

MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR PARENTS

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
September 18, 2011

Remember your first home, the first home you lived in, or the first home that comes into memory? Can you recall any details, the furnishings, the lifestyle, what it was like to be in the family then?

My first home was in the company town of Monroe City, Texas, a scattering of identical tract homes clustered on the outskirts of an oilfield, where the families of men employed by Exxon lived. Burnished by a distance of years, that home has become an idyllic place for me, the setting for a time of pure pleasure in my childhood, when all was green and golden and full of grace. I spent my days riding bikes on streets so hot the tar was melting; I spent my afternoons waiting impatiently at the edge of the town for my father to walk home from work, so I could walk with him, carrying his lunchbox, chattering about my day; I spent my evenings playing hide-and-seek with friends in the firefly-lit-dusk. Strangely missing from my memories in that first home are the darker times, when my older brother became gravely ill with polio, or when my parents faced financial ruin. Perhaps because it was a first home, it has few shadows, mostly light.

Remember your first religious home, the church or temple where your parents took you for services that made little sense and seemed interminable? My first religious home was the Sweet Home Baptist Church, a stark building adjacent to a cow pasture. I remember the hard pine pews, the lachrymose hymns, the stern looks from my parents if I fidgeted or spoke. I learned to snag a seat by a window in those pre-air conditioning days, so I could watch the cows drift by and daydream until the preacher thumped the pulpit and startled me awake. And I remember fear, my own and that of adults around me, fear of eternal punishment, fear of displeasing God, fear of never being good enough, fear of assuming I was good enough. Along with the fear are memories of a powerful relief when the service was finally ended, and God and the minister set us free.

Our first Unitarian Universalist home, our first liberal religious home, was in the European churches of the Reformation. Just as we now often define ourselves by what we are *not*, so then were we known by what we opposed. We were the anti-Trinitarians, defying the traditional church definitions of a God in three persons; we were the Anabaptists, rejecting infant baptism, supporting informed belief choices. Yet we placed ourselves firmly in the Christian tradition, and looked strictly to the Bible, not a bishop or church official, for spiritual and ethical guidance. And to understand the

Bible, we advocated the use of reason, seeing it as God's gift for discerning truth. Religion should make sense, we insisted, flying in the face of a church tradition that had become contemptuous of the rank and file membership, refusing to explain doctrines and practices with a dismissive "God works in mysterious ways." Our first home was an embattled one, where we saw one another punished, expelled, excommunicated, killed.

Travel along the timeline of your life to another family home, the place where you spent your later childhood and adolescent years. Remember that home where you began to assert an identity apart from your parents? How did that go for you? My next home sat on five acres of pasture and pine forest in rural southeastern Texas, a wonderful place to run and ride horses and build tree houses—and a place filled with loneliness for a teenager longing for the company of peers. Because the house was too small to afford any privacy, I took refuge in the branches of a massive live oak tree on the edge of the property, or in books and music. Inspired by a high school English teacher who encouraged independent thinking, I made the not particularly independent choice to adopt the counterculture values of the '60s, writing an antiwar editorial for the school paper, protesting a school dress code that mandated knee-length skirts for the girls and hair above the

collar for boys. And I yearned for a home elsewhere, away from the confines of small town values.

Your religious home during your high school years: had it changed from the childhood church or temple? Or had religion been dropped from an ever-busier family schedule? I had no such luck: we changed membership to a larger Baptist church in town, with more programs, a choir, more comfortable pews, better preaching—but the same dispiriting message of sin, wrapped in the same climate of fear. By now, I had learned to mentally take leave of the church service, just as I was mentally taking leave of my home. A “conversion” experience and baptism, the usual prescription for happiness, had left me feeling no difference, and I began to suspect the validity of the Baptist message. When my questions about incongruities in doctrine were waved away, and the minister gave me a book which set out to prove “scientifically” that the world was created in seven 24-hour days and Jonah really could survive being swallowed by a whale, I quit trying to understand and settled for biding my time until the church, along with the small town, would be a thing of the past.

After the era of intense Reformation activity, the Unitarians relocated to a new religious home in America where we would be free to fully express our identity. We established roots in the Congregational churches of New

England, a much more hospitable setting. As part of the Congregational church, we learned how to maintain a community by relying on a covenant rather than a creed, and had our first taste of theological diversity. The democratic process became our preferred form of church decision-making. We guarded our autonomy zealously, suspicious of any attempt by officials beyond the congregation to tell us what to do. But for some among us, even this much freedom was not enough; as we grew, the liberal climate began to tighten, and there were whispers that somehow we were not “real” Christians because we felt skeptical of teachings on the divinity of Jesus. Unhappily, we began looking for a chance to bolt our increasingly unwelcoming home.

Young adulthood, full of potential, ready to take on the world—and without a home. I finally left Texas to attend graduate school in Chicago. Armed with my studies about what was really going on in the Bible, impressed by my intellectual prowess, and so much more astute after a course of therapy, I decided the time had come for some truth-telling: I would inform my parents of their many shortcomings, and how those shortcomings had interfered with my desire for a happy life. Much to my surprise, my parents not only did not accept my well-crafted criticisms, but also vigorously defended themselves, with my siblings jumping in to claim a

very different growing-up experience. Point counterpoint, threats, ultimatums, and I found myself casting about for an invitation to Christmas dinner. No invitation from Texas would come my way for many years—unless I agreed to apologize.

