

Where is home?

One line stood out in her email to me. It expressed a hope, a visit. It simply said, "I hope your trip to Medjugorje was a good one. We want your next tour trip to be to the US, okay?"

A few days after receiving the email, I was on my way across the pond. I had planned the trip two months earlier but now, providentially, the icing was on the cake with that one sentence from my former secretary, Jo, in Bay St. Louis.

I walked into the rectory to a shocked staff on a Tuesday morning, announcing, "You wanted my next trip to be to the U.S. to see you. So, here I am!" Amid hugs and tears, I was welcomed.

For three short days, I was fussed over and welcomed "home." The "home" part was the most difficult. Others had taken my place. New relationships had formed. People had moved on with their lives and many had resigned themselves with the fact that they probably would never see me again on "this" side of the pond.

I walked into the Hancock Bank to sign some forms. In the distance, a former parishioner caught sight of me, as I approached. With a sigh and a surprised look on her face, I heard, "Fr. Tracey! I just read your column in Gulf Pine and now you are here in person. I can't believe it!"

My good friends, Mike and Mary Ann, kept saying "Welcome home!" Their comments created a stir within me. This place, "The Bay", was no longer my home. I had built a house several years earlier in anticipation of retirement and now was trying to create in it a "home," close to family members.

I began to realize the many places I called "home" in my lifetime. Some places were as short as a few years and others more than a decade. One "home" was replaced by another and then another until finally, I went "home" to retire.

As I reflected on the whole idea of home, I began to realize that home wasn't a certain rectory, a building I spent a number of years living in or a single town pinned on a map of Mississippi. It was wherever the people who loved me were, whenever we were together. Not a place, but a moment, and then another, building on each other like bricks to create a solid shelter that I took with me for my entire life, wherever I went."

I often think of the old adage of Thomas Wolfe, "you can never go home again." Maybe, it is because our concept of home as place cannot be the sole definition of "home." But, somehow, home is less a place than a person and the resulting relationship that was formed, shaped and celebrated in such unique and special ways.

I discovered that one can leave places but leaving friends is totally different, if not impossible. There comes a time when one must leave a place where one has lived and loved for a number of years; there all the memories of yesteryears are buried deep inside. It can be so easy to be nostalgic, turn back and pine for such memories to be rekindled; that somehow, nothing can replace such memories,

Maya Angelou, in her book, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, said, "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

Now, I realize that "home" is that safe place where we are comfortable in our own skin; comfortable with our surrounding walls, but, most of all, comfortable with our friends who accept us for who we are and we simply enjoy being at "home" with them.

As I left Bay St. Louis and said goodbye to cross the pond and go home, Jo, handed me a note that I tucked away to be read when I got home.

During my four hour layover at Atlanta airport, I had time to reflect on my three days on the U.S. side of the pond. I decided to get something to eat. I found an empty table and as I sat down, next to me, I heard this gasp, "Fr. Tracey, what are you doing here?" A couple – former parishioners – were on their way to Wyoming to do some hiking. They had to call neighbors immediately and tell them, "guess who is sitting here beside us at the airport in Atlanta." Before long, emails came my way to let me know that word of the encounter filled the airwaves.

I did get "home" and opened the note Jo gave me. Part of it read, "You will never know just how much your surprise visit this week has meant to me. To lay eyes on someone whom you had accepted you would never see again is such an awesome experience – the joy of it will never leave me. I just pray it will not be the last time I see you."

Now, I think I know the answer to "where is home?"