

Can We Go Home? – and Where Is Home, Anyway?
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Christmas – one week from today – it hardly seems possible. Kerry and I will be in Milwaukee, with Amanda and her family. We'll be leaving for the Midwest on Wednesday.

Christmas is a time for returning home. It started with the very first Christmas, with Joseph and Mary returning to Joseph's ancestral home, Bethlehem, the city of David.¹

When I was young, we went, for Christmas, to Lansing, Michigan, to be with my grandparents, in the house where my father had lived when he was young. Often, one or both of my grandmother's sisters would be with us. Bertha, her older sister, a widow, lived in Duluth, Minnesota. Ruth, her younger sister, and her husband, Ralph, lived in Washington, D.C. They're all gone now. And my parents, and their generation, they're all gone now, too. But those Christmases live on in my memory.

As a young adult, I often had Christmas with my brother, and his family, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, just north of New York City.

When Kerry and I formed a new family, and I joined the choir of the Unitarian Church of Arlington, Virginia, Christmas Eve was at church, singing in the choir. Early Christmas morning we might drive north to Ithaca, New York, to have Christmas with Kerry's sister and her family.

I haven't tried to recover the whole history of my Christmases – you may want to take time in the next week to think of yours. Do you have a memory of childhood Christmases, like mine with my grandparents in Lansing? Their house, by the way, is now a parking lot.

For many people, and probably for some of you, Christmas is a difficult time, with memories you would prefer to leave behind. You have the support of this community.

* * *

Today, this Christmas season, we think of those, in this country and around the world, whether they recognize Christmas or not, who have lost their home, or whose home is threatened, or who don't know where their next home will be, or whether for them there will ever be a next home. The list is long; I'll just mention a few examples: the people of Aleppo, in Syria, who have been living, and dying, for many months, indeed for years, in the midst of a battlefield, or who have escaped and are living as homeless refugees. Of course, the rest of Syria suffers as

¹ See Luke 2:1-7. Matthew, on the other hand, assumes that Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem; no trip was necessary. See Matt. 1:18-25, 2:1.

well. And in that part of the world, there's war and terrorism in Yemen and Iraq and Afghanistan and South Sudan. I won't attempt to review the whole planet, and global warming is uprooting people as well, and making their homes unlivable.²

And here in the United States, the descendants of those whose ancestors had been here longer than memory records and whose land was confiscated by the ancestors of many or perhaps most of us in this room still live in insecurity, not knowing what they can confidently call home. Millions of our fellow citizens live on the edge of homelessness, or, too often, over the edge.³

Throughout the world people are seeking a safe place, where they can be warm and dry and not worry about whether they will have a next meal.

Home is many things. It is a childhood memory. It is a physical place. It is family. It is clean, safe water and electricity and heat and food in the refrigerator and the pantry and the availability of medical care and physical and fiscal security and schools and libraries. All this and more we should not take for granted.

Where can we stop as our concept of home keeps expanding and becoming, we might think, more metaphorical?

When I think of home I think of a place where certain basic principles are proclaimed and followed:

- equal justice under the law
- freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion
- commitment to preserving our planet for our grandchildren and their grandchildren
- recognition of our interdependence
- a reliable and secure safety net
- the repudiation of war, with peaceful cooperation among the nations
- full social, economic, and political inclusion regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or disability
- education for all

We could continue this list, but you get the idea.

² See Somini Sengupta, "Heat, Hunger and War Force Africans Onto a 'Road on Fire,'" NY Times, Dec. 16, 2016, p. A1.

³ See Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016), or at least the one paragraph summary by Jennifer Senior, NY Times, Dec. 16, 2016, p. C28 ("You will also have the mad urge to press it into the hands of every elected official you meet.").

To the extent that these and other similar values are lost or rejected or overridden or neglected, I have lost my home; I am homeless. And that is how I have felt for the last several weeks. I feel abandoned by a large proportion of my fellow citizens.⁴

Consider this, from the New York Times: “Nearly Half From U.S. in Poll Say Torture Can Be Useful.” The finding of the global survey described in the article “puts respondents in the United States in contrast with citizens of many countries and at odds with international law, which prohibits torture under any circumstances.”⁵

Can I still feel at home here?

I think back to the 1950s of Christmas with my grandparents in Lansing, and with my parents and big brother. But others think back too, to the past, perhaps a mythical past, where working men had good jobs, building stuff, where each generation could be a little more prosperous than the one before.⁶ We didn’t have to worry about pollution then; we hadn’t heard of global warming. Can’t someone take us back to those days of yesteryear?

Metropolitan areas on the east and west coasts are doing pretty well. But people in large portions of the country, the less densely populated areas, are hurting. They’re not benefitting from reductions in the national unemployment rate.⁷ As a commentator in the New York Times explained on Wednesday, “less-educated white voters had a solid economic rationale for voting

⁴ See Paul Krugman, “Useful Idiots Galore,” NY Times, Dec. 16, 2016, p. A21; Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, “Is Our Democracy in Danger,” NY Times, Dec. 18, 2016, p. SR5.

