SANCTUARY

A Meditation on Home, Homelessness, and Belonging

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Where the Heart Lives

The Relationship Between Home and Sanctuary

We are specks of dust on a strand of Mother Earth's hair. There is no need for us to "save" the Earth; we simply need to let her discard what has become stale. We need to release our planet of our wanting and begging, our ignorance and confusion, and be weaned from her breast, even when it feels we won't survive. When we stop exploiting the Earth, she will return to sustainability on her own and share her bounty generously.

In November 2016, America and the rest of the world were stunned when a candidate whose platform included harming immigrants and discriminating against certain citizens won the presidency. When I learned he'd been voted in, my heart sank, realizing that America had become even less of a place I can call *home*. Many of us had been living under a constant threat of harm for decades. Now, the blatant hatred ignored by so many others could no longer go unacknowledged. Many would recognize and join a shared sense of homelessness.

My parents were born and raised in southern Louisiana at the turn of the twentieth century, not far from the plantations where their ancestors labored as slaves, and where lynchings of their neighbors occurred often. While I'm certain they did not feel at home in that environment, there was sanctuary among

others who embraced the black Creole culture. Because of *their* cultural sanctuary, I am able to experience a sense of home in my heart. Although I wasn't born or raised in the homeplace of my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, the bayou, swamps, music, foods, and eloquent Creole language were transmitted to me through my parents' very being. The cultural, ecological, and social life of Louisiana is in my bones, and whenever I'm there, I feel a primal sense of home — despite having never lived there.

Finding home, feeling home, and being at home are complex, multilayered, spiritual and cultural experiences independent of the place we live. Where is home? What is my true nature, and what does it mean to be at home with it? When I don't feel at home, where can I find sanctuary? These questions become critical when our lives are under threat.

In the early twenty-first century, groups are still being terrorized because of race, religious choice, physical ability, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Legendary radical feminist and academic Angela Davis points out that racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, hetero-patriarchy, and xenophobia are, in fact, the ghosts of slavery. We have returned full circle to what catalyzed the civil rights movement and forced the creation of political and spiritual sanctuaries for those who were hunted by people trying to maintain white supremacy. In this book, I explore home and homelessness, sanctuary and refuge in the light of such terrorism and its impact on life, death, identity, and peace.

In spiritual communities, especially in Buddhist ones, the teachings on finding home are profound, but they often leave out the experiences of those who are dehumanized in their own homeland. Spiritual teachings like, "Home is within the heart" can be off-putting when loss and disconnection aren't also acknowledged. Those who have such experiences can feel homeless spiritually and physically, and finding refuge, or sanctuary, from acts of hatred must be offered along the path of finding our true home.

I was invited to give a talk at Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California. When I arrived, I saw a sign in Thich

Nhat Hanh's beautiful calligraphy that said, "I am home." When I saw it, the words rang through me as though I were hearing a temple bell. I felt relieved, and *my heart knew* I was home. I don't live at Deer Park, but reading the Zen master's words, I felt deeply at home. The home I felt isn't on the earth; it dwells in my heart. How was I able to recognize a home not visible but felt? Is a home like this momentary, or can I feel it wherever I go?

Deer Park, with its tree-covered hills, is a place where prayer, meditation, and song shape the sense of place and bring the visitor peace. It's a true sanctuary, offering immunity and refuge for troubled folks in troubled times. Sanctuary, from the old French *sanctuaire* and the Latin *sanctuarium* or *sanctus*, meaning "holy," is essential for those of us who live day in and day out in chaos and oppression, where belonging is never guaranteed. As I walked the monastery's paths, I affirmed in my heart that my true home must have peace.

What leads a person to homelessness? What happens when your home doesn't have the peace you'd hoped for? If we look at the impact of history, culture, and ancestry on finding home, we begin to understand the vastness of homelessness. The words "I am home" don't resonate for many who are marginalized by society. When we recognize the profound influence of social factors upon homelessness, then compassion, forgiveness, and similar virtues can carry us home.

If you have a sense of not belonging based on prolonged, systemic mistreatment, if you've been a target of hatred and violence, that disregard affects your well-being. In a relative sense, those who are dehumanized are never home. In the absolute sense, home is in the heart and cannot be touched by any outside force, even the most oppressive. Both senses are true. Oppressed groups live with the paradox that we are *and* are not home. While we are encouraged to make a home in this country, manifesting such is a struggle.

When I was eleven-years old, my family was having a tough time. One evening at dinner, the meat was stringy, and I asked, "Daddy, what's this?" My father proudly answered, "Possum. I

caught it in the backyard." I didn't know what a possum looked like. All I could think of was the blood that might still be behind the house. I dropped the meat from my fork. My father, from the back roads of Opelousas, was doing what he'd always done to survive hard times. It wouldn't be long before we received our first — and last — bag of groceries from the welfare office. We were too proud to continue.

