



Returning Home

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We left the house early, David and I, before the household had really begun to stir and show signs of activity. Mum was up, but temporarily, making her first cup of tea to ease herself into the day. Edgar would sleep for several more hours yet, as was his wont. Muffled sounds of movement from upstairs indicated that Pat was ready to descend and probably sit looking out of the drawing room window at the garden for a while before taking hold of the day and quietly establishing the shape of our activities.

After crossing the road we climbed the stile and stepped down into a field that had been freshly manured. I was not shod appropriately, and while David strode resolutely forward toward the stile on the far side of the field, I skittered and danced spasmodically through the dew-drenched grass and manure, futilely attempting to maintain the semblance of a conversation. David's brow was furrowed, and a quizzical smile played across his face as he offered a biting critique of the most recent, heinous machinations of the Thatcher government.

Such considerations paled into insignificance as we approached the far hedge and the next stile. An intervening two meters of the field had been churned by the cattle into a sodden, sullen, odoriferous swamp. Suitably booted, David strode oblivious through the quagmire, his stream of invective unabated. With a despairing and almost successful leap, I made the stile leaving only one large, indistinct, and already waterlogged footprint and acquiring an uncomfortable, intermittent squelch.

I told David I wanted to take a photograph of the oldest structure in the village. Standing where I was, on the stile, I focused my camera on the half-timbered cottage, while David obligingly slowed his pace somewhat and continued to stroll along the lane.

For a few moments I watched his receding figure—tall, erect, with the newly familiar, slightly pigeon-toed stride. Quite unaware, I was suddenly enmeshed in a confusing half recollection of barely discernible memories, crosscurrents of emotion that swept raggedly through my consciousness. The knowledge of

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how much I loved this 50-year-old man welled up inside me, momentarily stopping all other sensation. Four weeks in the last 24 years was the sum total of the time my brother and I had spent together. The realization of how much had irretrievably passed inundated my being and dulled my senses.

Almost literally shaking myself, I jumped from the stile and ran down the road to catch up with him. As I drew level I tentatively laid my hand on his shoulder. He turned his head toward me, a half smile—partly surprise, partly acceptance—on his face. Briefly he laid his hand on mine. Then he strode off down the road, launching the while into a detailed discourse of how the Agrarian Revolution had affected the development of the village.

Many people, either by choice or necessity, find themselves living apart from some or all the members of their family. Often the distance that separates is considerable—a continent or an ocean. Familiar constraints of time, money, opportunity, and other obstacles less easily discerned create a gap not only of distance but also of time. Loss of living within a family is frequently one of those things that is not thought about to any great extent until that loss actually is experienced. The distance and the sense of loss can then assume a great proportion and exert a pressing demand that we make the effort to return and visit our families. The experience of returning to our families is always significant and, depending on the factors involved, on occasions profound. In searching for the ground of that experience, I have asked myself the questions: What is it to experience returning to the community of one's family? What is it like, after an absence of many years, to journey back to the family of one's birth and the home one left?

One way the word return can be interpreted is as re-turn. It is in this form, in the sense of going back to, a re-currence, a re-viewing, and a re-making that I will endeavor to examine the implications, and perhaps the ground, of the question.

Returning as Anticipation and Regret

For a friend with whom I traveled, there is always, apparently, a thrill of nervous excitement and anticipation as she awaits the day of departure. Planning well in advance she develops long and detailed lists of the things she is going to see and do: the times she will spend with her mother, the time arranged to be with Uncle George and Auntie Marie, the old friends she will visit. Her enthusiasm fired mine, and I too became embroiled in a series of extravagant plans about whom to see and when, and an unfocused, barely discernible series of images of things and

times and people formed into illusions of what I felt it would be like. It was almost as though we were previewing a movie of the visit, taken before we had even left the country, a movie which we had directed and for which we had written the screenplay, but for which we had forgotten the fact of the editor and the interpretations the other actors made of their parts.

The excitement carried us well into the visit itself. A nervous dread filled us, as though we were children on our first trip to the fairground. There was too much to see, too much to do. How were we going to fit everything in? We talked to ourselves, while pretending to converse with the other. Even though we knew that our memories of our lives there, or of earlier visits, would raise only a vague stirring of familiarity, and that the details of our monologues were completely foreign to the other, we prevailed and rewarded each other with smiles and nods and mostly monosyllabic approval: "Yes ... That sounds fine ... Good ... Hmm," and so on.