Nor did I have a church home to call my own. Having shaken the dust of the Baptist church from my shoes, I had sampled a variety of religious options, from folk masses to Hare Krishna chanting to the prolonged silence of a Quaker meeting, only to conclude that the religion which would suit me had yet to be invented. No family home, no spiritual home, I drifted—in much the same manner as Unitarians and Universalists drifted, once all ties were cut with the parent Congregational church. We continued experimenting with our liberal Christian identity, discarding the traces of Calvinist theology and its damning God. We took a mystical spin with Emerson and the transcendentalists, talked up humanity's innate goodness and talked down Jesus' uniqueness, preferred social justice work to theological rumination. And with each passing decade, we pushed farther and farther from our Christian roots.

Those who drift eventually reach an angle of repose, and I was no exception. I settled into my own home with my own family in Minnesota, offered an olive branch to my parents with invitations to come up for a white

Christmas (they never did). After considerable fussing, Unitarians and Universalists decided to stop dressing in Christian clothes, declared ourselves essentially humanistic, and settled in for the long haul.

Race along the timeline, leapfrog through the years: how is it now when you return home, to the place where you started, whether visiting your family of origin, your old neighborhood, or attending a class reunion? Does that home still exist in fact, or only in memory? What is it like to be among those you grew up with, your parents if they are surviving, your siblings, your first home, your first world?

After a nine-year absence, I returned to my Texas home one Thanksgiving. All my siblings and their respective families were in attendance, summoned by my parents for this rare occasion. In nine years, so many changes: everyone had aged, some more dramatically than others; my nieces and nephews, small children when I had last seen them, were now hulking teenagers, while my parents, who had loomed like giants in my memories, were strangely shrunken, stooped, slow-moving, hard of hearing. All the furnishings in the house seemed shabbier than I recalled; the pine trees surrounding the house, once saplings, towered above it. Most surprising to me, after nine years, was the warmth of our interactions: had

my family somehow learned to be affectionate during my long absence—or had the affection always been there, plain as day, and I could not see it?

Your own experiences of homecoming, when you returned to your literal homes where you spent formative periods of your life, when you went back to see the people and places that shaped you for better or for worse: did you find things just as you remembered them, or had something shifted in the years away, shifted in others there, shifted in you here? Author Thomas Wolfe famously insisted that “you can’t go home again,” but I believe he was wrong. Not only can we go home again, we *must* go home again if we are to have any hope of being spiritually healed and whole.

For spiritual growth is a process of connecting and weaving, joining the disparate experiences of life into a meaningful pattern where no one and nothing is left out or discarded. Darkness and light, joy and pain, good parents and toxic parents, happy homes and unhappy homes, nurturing churches and insipid churches, empowering beliefs and disempowering beliefs, all of it ultimately has to somehow be included in our sense of who we are spiritually and what our lives mean. The sorting process we go through over time, including some memories and discarding others, staying in touch with some people and avoiding others, is only a halfway measure. There comes a point when the stuff in the discard pile requires another look,

a different kind of look, where we are able to find some meaning even in those people and places and experiences that seemed to offer nothing of value or, worse, seemed bent on harming us. This is *not* a simplistic sort of affirmation that everything was good, nor does it excuse or make okay the experiences of suffering; rather, the process is about being willing to grant that each experience, each place, each person, has contributed to making us who we are and by so doing has been meaningful.

What this means for Unitarian Universalists in particular is that our time-honored propensity for defining ourselves in terms of what we are not and do not believe will need to give way to different sorts of definitions. Those words that have an amazing power to set our teeth on edge, most of them words left over from traditional religion, will require a redefining so they lose their power to provoke us, perhaps even redefining so that they come to be meaningful parts of our present spiritual vocabulary. Even more difficult, the set of experiences which originally invested negative energy in those words will challenge us to come back around, take another look, see whether what we believed was happening the first time may not have been the whole story. Like adolescents who grow up and in time recognize their parents as having real wisdom to offer, our spiritual adolescence, the time of pushing back and rejecting tradition, will give way to a new maturity where we

thoughtfully recognize the value that was always present in the place, the people, the church where we began.

One of the initial reasons persons who tend not to be naturally interested in social networking media like Facebook go ahead and give it a try is the desire to reconnect with parts of the past, particularly persons from the past, who have disappeared over time. To once more have contact with someone I knew as a youth or young adult, to compare our life journeys since the time of parting, to reminisce about our time together, can be a powerful experience of healing, as a piece of life that had seemed forever gone is restored. Perhaps in time, perhaps through some sort of spiritual Facebook, we will discover how to reconnect with the deeper levels of our lives that we lose, either deliberately through rejection or innocently through disuse, and in so doing find the patterns that are large enough, wise enough, to include everything. What is required of us is the willingness, simple yet courageous, to go back home once more.