I remember saying to myself, *I will never be as poor as my parents*. I wanted to feel that I could get what I needed. And I know that when my father promised each of his three daughters a Cadillac and a house, he meant for us to be better off than he was. First, second, and third-generation African Americans who migrated north were supposed to succeed, and our progress was measured by external appearances. Most important was to have a roof over our heads. When you lose your house, you feel like a failure — a disappointment to yourself and your family.

Owning a home is a marker of stability and success, but today it's impossible for many of us to purchase property in the places we grew up. Imagine the assault on the heart when you are living in a homeless shelter or on the streets. How can we own the home we know and love? There are many ways to overcome physical homelessness. One is to redistribute wealth and return stolen territory. Another is to heal and disrupt the disconnections that result in disproportionate wealth, colonization, and occupation. When you consider the destruction of others' homelands and cultures and how it impacts their quest for home, the difficulty in overcoming spiritual homelessness is clear.

Enslaved Africans did not *immigrate* to America. In fact, many black people were here before the first colonists or slaves arrived. Native Americans did not give away their land; it was stolen. Holocausts for Jewish Americans, Armenians, Rwandans, and others did take place. Rape is used as a weapon against women. Muslims are harassed and annihilated. Perpetrators of all races murder transgendered people. What if those who have been pushed to the economic, political, and social margins were *seen* and their true histories revealed while presenting the

teachings of finding one's true home? Would that help us understand the depth of our connections or disconnections to each other and facilitate the quest for an authentic home?

As I explore the epidemic of homelessness and the urgent need for sanctuary historically and in our time, I taste the tears of so many. How much longer will those who have been pushed out be able to survive? Is there too much water under the bridge to reconcile our disconnections from one another as people? If we are not paying attention to who and what is unacknowledged, we'll always have dangerous demagogues who shake us loose from the illusion that all is well. They are a curse and a blessing, as they help us remember what matters. Patience is more than waiting and hoping. Patience is taking the time to love what is difficult to love.

Sanctuary is the place we can go when our lives are under threat, where we can consider love in the midst of oppression. It's a place for those who speak a language not of the dominant culture, a place where anyone can say, "I am home."

Taking sanctuary is an act of saving one's life from the suffering of the world.

After one receives Buddhist monastic vows, homelessness and sanctuary become one and the same. This homelessness is an intentional disengagement from the chaos most people on earth endure daily. Monastics take refuge, and the spiritual life becomes their sanctuary.

I once met a nun of Buddha's forest tradition. I asked, "Where are you from?" She said, "Nowhere." I followed with, "I mean where do you live?" She said, "Nowhere."

My teacher was sitting nearby and overheard us. She said, "Ask where will she sleep tonight?" The nun lived nowhere but would be sleeping somewhere. The homeless mendicant smiled, and the conversation was over. Like Buddha, the earth was her pillow, the place upon which she would claim no territory, no country, no land, and no house. Instead she would trust the Earth as her mother to care for her. No matter where she lay her head, she wouldn't claim that place as her own. To some, this sounds romantic, to others too great a hardship to imagine.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are monks and nuns who have been exiled from their native lands, including the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. They were forced to leave families and sanghas and create new lives in foreign lands. To their credit, both have created potent sanctuaries for millions in duress and both became prolific in articulating the spiritual path. They did it as a direct response to the hatred and homelessness they themselves experienced. Sanctuary is a place you create when you are "missing" in the scheme of humanity. Establishing sanctuary is critical to finding home.

In this book, I explore a broad perspective on homelessness, physical and spiritual, and the act of creating sanctuary as a response to the hunger for home. I try to expand the spiritual teachings on finding home to recognize societal influences, the longing for connection to the earth and each other, and finding spiritual *and* cultural sanctuary. Along with this inquiry on sanctuary, I examine several kinds of home and homelessness including urban displacement; historical and political loss of land, culture, and language; as well as religious and spiritual quests for home. I dug my feet into the mud and waited to see what would emerge concerning the homeless condition of every living being — our insecurities, experiences, and threats to our sense of belonging.

Ultimately, this is a book about sustaining peace. I share from my heart the experiences I've had and the teachings that have settled in me. Please join me in entering the Dragon Gate, so we may each emerge with our own true face.