As we probably knew and unconsciously acknowledged, however hard we tried and whatever plans we made, it simply would not be that way. Whatever memories and visions we still held could not possibly have been sustained. Why did we persist in expecting things to have remained as they were? We had continued to live our lives in the years that we had been away, we could acknowledge the changes that had taken place in our own environment; why did we expect that none had taken place elsewhere?

Part of the reason for returning was to recapture that which had been; to be able to grasp once again that which we now considered to have been so pleasing, so devoid of problems. These memories mutate with age. There is no apparent process, but that which at the time must surely have been fraught with all the usual pitfalls of life—particularly those of adolescence and the callow blossoming of early adult life—is transformed into a Disney-like convection of effortless, nonthreatening adventures, for which Dickens' opening lines to *A Tale of Two Cities* ring so true: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The best times were clear and untroubled, while the worst times, even though acknowledged and understood, took on the form almost of a cartoon in which the most calamitous occurrences took place but in which no one was ever seriously or permanently hurt, and in which everyone returned smiling for more. Although this may be a somewhat superficial gloss of real events, we were in a sense protected from harsh realities by time, the events themselves being encapsulated so that we could examine them with a kind of detached interest.

On occasions there seems to be a need to return, if only in our own minds, to times in which we imagined we were more secure, more protected, at peace with the world and ourselves. Perhaps it is one way in which we strive to fend off the darker and more stressful moments of our lives, to cling to a knowledge of hope that our lives will return to a more ordered and positive setting where we will be able to grow once more and experience the satisfaction of acknowledging that growth, and in many unobtrusive ways having it acknowledged externally. Why the idea and subsequent fact of a trip "home" should cause this kind of reversion is interesting.

For almost everyone the notion of home is usually a positive one. It is the known as opposed to the unknown; it is certainty as opposed to uncertainty, security rather than insecurity, the knowledge that in the final analysis someone else, our parents, will make the necessary decisions and will protect us from harm. Some children are forced to live in homes that many would describe graphically as being inadequate, with parents who are frequently abusive in one way or another. But, when given a choice, they will often decide to stay in that environment. It is the only real experience of home and parent that they know. It is familiar and predictable. Better than the unknown, the unpredictable, with a stranger imposing strange ways. It is also the primordial sense of the need for security, of being held, of belonging.

The balance of our lives is unknown. We may have plans, goals we wish to achieve and undoubtedly will achieve, but as yet they are unrealized. The future is uncharted and unseeable. Even in secure surroundings this can impose a threat, albeit a minor one. Daydreaming, sitting back and imagining ourselves elsewhere, involved in pleasing and stimulating activities, is a form of dealing with everyday tensions. How much more powerful is the fact of actually returning to that primal haven of peace and security, our childhood home?

Disappointment and regret in these circumstances does not occur suddenly. It is subtle and slow and as inexorable as Tennyson's sea. The lines and greying hair we see in a friend; the obvious preoccupation with the problems of his life, and not the raucous disregard of Saturday nights after a game of rugby; the less sprightly step; the rest that is taken by common, unspoken agreement halfway up the cliff path: These are the more obvious indications that things are not as they were. Buildings that one thought one knew have disappeared or have been altered; hedgerows are gone and enormous unfamiliar fields have been planted in their place; a village incorporated into an

adjacent, larger town were less noticeable indications for not having been so well known. But there is a different feel about the country. The old man's part-prophetic complaint that "Things ain't what they used to be!" is not so much to be laughed at and now holds a ring of truth. I ponder for a moment with wry acknowledgment the arrogance of my naive expectations. Why did I think that it could have possibly remained as it was? Certainly not to satisfy my longing for the security of my childhood, the grasping of familiar things.

Friends to whom I have talked have expressed similar thoughts during our conversations: the assumed immutability, the hardly surprising surprise, and the sense of disappointment when they returned for visits. One wonders at the ease with which the illusion insinuates itself into our consciousness until it is accepted, even despite our sure knowledge that in reality it is not so. We seem to build these illusions quite willingly, contradicting what we know to be the real state of affairs. What are we then saying to ourselves, about ourselves?

During a last-minute telephone conversation with my older brother David a few days before I was due to leave on my trip, he said, without any preamble and certainly without any connection to the topic of conversation, "She's a frail, little old lady now, you know." He was referring to our mother whom I had not seen for 18 years. The statement, whatever its inspiration, brought home to me a feeling of being suddenly bereft. Not only had I not visualized my mother as being much different from the way I remembered her when we last met, but also the time that had elapsed, the passage of the years, and the changes that had occurred and that had brought her to this point in her life were gone. It was not available to me even as a memory. This discontinuity, the fragmenting of the lives of those we love, cannot be avoided when we live apart.

