

HOME, A SENSE OF PLACE

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One of the first things we often ask when we meet someone, after their name, is “where are you from?” or “where’s home for you?” There are subtle distinctions. I might answer “I’m from Washington,” or “Seattle,” or “Ballard,” depending on the context of the question. Or I might refer to where I’m recently, or originally, from, such as “I came from Minnesota,” or “I was originally from California.” My answers may say something about me, but they are certainly not defining.

The question “where’s home for you?” has different meanings. In earlier times, home was a place where we lived during our early lives. Even though we moved out of that home when we grew up, our parents continued to live in that same place. Going home meant going back to where we came from. In modern Western times, where we live is a matter of economy and choice. We have many homes. We move to where our jobs take us or to other places where we would rather live. We may live in many different places during our lifetime. It’s hard to say where our real home is.

How does our home influence who we are as a person? We may think that our lives, our psychology, and individuality, are separate from where we live. But each place we live influences who we are. The geography, our friends, the college we attended, and the community where we lived, each affect us. These can lead to lifestyle changes as we move from one place to another.

Home is where the heart is, and my home speaks to my sense of place. I have lived in too many places, and too many houses, to list them all. Since I married, we have lived in twelve different houses, in nine different cities – some we lived in just a year, and others for many years. We have owned six (including the condo where I now reside). Some were just physical places with no particular attachment, while others were homes where we grew up, lived, raised our family, made friends, and established deep connections with the community. These I remember as a “sense of place.”

My first sense of place is where I lived during my teenage years – a rambler on an acre of land in Studio City, in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. This is where I went to junior and senior high school, made friends, had my first car, lived as a family of four, hiked in the hills above our house, gathered with our extended families, and graduated from high school before I left for college. I only lived there for six years, but they were my coming-of-age years. I only visited the house once later, about twenty years ago – it was extensively remodeled, but it looked much the same. The community where we lived, however, was much different. I will not go back. This place exists mostly in memory.

A second memorable home was in Northfield, Minnesota, where I taught chemistry at St. Olaf College, and where we raised our family from the time our

youngest was four until our kids finished college. These were their formative years when we grew as a family. Although we were separated from our respective families in California, we made many long-lasting friends and did many things as a young family – camping trips, community events, visits with friends. It was in a small college town (St. Olaf and Carleton College), and a great place for kids to grow up. Our house was a former farmhouse, moved into town in about 1936, and on a typical Midwestern tree-lined street. We lived there for twenty years. The house is now owned by another struggling professor. It is not much different than it was when we lived there. These memories will remain for a long time.

During that time, my first sabbatical leave moved us to Utrecht, in The Netherlands. We lived there for one year (1974-75). It was our first experience living abroad with three children, aged nine to twelve. Our kids were in typical Dutch schools and learned to speak the language. We lived in a typical three-story attached townhouse (owned by the University of Utrecht) on Zesendertig (36) Eikmanlan, in the area of Tuindorp. We had five bicycles (no car) and traveled by bus and train all over the country. Evening bicycle rides around Utrecht, eating pannenkoeken along the city canal, and day trips to small villages and museums are some of our memories. I bicycled to the University every day. We will always remember that year.

When all our children were out of college, we discovered that we suddenly had some money, and built a townhouse on the edge of Northfield – a beautiful stand-alone house, custom-built, the nicest place we had lived up until then. It was a time when we adjusted to living without our children. A comfortable home, we lived there eight years until I retired from St. Olaf in 1996 and we moved to Seattle.

Our first house in Seattle was on Palatine Ave in Broadview. After living there nine years, we moved around the corner and up a block to a house on First Ave. This was a large house – not quite as nice as our townhouse in Northfield – with a living and dining room where we could host a dozen or more musicians for monthly folk-music jams. We had a music room and a guest room downstairs, where we could accommodate traveling musicians who performed for my Pacific Northwest Folklore Society Concerts at Couth Buzzard Books. It was a “music house” that reverberated with lots of good folk music. It was too big for just two people, but our belongings expanded to fill all the available space. We lived there for fifteen years.

November 2019, was a life-changing time for me. My wife, who was experiencing some symptoms of memory loss the previous year, suddenly took a turn for the worse and moved into memory care. From then on I have lived alone. I was not going to continue to live in that big house, so I got it ready to put on the market. I emptied it and bought a condo in Ballard. After I moved, the real estate agents fixed up the big house, and in late February it sold for a substantial price.

My condo in Ballard, two blocks north of the Ballard Post Office, is a beautiful, two-bedroom unit in a six-unit building, on the third floor, with skylights and lots of light. It fits my needs well, although it is about a third the size of our previous house. It is very nice, but it doesn't yet have that "sense of place" – it's just a place where I live. I have made a few new friends in Ballard and explored much of my new surroundings. It may yet achieve a sense of place after a few years. After two months of living there, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown came, and everything changed. That was hard to get used to, and reduced me to living mostly "in-house."

On my daily two-mile walks, I discovered the beautiful residential neighborhood of Sunset Hill. There are many beautiful old houses there, which may have a sense of place for those who live there. Most have front yards with beautiful flowers and landscaping. That someone would make their house look so beautiful from the street, says to me that they have a sense of place – why else would they do something that has no practical value?

A sense of place is something that requires time to develop. I hope that in a few years my condo will have a sense of place for me. What is your sense of place?

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