2

Where We Were Born

The Soul and Home

I reviewed my secrets to be sure nothing hidden was revealed. What could be seen was only what I made of myself. No one knew who I really was or what I was capable of. Being afraid, breathing hard, the foul air held down for too long was forcing itself out. I pushed hard to birth myself, over and over, trying to get to the heart of the matter. Don't stop. She's coming. And she'd better be who she is or this time she will die. Here in this darkness, I return home from the far side of the moon.

To make the unfamiliar our own is a necessary act of survival. Many of us try to transform an alien home into one where we can flourish. The effort is as old as humankind.

People removed from their homelands brought their ancient observances into the rites of their new land, and as a result, world religions are suffused with indigenous rituals. Africans who were carried into this country as cargo reshaped the dominant beliefs into their own, and as a result, African deities and Christian saints intermingle. Christian hymns have African rhythms, and worship made to fit the African's sense of being home can be found in churches throughout the African Diaspora. The same is true of Native Americans and immigrants from Asia and elsewhere whose indigenous practices were forbidden yet found their way into Christian churches.

In a twenty-one day Zen Buddhist ceremony that begins in the home, I included three Haitian Vodoun deities that match in role to Zen's gatekeepers, protectors, and bodhisattvas. As I lit a candle at each altar, I called forth the Haitian spirits with their chants along with hymns to the Zen deities, and I touched a distinct and ancient place inside me. I could feel my blood ancestors, who had been forced from their homes and taken up Christianity, still having the need to invoke their own lineage and deities. I felt myself touching *home* saying Legba Atibon, Ayizan Velèkètè, and Erzulie Jan Petro, invoking at the same time Avalokiteshvara, and Bodhidharma. As I invoked the name of Shakyamuni Buddha as a great teacher, I invoked the sky by blowing an eagle whistle. Incorporating Vodoun deities into the Zen ceremony created a familiarity I found deeply resonant with home and therefore my heart.

At the same time, I felt afraid I'd be admonished for altering a Zen tradition that can appear set in stone. This, too, had an ancestral resonance, because Africans had to hide the things they added to their Christian rituals. As the fear subsided, it became clear that to shape religions to my own sense of home is to create sanctuary. Dogen Zenji took the practice of Ch'an he'd experienced in China and created Japanese Soto Zen. For all of us, our worship or our practice has to feel like home for us to embrace it.

Over the centuries, Buddha's path of awakening has been shaped according to people, places, languages, cultures, and times. Going from India to China, the teachings had to be shaped for the Chinese of the first century B.C.E. Then from China to Japan, from Korea to Vietnam, and from these places to the West, the teachings have been adapted each time. Once that is in place, we can authentically touch the wisdom of awakened ancestors.

We are born from our mothers. As we listen to our mother's voice, we come to know home as the place we'll be cared for. For some, caring might never arise or it can be disrupted. We may be placed with other relatives or caretakers, a foster home, or be adopted. The early loss of home brings a sense of not belonging.

The next morning Wang-chou got a boat, bade farewell to everyone, and went up the river. In the middle of the night, he heard a voice, twice, and when he looked around, it was Ch'ien-nu. He was delighted. Ch'ien-nu joined Chou in the boat, and off they went to a nearby province to live together as they'd always dreamed. Eventually, Chou found a decent livelihood, they were married, and Ch'ien-nu gave birth to two girls. They lived happily for six years.

Then Ch'ien-nu began to grieve that she had abandoned her parents. She said to Chou, "We must go back and apologize for what we've done." Chou agreed and promised he would take her home.

When they arrived, Ch'ien-nu stayed near the boat while Chou walked up to the house, as it was customary for the husband to go to the house first. He looked back at Ch'ien-nu leaning against a tree and his two young daughters playing around her.

Chou, of course, was afraid Ch'ien-nu's parents would be angry, yet he walked up the path with courage. Surprisingly, when he got to the door he was received warmly, with open arms, by her father. Chou said, "I thought you would be angry with me for running away with Ch'ien-nu." The father was surprised. "My daughter has been sick in bed all these years, ever since you went away. Come. She's lying down." Chou followed his father-in-law, and when he entered the room, he laid his eyes on a thin and pale Ch'ien-nu.

He asked Ch'ien-nu's father to come with him, and standing near the boat he saw his daughter and two small granddaughters. He greeted Ch'ien-nu and invited her into the house. "Come, I have something to show you." As they walked toward the house, the sick Ch'ien-nu came out and met the well Ch'ien-nu. They recognized themselves in each other and came close enough to melt into one Ch'ien-nu. She said, "Now I don't know whether I'm the one who went away or the one who stayed home with Father."

Stories like these, shaped by the direct experiences of Zen practitioners, are meant to stimulate inquiry into our lives. Ch'ien-nu's two parts blending together was a homecoming.

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