It was a commonly felt loss among those with whom I talked. Even though letters, phone calls, cards, presents, and photographs were exchanged, their lives had in a way become abstractions; there was no real substance, only the metaphors represented by the different communications. The gaps cannot be filled. But it seemed important we should be able to do so. We found subsequently that no amount of talking and reminiscing can take the place of the lived experience. There is a feeling of exclusion, of being outside. I am not a part of those portions of the lives—individual and collective—of my family. I can be part of the present after the novelty has worn off and the illusion has been replaced by reality, but because it is only part and can never be the whole, the unity I felt as I grew up within the

community of my family, the oneness, is no longer there. I am at once within and without, part of and not part of, part of but not belonging.

Returning as an Occasion for Being Special

And he said, a certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said, Father, give me the portion of thy substance which falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after that the younger son took his journey into a far country; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living.... And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine. But it was meet to make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found. (Luke 15: 11-32)

The parable of the prodigal son is an allegory. It is also analogous to the circumstances in which we return to our families after living apart. The analogy prevails even if the return is for a visit rather than being permanent. When a member of the family group leaves for whatever period of time, a gap is left which alters the structure of the group. The family members are used to relating to each other in particular ways that have developed over many years of intimately living together. The loss of one member creates a gap which must be filled. A complete range of complex behaviors and responses is no longer possible. On those relationships, as they meshed with those among the remaining family members, depended particular ways of behaving—dependencies, responsibilities, opportunities, advantages—that are not possible, at least not in the same way, when one member is not there to play his or her required and accepted role. The family must regroup, the gap has to be filled and others must now adapt to fill those necessary parts of the role that has been vacated. The role ranges from simple but subtle things, such as simply being there, to more far-reaching and demanding requirements of extensive and weighty emotional and physical support. Most families absorb them and fill the gap almost automatically, adopting and adapting to new parts, with an understanding that can only arise out of an acceptance of whatever the absent member has done and an unquestioning understanding that it was necessary.

The absent member thus becomes an outsider, no longer part of the deep-seated, largely unconscious process that is the family community. They are still part of the family but in a sense do not belong to it. They are members, but increasingly as time goes by they become unfamiliar with the way the family oper-

ates and relates without them, to the point that when they return there is no real place for them. They are indeed welcomed back as was the prodigal son, but there is a sense of artificiality about the role they initially play.

Certainly they are welcomed back, usually with open arms, because they have been gone and their presence was missed. But now they are back and all the love and care that would have been theirs had they been there is lavished on them. They are welcomed back as special people.

As homecomers we must now fit back into the family and play the part that we once played: reap the benefits and accept the responsibilities. This does not mean that we are no longer treated in a special way. All members of families are treated in special ways, but now it is the specialness of once more being enfolded in the family without being questioned or made to feel that one is not loved or welcomed. One is expected to take one's place in the family, to fit in and be a part, to complete the whole and remake the oneness. It is now special to be taken for granted.

Returning to the Familiar

I was surprised and a little embarrassed when I realized that I could not direct David to the Craddock farm. I had ridden there many times on my bicycle during the years of my friendship with Geoff and had thought that it would never disappear from my memory. Eventually, after driving around more and more aimlessly and asking directions twice, we arrived. Even then I had to catch a glimpse of the tall, four-storey brick farmhouse through the trees before I was sure. Certainly the new opulent looking bungalow in the corner of the home field did not help, but still.... We met Geoff's wife and daughter for the first time as we drove into the farmyard and halted in front of the house. Eva had called ahead and they were expecting us. As is the way, Geoff had continued to work, and his elder son was sent to take over for him and allow us to spend some time together before milking.

When he walked around the corner of the shippen I released my breath in an almost audible gasp of relief, I would have known him anywhere. He extended his hand and looked at me with his head cocked on one side and a broad grin on his face. "Yes, it's you, all right," he said and drew me inside the house, still firmly gripping my hand.

It was a scene that was to be played out many times as I revisited old friends, renewing my acquaintance, and reliving

old times, while attempting to catch up with the changes that the passage of years had wrought.

We think as we approach these situations that all we have to do is unlock the old memories and pick up from where we left off. We reenter environments of which we had intimate knowledge and think we still have. But as our lives have changed during the period we have been away, so have the lives of those who remained. Even as the milieu of our lives has changed, so has theirs. Warily we begin to explore the establishing of a new relationship. Obviously it is built on the old, but it must of necessity be a new relationship and not merely a recurrence of the old one. The face of the other has changed. Whereas in the past we saw ourselves reflected in a particular way, we now see that that has changed because the way in which we are perceived has also changed. We chose to leave. The act of leaving in itself brings about an immediate reappraisal by our family and friends.

