

There's No Place Like Home

... whether it's a place, or a space within

For Seniors, Love and Care May Compensate for Loss of Home

Home! And this is my room — and you're all here! And I'm not going to leave here ever, ever again, because I love you all! And — Oh, Auntie Em — there's no place like home!

“**T**here's no place like home!” Ever since the debut of *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939 these words of Dorothy's, in which she related profound gratitude at “returning” home, have expressed a truth held by many of us. Our early experience of home is virtually part of our DNA, and we carry it with us throughout our lives. For those of us who have been blessed with a loving family and home, we have come to treasure pictures and mementos that bring back memories of that special time. This year friends of mine became “empty nesters” for the first time. Their daughter, who is starting her third year of college, left for Madrid for a semester of study, and their son moved to another city to start his first year of college. Listening to them speak of these departures brought to mind my own experiences of leaving home. And although leaving for college is a memorable event for me, the experience of leaving home to enter the Sisters of Mercy is by far the most poignant.

The day I arrived in St. Louis, my first of many homes as a Sister of Mercy, is still etched in my mind. My family drove me to a 1904 four-family flat that had been converted to a 13-bedroom home. We were warmly greeted by the sisters and

the family members of the other girls who were entering with me. Rooms were offered on a “first come, first served” basis. Luckily, I wasn't the last to arrive. I chose a room on the third floor that had plenty of windows and was more spacious than any I had ever known — given that my previous bedrooms consisted of a converted porch, a shared dorm room and a shared college apartment bedroom. This new bedroom was indeed a welcome change. In addition to my clothes and the things that I thought were necessities but later realized were not, I unpacked a few pictures of family and friends and other reminders of those I love. These pieces of my past made my room feel like home, and with all the unfamiliar surroundings, experiences and people I was encountering, my room became my safe haven. The reminders of home grounded me and rooted me in a past that I knew and a place where I was known and loved.

That grounding was shaken several years later when my mother and her sisters had to make the difficult decision to move my 98-year-old grandmother to a long-term care facility. My grandmother, or Nonie as she was fondly known, played a significant role in my life. My grandparents lived one block from our home so their home became an extension of mine, one filled with warm memories of family gatherings and fireside stories. Nonie's departure from her home was a great loss for me in that my experience of home would change significantly.

I sadly recall the day she moved to the long-term care facility blocks away from her youngest daughter. We decorated her shared bedroom with family pictures and familiar objects, hoping that this would comfort her and create a welcoming space for her. The daily visits from family members helped with the transition, and soon I realized that it was harder for us to leave her than it was for her to remain at the place she now thought of as home. She had grown accustomed to the routine and to the people. Periodically, we would take her for rides and to family gatherings.



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I will never forget the time she was alone in the car with me, and I drove by her former home, which had yet to be sold. My mother had discouraged me from taking her back for fear that she would not want to leave. As we drove by the house Nonie remarked, "There is my old home." And when I asked if she wanted to go back to her home, she replied, "Why would I want to go back? There is nothing there for me anymore." Her words are forever embedded in my memory, for she taught me a great lesson on letting go.

Through the years the importance of home and being known continued to take on new meaning for me. Shortly after professing temporary vows, I served as a counselor in a residential facility for girls ages 16 through 21. These girls were referred to our program from either emergency shelters or from the foster care system after several unsuccessful attempts at placement. Many had lived in institutions for the majority of their lives, while others had been on the streets until circumstances led them to seek emergency shelter. Some of the girls came with minimal clothes and a few personal items that were given to them when they left their former residences, and others came quite literally with the clothes on their backs. Upon admission to the program each girl

was assigned her own bedroom and given the opportunity to choose items of need from the supply closet. Their bedrooms, like the remainder of the house, were sparsely decorated with donated items. We tried to create a home for these girls in a former convent, realizing that many of them had no real concept of "home."

Most of these girls had been abandoned, abused or neglected by relatives so their ability to trust another person had been greatly compromised. As a result, the staff members were constantly tested and given every reason to dismiss girls from the program. But we remained stout-hearted, consistently offering our care and love in response to their anger and pain. Slowly some of us made strides and began to gain their trust. Girls began to share their vulnerabilities and fears knowing that they were still loved and accepted for who they were. And, more importantly, they had come to realize that no matter how much anger they expressed toward us, we would not abandon them. We soon learned that the external surroundings and material possessions were of no real importance to these girls; rather it was the love and care that they experienced from us that enabled them to call this institution their home.

Through these life experiences I have come to

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a fuller realization of what it means to offer hospitality, which for a Sister of Mercy is of utmost importance. Hospitality is more than extending a warm welcome to a guest or providing care and kindness to whomever is in need. It involves receiving another in a way that invites and enables that person to find home within. We speak of home as a physical environment; the place where we live, but as Christians we are called to receive one another and to find our home in and through those relationships.

He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. And if any place will not receive you and if they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them."
(Mark 6:8-11)

During my 25 years as a Sister of Mercy, I have moved 14 times and have had multiple homes scattered within four states and two countries.

And although to this day I treasure the mementos of people and experiences that continue to adorn my space, I have come to realize that my home is not a product solely of these externals. Rather, home is within me and invited forth from me by the love and care of others. For it is through those relationships that I encounter my God.

We are shaped by our life experiences, and as I write this reflection I realize that my experience as a vowed religious is not the same as that of most individuals, particularly seniors whose experience of home has been shaped by their longevity and, in many cases, a continuity of place. I do recognize and value the importance for many people of this, including seniors who may relocate to an institutional setting, either temporarily or permanently. For that is what they have known.

As for me, I have come to rely on the wisdom of Nonie and the girls in the residential facility. They have taught me that what becomes home for us may not be a particular place, but rather is the experience of being drawn together in the giving and receiving of care and compassion that nurtures and sustains us. And I have come to realize, that regardless of our life experiences or commitments, we share a common journey, and the hospitality we offer another ultimately provides the most welcoming experience of home. ■



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