culmination of the Jewish High Holy Days, recognizes that we always, always *need* this sort of *return* to the home of our better selves because time and again (being human) we will fall short of our better selves, we will err away from our better, true selves, saying something hurtful in a moment of anger or failing to do or say something helpful simply because we were in a hurry or too concerned with our own project or plan for the day or week or year or life.

Yet the good news and the enduring wisdom of Yom Kippur is the assumption that through forgiveness and understanding (which are forms of hospitality after all) we *can* return home to our better selves, we *can* do better, we *can* live more closely aligned with the values we claim as ours.

Indeed, all authentic religious or spiritual paths affirm the same. Each in their way, affirms that in this world as it is, a world and lives filled with plenty of trouble and suffering, yet also with beauty and joy, we *can* grow our souls, become more open-hearted, become kinder, become peace-makers and justice-seekers and earth-keepers... in short be more at home in our own skin in this world as it is and as we would seek for it to be.

This *can* be done – by you, by me, by all of us in the midst of the odysseys of our lives, in support of and offering hospitality to one another.

Welcome home... once again.

So may it be, this year together – and always.