Returning to Family

When trying to determine just what home is or means, one finds oneself struggling to write a succinct description that goes beyond the descriptive and captures something of the essence of the word. We have numerous idiomatic sayings which are more or less apt: home is where the heart is; home is where I lie my head; home is where I hang my hat; home, sweet home; and so on. Each of these phrases conveys something of the meaning of home. Home is a place where one loves and is loved; it is a place where I go to rest, in which I feel secure enough to lower my guard and lie down to sleep; home is where I keep my possessions; home is a place of comfort where pleasant experiences take place. Each of these describes one aspect of home, but in and of themselves they are not sufficient to convey the notion of home.

Frost, in his poem "The Hired Man" (Latham, 1967), creates a dialogue between a farmer and his wife, the subject of which is the return to the farm, in the farmer's absence, of a somewhat irascible old laborer. In previous seasons the old laborer has not really done the work for which he has been paid. His narrow-minded attitudes and dogmatic refusal to learn new ways have also contributed to the farmer's reluctance to hire him again. After a lengthy discussion, the farmer, against the appeals of his wife and perhaps his own inner feelings, goes inside the house to tell the hired man that he will not employ him again. On reaching him, the farmer finds that the hired man has died in his

sleep. During the dialogue the wife says, "Warren ... he has come home to die" (p. 38).

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

I should have called it

Something you somehow haven't to deserve.

In his text "The Homecomer" Schutz (1971) describes home as "starting point as well as terminus." By this I believe he means that our journeys, in a broad sense of the word, begin and end in a specific place. The point or place in which we feel secure enough to begin taking risks and from which we embark on adventures, to which we return triumphant or discouraged, is home. Frost extends and deepens this notion by his statements that home is always there. It does not matter what you have or have not done, there is always a place for you at home. This implies the idea of acceptance, an understanding by another that this is also your place of being and that in it you simply are. The fact of the old man going home to die brings us back to Schutz's starting point-terminus statement. Home is where we are born or at least become conscious of the world and first establish identity in relation to others. It is also the place where, by preference, we finally relinquish our being and die. Home, therefore, is more than a place, a geographical location. It is a notion. Schutz (1971) says:

The symbolic character of the notion "home" is emotionally evocative and hard to describe ... home means one thing to the man who has never left it, another thing to the man who lives far from it, and still another to him who returns ... [it] is an expression of the highest degree of familiarity and intimacy. (pp. 107-108)

Thus home is not a place or a thing but a notion that is the synthesis of the effect of a great many things. Familiarity and intimacy speak of relationships, the otherness of our lives.

I have examined briefly the notion of home and its significance as a symbol, a metaphor for a variable set of intangibles. The indication that there is in many people a need to return to home and the feelings that it engenders is testified to by the kinds of stories they tell. The need to return to a place of comfort and security at various times during our lives appears to have a place in the collective unconscious memory of mankind. We have some indication of this if we examine, in part, the root of the word home as it has prevailed since recorded language began.

It appears first in the Indo-European base form “kei-” meaning to lie or settle down. It is related to the German to lull or put to sleep. In Old Norse the word “heimr” means residence or world. The Old Irish word “coim” or “coem” derives from the same root and means dear or beloved.

The sense of communion which grows with and through the emergence of self in relation to others is fundamental to our being. It is the foundation on which we are able to build our lives and it is that which beckons and suggests that we tarry. Through it we strengthen the grounds of our lives, our origins, and by virtue of that communion, we receive affirmation of the value of our self in relation to the most significant others in our lives.

Returning to be with Parents

I did not arrive at my mother’s house until quite late in the evening, about 9:00. By then it was too late to do much other than eat, catch up in quite superficial terms with the current news, and then wearily climb the stairs to bed.

By the time I got downstairs the next morning, my mother had been up for some time. While eating the breakfast she had insisted on preparing, we chatted animatedly about the other members of the family, but I sensed as we did so that my mother was agitated about something. No sooner had I finished than she took me by the arm and insisted that we walk around the house. As we did so she told me, in some detail, of the disposition of her belongings to be made when she died. Particular attention was paid to those things that she insisted I was to get, repeatedly stating that my older brother and his wife would make sure that I got everything.

