

Home . . . it's a powerful and yet everyday word. Charles Dickens said, “Home is a name, a word . . . it is a strong one, stronger than the magician ever spoke or spirit ever answered to.” Home, it may be a magic word, but we use it casually. For example when we say we are going home meaning back to the hotel room from the meeting. And sometimes the word home is misused. Some realtors say that they can sell you a home. But no one can sell you a home. No one can find a home for you. They can sell you a house; they can help you to find a building. Not a home.

Have you seen the magazine *Better Homes and Gardens*? The magazine is mostly full of ads for decorating and re-modeling products. It implies that you can make your home better by buying and using these products. Just find the right paint color, the right tile, oh and maybe a new window, and your home will be better. I don't think so. Your house may be more beautiful or more comfortable, maybe you might even figure out how to organize all your stuff. My husband likes to re-model our old house. I love color and design, and I love the finished projects. But none of these things make our house a home or make it a better home.

When you think of home, what do you see, what do you feel? What really makes home? Think for a minute, picture it – feel it. Make a mental note – is there something you'd like to tell the people in your house?

Home is something people make, home is a place where we belong. The most beautiful and well furnished house is not necessarily a home, and the most humble studio apartment may be a home. A real home is an honest place. It may be beautiful and orderly. It may be beautiful and messy, or maybe it's lacking in style but full of energy and life. But it is an honest place.

We belong at home because we are known there. When we are really at home, we are at ease and can be our authentic selves. At home, we are accepted with our flaws; sometimes, we are even loved for our flaws. Our flaws are part of our unique, authentic selves. A real home takes love – not sentimental, pretty, greeting card love, but robust, unvarnished love. Sentimental love idealizes; it's like a marshmallow, sweet while it lasts but lacking in substance.

Robust love is love that can face pain, conflict and loss. Love that stays connected and listens in the face of conflict or in the face of terminal cancer. Love that both supports and challenges. To love and receive robust love takes trust. And trust takes commitment, constancy. Will we be who say we are? Will we keep coming back? Will we be there when we are needed?

Will we take the kids to basketball practice or piano lessons, remember to pick up the milk or the dry cleaning? Will we be there to listen to the “what a day I had” story? Will we be there to celebrate? Can we be there to listen in the face of tears or in the face of anger?

When we allow ourselves to be known and loved, when we love and commit to that love, then home becomes our safe place, our sanctuary. Home becomes the place where we are en-couraged –given the heart and the courage to find our way in the world, to find meaningful service and joy in the world. Home becomes the place where we can grow.

I have had to learn about love and commitment, to learn about home as a safe place mostly in my adult life. As a girl, my home felt far from safe. It was chaotic, noisy and unpredictable. I was the oldest of six children, and my parents had a highly conflictual relationship. I was more at home out in the world, in the woods or downtown or in my books than I was in my house.

So at home, I wasn't really my true self. I was "big sister" or "good daughter." I listened over and over to the West Side Story album – I loved the song, "There's a place for us, somewhere a place for us . . ." I was yearning for that place.

But all of that was a long time ago and I have been very lucky in my adult life. (And I did work hard in therapy!) I have been loved and I have loved. I love and know that I am loved. I have felt grace. I learned that to be intimate, it was not only ok, but necessary to be my honest self. I learned that not only can I listen, but I can expect to be heard.

OK, not every time! How many times has someone in your house said, "You never told me that!" when you know you've told them? Probably more than once? Humorist Joe Moore said, "Home is the place where you can say anything you want, because nobody pays any attention to you anyway."

We laugh – because we've had that kind of experience. But I can expect to be heard when it's important. I hope that you too can expect to be heard, and I hope that there is deep listening in your home.

It took me awhile to make a full commitment. Even after we were married, I watched for things to change. I watched for that constancy, love and trust to disappear. But it didn't and finally, I knew that I was fully committed. Rick and I have been married for 33 years; our home is a real home – one with honesty, love, laughter and sometimes conflict and pain. Home is a place where we have grown. Home is not the place where you can stay the same. In an honest home, you will be asked to change. You will be asked to work and to contribute. I didn't make a home by myself and neither did Rick. We make home through relationships. We made our home together. The two of us alone wouldn't have been able to make a real home without other relationships, relationships with friends and families, other relationships which supported our relationship. It takes community.

By the way, I am not saying that you have to live with others in order to be at home. One can live alone and have a home, but you can't have a sense of home without relationships.

Indeed, it takes relationships and community to become your true self. Unitarian Universalist theologian, Sharon Welch, says, "We see as we were seen: we love as we were loved. To see the world through the lenses of compassion and empathy, . . . , is not a duty, a demand, an obligation or a sacrifice. It is, rather, a blessing and a gift. . . . (C)aring about injustice is . . . the result of being loved, recognized, and seen by others."ⁱ It is never too late to be seen, to be loved – to see and to love.

For a congregation to be a religious home, it takes authenticity, trust, love, commitment and constancy. It takes deep listening. . Will we be who say we are? Will we keep coming back? Will we be there when we are needed? Will we be there to celebrate? Can we be there to listen in the face of tears or in the face of anger?

Relationships are essential to finding a religious congregation that feels like home. You may visit a congregation first because of a relationship or a personal invitation. What led you to first visit Restoration? If this is your first time here, what do you need to see, feel, hear, experience to want to come back? If you've been here before, what brings you back?

Connections, relationships that matter are the reasons people keep coming back to a congregation. Many people have experienced confusion and hurt from past religious experiences. They can be fearful of even visiting a religious congregation once, much less coming back

A once hurt and fearful man told his story on the Unitarian Universalist web site, "I didn't want to be in church that day. It was the last place I ever wanted to be." But when he came to the church at his partner's request, he found a genuine welcome and support. He found what he had hoped for but didn't really believe existed. "The first day I came here I fell in love with the church. Each week that I come it grows deeper. . . . This church has become a second home for me."ⁱⁱ

For a congregation to be a true religious home takes the same qualities as making an individual or family home. It is an intentional, chosen community. A healthy religious home needs commitment, honesty, love and work. We need to be supportive of others and to be vulnerable. It takes trust. We need to trust and to be trusted to experience empowerment and transformation. To allow ourselves to change in response to our community.

This love is not the same as liking. This love does not require everyone to be the same or to agree. In a genuine community, there will always be people with whom you disagree, people whose ways of doing things annoy you and people that you don't really like. My colleague, Rev. Duane Fickeisen of the Unitarian Universalists of the

Cumberland Valley, PA, said, “It isn’t your church until you’ve been disappointed by it or gone through a conflict and stayed in community.” Still, in a religious home, we listen, respect and encourage each other.

Hosea Ballou, our early Universalist theologian, wrote, “Let neighborly love continue. If we have love, no disagreement can do us any harm, but if we have not love, no agreement can do us any good!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, let neighborly love thrive at Restoration and no disagreement will harm us. Please think of one thing that you will do to help make our congregation a place where neighborly love flourishes, to make Restoration an authentic religious home, not only for those of us who are already here but also for those who will come next week, next month, next year. Think of that one thing you will do and then tell someone about it! And do it!

Then it may be as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “Where we love is home. – Home that our feet may leave but not our hearts.” May your heart rest at home. May we see each other clearly, know who we are and turn the world around! May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Welch, Sharon. “A Return to Laughter” in Dean Grodzins, ed., *A Language of Reverence*, Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004, pp 55-56.

ⁱⁱ Carkin, Rick. “Congregation’s welcome has changed Lives” at www.uua.org/congregationallife/growingcongregations/14938.shtml

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Tom Owen-Towle. *Growing a Beloved Community*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2004. pp.69-70.