

Going Home, September 3, 2023, All Souls Sermon

This past June I went to live in a religious community that I thought would be a kind of home for me. A place where I could finally rest. I've been searching for that sense of home for a long time—the place, job, relationships, or spiritual community that would make the world feel like a safe and secure place. Each of us have our own version of where we look for that sense of home. For some it might mean achieving a certain kind of professional or material security. For others it might be a physical home, made to feel comforting and welcoming. For many it might come in a creative expression of music, art, or movement. For most of us, we seek that kind of home in our relationships—friends, lovers, children, mentors. For some of you it might even be this building and this community, where you seek home.

But what happens when we think we've found it, and then the ground falls out from underneath us? Where is home then? The company downsizes and the job disappears. We experience flood or fire and lose our possessions. We fall ill and don't have the energy anymore to paint, dance, or run. And what happens when the lover we've built a life with leaves us, our dearest friends change and become distant, or our teachers disappoint us? Or, like happened for me this summer, our spiritual identity is shaken. Where is home then? This is a story about what emerged for me this summer when I lost that sense of home.

When I arrived in rural southern France at the compound of a Buddhist monastery, a rapid process of dissolution began. My first night there I had finished a modest dinner in the communal dining hall when an older monk sat down across the table from me with a giant smile on his face. We started talking and slowly the room cleared until we were alone and I was quietly crying. He held that quiet, tender space with grace and kindness and I went to sleep feeling utterly groundless and exposed.

It was the start of an unraveling. I'd been seeking the perfect place, people, philosophies, and practices that would make me feel whole, connected, secure, and at rest. And I was pretty sure that the monastery was the golden ticket, was the answer to my hopes, was

going to be my spiritual home. But after I finally arrived, what I felt instead was sadness, anger, and disappointment as I began to confront the loss of that fantasy. The monastery didn't provide those things, it didn't feel like what I had imagined in my mind, and I was starting to doubt if any place or community ever would. But then, as happens all so often, a hand reached out at just the right time.

I was set to leave in a couple of days, and I ran into that same monk in the library. After looking into my eyes and my heart, he asked if I wanted to take a walk. We set out on the winding narrow road that led up into the hills north of the monastery compound. It was early evening and the light was dusty and warm as we arrived at a small cemetery at the top of a hill. We decided to sit in some cracking plastic chairs under the shade of a large stone archway that looked out over the shallow valley. Seated across from each other, I was enveloped again in his tender gaze and I began to pour out all of the fear, confusion, and disappointment that had been building up.

We sat there watching the sun set over the small maroon and white buildings. I cried and laughed as it began to dawn on me how desperate I felt to find that sense of home: how much thinking, planning, striving, and clinging had gone into trying to identify it and then grasp it. And most painfully, how alone I felt through it all. Tied up in my searching was a deep sense of isolation—from what exactly I didn't know at the time—but the feeling of homelessness, of separation felt crushing. After we talked for a while longer, we sat in silence again. Then my new friend offered me a gentle suggestion that he thought might help as I left the monastery and continued on in my life—he said, “just forgive yourself.” I didn't fully understand what he meant in the moment—forgive myself for what exactly? But it stirred something in my heart.

I left the monastery a couple of days later feeling a peculiar sense of uprightness and freedom, back in the unknown. Turns out the monastery wasn't my home, but it was exactly what I needed, because it forced me out of my hardened conceptions, and back into a place of release, awe, and curiosity about what it means to be alive.

Over the couple of months since I left France I've felt that familiar sense of homelessness, of some deep sense of separation, reemerge from the quiet corners of my mind, many times. But when I do, I recall the gentleness and lightness offered by the monk with the big smile, and I invite in his words "just forgive yourself."

As I allow my heart to stir again in that mystery, sometimes it's pretty painful, but more often it's extremely peaceful. There have been no lightning bolt realizations. I haven't had any strokes of insights or cathartic releases. To be honest it's actually been really hard to try to put any of it into words. But what has emerged from the open space of forgiveness and curiosity are three recurring mirrors: the earth, my body, and loving connection.

The first rose up in early August, entwined with the super moon. I was in my hometown in western Massachusetts and a few friends and I went for a short walk up a hill to watch the sunset and the moonrise. As the moon began to surface over the horizon it was glowing with a brilliant pink, orange light. It was being obscured and highlighted by a narrow band of silhouetted clouds, which gave it an added tinge of mystical awesomeness. I felt in the presence of angels.

We stayed for a few minutes, drifting between sweet silences and giggly jokes, teetering on the edge of profundity, and I felt so porous, so utterly free and inconsequential yet loved and held in between the sun and moon. Standing behind me, one friend said, "there's something about having to choose which to look at, the sun or the moon, that feels so human." I nudged her to say more, but her heart knew that silence was the correct way to honor the moment. Because buzzing insects and rustling grasses are the appropriate soundtrack to consecration. And in that moment we were all consecrated through our complete surrender to the natural order of things.

And then again, in the next moment, I felt that familiar impulse to harden, to search for home, the restless pain of separation buzzing in my chest. So I recalled the sun setting over the valley in France where those small buildings of the monastery sat, and I called upon forgiveness

and its potent mystery. I settled into the pulse of curiosity and wonder, trusting a little bit more in the sacred earth, which has never once failed to hold me.

The more time I've spent resting in the cradle of the land, the more obvious it's become that my body is an expression of the earth and that it cannot be separate. So when I start to harden and yearn for the safety of home, I remember my friend, and I forgive. When I hurt, I forgive myself for imagining that I'm hurting alone. I forgive myself for feeling anxious, because my body knows how to hold fear without making up any stories around it. I don't need concepts like sadness and grief when I'm able to watch the tears moving from my heart, through my throat, and into my eyes. And when my muscles settle and I can breathe from my abdomen, I don't have to explain anything about what it means to be at rest. If my body is not separate from the earth, of course it hurts sometimes, and of course it is sacred.

And if my body knows the earth and knows what life feels like in all of its ebbs and flows, doesn't yours? Isn't that a loving connection that we share that is deeper and more true than any conceptual agreements we could ever make? I went to the monastery seeking teachers who would model that kind of embodied love and connection for me. I found one, and he helped to remind me of the abundance of love all around me.

That first night in the dining hall, that wrinkled, robed man had asked me about my dharma teachers and friends back home. As I started to tell him about the people who have witnessed me and guided me through some of the most challenging and joyful times in my life, my heart swelled. Looking kindly into my eyes, he felt the hugeness of that love with me, and offered wide open silence for my heart to crack open and spill out in awe and appreciation. I am constantly surrounded by people who are deeply connected to the natural order of things and when I open my heart to them, I find myself at rest. Like beacons of light, they guide us with patience and sincerity, and it's in their sacred light that I trust.

I don't know where home is for you, but I hope and I pray that you find it. I hope that you find what you need to feel safe, to feel secure, to feel certain that the world is a meaningful

place and that you are loved and valued. I pray that you can rest. And if you're feeling like it's all falling apart, or that you're roaming this world homeless, separate, or alone, I offer to you the same suggestion that was offered to me—forgive yourself. For whatever it is you need to forgive yourself for in order to remember the ground underneath you, the sacred earth that is holding you, right now. Remember your sacred body, because *it* hasn't forgotten *you*. As John O'Donohue tells us from his ancient Celtic wisdom, "the body is a sacrament, it is a visible sign of invisible grace." (47) And then I encourage you to look up, and look out, into the eyes of someone you love and remember that their sacred light is not separate from yours. And then maybe for a moment, you can go home.