I found this process most disconcerting. She apparently accepted the fact of her death within a relatively short time with equanimity. At first I protested, failing to see the reason for the exercise. I told her it was not necessary and not to think of that now. It was not until several days later that I realized that it was part of the rites of passage through which she felt she had to go. It was a symbolic gesture, a declaration that she had accepted the fact of her imminent mortality. Two purposes had been served by the process. She had been able to set her mind at ease that I would receive those items that she had declared were to be mine, and she could now rest, assured that each member of her family had been told, indirectly, that she had prepared herself for her death. We were not to worry because she was not worrying herself.

My arrival after a prolonged absence had coincided with the need to gather her family around her. We had long been scattered, and the nature of my father's job resisted the planting of deep roots in a particular place. It seemed that the gesture was an attempt to develop a commonality of purpose, a gathering of the family, and a statement that we were parts of the whole. As we spent time together—my mother, her husband, my two brothers, and I—the feeling of a sense of intimate communion began to develop again.

This became more apparent when we gathered one evening and went through the family photograph albums, each of us picking out those that we wished to have. Recalling the occasions on which the photographs had been taken led to endless tales of the days when we had all been together. The places in which we had lived, holidays we had taken, special events in our lives, and memories of my father came tumbling back at an ever-increasing pace.

After coming back home to Canada at the end of my visit, I realized that a significant part of the reason for returning had been a sense of obligation to my family, but particularly to my mother. This feeling was reinforced in a conversation I had with a friend subsequent to my return. She felt strongly that the only reason that she returned to her home in Holland was out of a sense of obligation to her parents. My friend's feeling, apparently, was that her obligation was not a particularly happy one, but that it was necessary; therefore, it was undertaken. Part of her obligation was to ensure that her own children knew something of their roots, and they returned with her on a quite regular basis. Her obligation was one of necessity, a requirement that had to be met.

As I examined my sense of obligation, I began to look at it in a different way. To be obligated is to be bound or tied to, to be pledged. I felt that mine was a pleasing obligation. It grew out of the sense of belonging that I had felt when I was with my mother. An additional meaning for the word longing was found in the use that was made of long in ancient Greek, that is constant or continual. Belonging can be used in the form belonging, a longing to be or for being: thus a being that is constant or continual. I had found this, and I believe my mother had felt it as we spent time together. Our self, our sense of being, does not grow in isolation. It can only develop in relationship, in fellowship with others.

It is in the relating to others, the communion of ourselves with others, that self grows and is realized through being. The closer

and more intimate the relationship, the more we transcend beyond mere self, our involvement with the world or reality. The combining of our concrete self and our world of abstract thoughts leads to being. This transcendence occurs through relating in a meaningful way with others. The most powerful way is through the community of family.

As we spent time together, I frequently paused to wonder just how my mother—now a frail elderly lady, halting in movement, restricted in some of her faculties, but indomitable in spirit—perceived this gathering around of her family. We were adults now, my two brothers and I. We had ourselves been, and continued to be, responsible for the creating of the community of our own families. Did she see this gathering as a reaffirming of the old family relationship, a rebuilding and a renewing? Or was there for her a recognition of the creative nature of the communion of family, a realization of the infinitude of that creative transcendence to being, the constant renewal of the creative community?

During the course of her conversations with me my mother revealed that she had not known if she would see me again before she died, but that she had hoped she would. There was a trust implied in the statement that transcended the idea of self and other and brought us to I and Thou. It was a declaration of the strength and depth of the tie that had held us together for so many years.

This sense of trust is fidelity which draws together the members of a family in a communion that engenders a sense of belonging which lasts for their lifetime and beyond. It is the realization of a higher sense of being that leads to an understanding of who we truly are. It is the being that fidelity itself creates. Through fidelity we aspire to hope. The relationship of I and Thou is a relationship which continually recreates itself. Fidelity, which is grounded in this communion, helps us to reach beyond by granting us the freedom to recreate ourselves in relation to the others in the communion. It gives us the freedom to search for what is possible. It leads us to hope, for hope is the bridge between what is and what is possible. It is the selfless appeal to the creative power of another, through which that other transcends and in so doing urges the recreation of the others. Hope opens us to others. It is a driving force of the community of family. It is the ground of love (Marcel, 1960).

We are constantly surrounded by the increasing clamor of a dissonant world. Within it the community of the family offers us a refuge. The material rewards of our world are relatively easily

come by, as are the less concrete achievements of our efforts. But of it all, perhaps the community of the family offers us the only things that are of immutable value—fidelity, hope, and love.

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