⁵ Somini Sengupta, “Torture Can Be Useful, Nearly Half of Americans in Poll Say,” NY Times, Dec. 5, 2016, p. A3. Among Americans, 46% said torture was OK, 30% disagreed, 24% were not sure. “Only Israelis, Palestinians and Nigerians seemed to endorse torture as enthusiastically as Americans.” Worldwide, two-thirds of respondents said torture was wrong. See also Rebecca Lemov, review of Shane O’Mara, *Why Torture Doesn’t Work: The Neuroscience of Interrogation*, and Mohamedou Ould Slah, *Guantanamo Diary*, Times Literary Supplement, Dec. 2, 2016, p. 12.

⁶ See David Leonhardt, “The American Dream, Quantified at Last,” NY Times, Dec. 11, 2016, p. SR2.

⁷ “Under President Obama, job growth has been quite strong, and the unemployment rate has improved dramatically. PPP [Public Policy Polling], however, found that 67% of Trump voters believe the unemployment rate went up under Obama – which is the exact opposite of reality.” Steve Benen, “Trump, his supporters, and the persistence of the ‘reality gap’,” MSNBC website, 12/09/16 08:00 AM.

against the status quo: Nearly all the gains from the economic recovery have passed them by.”⁸ With the good industrial jobs in decline, due to automation and low-wage competition abroad, with strong labor unions practically wiped out, with the alarming decline in workforce participation masking the true unemployment rate, we shouldn’t be surprised that many people want someone to rescue them.⁹

With good jobs hard to find, why, people wonder, would we welcome tens of thousands of refugees from places around the world we wish we had never heard of. Of course they are not all terrorists, but what about the few who are?

What is to be done? What are we to do, as individuals, as families, as a congregation? How do we talk to neighbors, whose pre-election lawn signs we found inexplicable and abhorrent? How do we talk to cousins and siblings who think we’re as out of touch with reality as we think they are? How do we relate to strangers who we suspect we disagree with?

I assume that most of you have known me long enough to know that I don’t have any magic answer for all these questions, any miracle solution to get us through the months and years ahead and come out on the other side into a land of milk and honey. But here are a few suggestions; you’ve probably already thought of them yourself.

First, keep yourself informed. Pay attention to the New York Times, NPR, and other reliable sources of information.¹⁰ Beware of fake news.

Second, be kind and courteous to strangers. Hold the door open for the next person; let the car waiting for a chance to get on the road pull in ahead of you; thank the checkout clerk at Kennie’s or wherever. Random Acts of Kindness, as Kerry suggested last week.

Third, listen to what those with whom you may disagree have to say. You don’t have to lead them to believe that you agree, but let them know that they’ve been heard. Don’t get into an argument, but you can gently suggest that there’s more than one way to see the world.

⁸ Eduardo Porter, "President-Elect Found Votes Where the Jobs Weren't," NY Times, Dec. 14, 2016, pp. B1, B8. "Given such clear divisions – less-educated whites living in depressed rural areas, on one side, and minorities living in more vigorous big-city economies on the other – the social and racial animosity manifest during the election campaign is hardly a surprise. So there is a clear economic argument for Mr. Trump’s angry voters to have bucked the establishment." (p. B8)

⁹ See Neil Gross, "Is This Collective Trauma?" NY Times, Dec. 18, 2016, p. SR8.

¹⁰ See Jim Rutenberg, "TV News Must Pull No Punches For Trump," NY Times, Dec. 12, 2016, p. B1.

Fourth, try to find some common ground. We all wish for our children and grandchildren to have prosperity and long and happy lives. We're all in this lifeboat, our earth, together; we want to keep our planet safe, not only for ourselves and our immediate descendants, but for future generations as well.¹¹

Fifth, actively resist. Participate in marches and demonstrations, vote, get involved in politics, write letters to the editor, put bumper stickers on your car. Let your Facebook friends know where you stand. Or, as Charles Blow put it in concluding his New York Times column on Monday, "America needs you . . . now. Speak up."¹²

Beyond that, to the extent that you are able, give money to organizations like the ACLU, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the Interfaith Center for Peace & Justice, the League of Women Voters.¹³

And share the message of love proclaimed by the Jewish prophet who lived about two thousand years ago and whose birth people around the globe will celebrate one week from today. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, give clothes to the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner.¹⁴

You've got Mole's search for his home to think about¹⁵ and my memories of going home for Christmas. Here's another view of home to think about in the week ahead: the haunting, troubling line from Robert Frost's poem, *The Death of the Hired Man*:

'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'

¹¹ See Janet Powers, "Find Common Ground," Gettysburg Times, Dec. 8, 2016, p. B5.

¹² Charles M. Blow, "Patriotic Opposition to Donald Trump," NY Times, Dec. 12, 2016, p. A21.

¹³ See also John Cassidy, "Nine Ways to Oppose Donald Trump," New Yorker website, Dec. 16, 2016. His headings: 1. Go to change.org and join the 4.9 million people who have signed a petition calling on members of the Electoral College to reject Trump. 2. Attend the Women's March on Washington, which will take place on Saturday, January 21st. 3. Contribute to organizations that will oppose Trump and the Republican agenda. 4. Support independent journalism. 5. Get engaged on a personal level. 6. Contact your congressman and senator and tell them to stand up to Trump. 7. Support local initiatives to resist the Trump and the Republican agenda. 8. Support electoral reform. 9. Be smart: violence would only help Trump.

¹⁴ Matthew 25:35-40.

¹⁵ Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows*, ch. 5, "Dulce Domum."