

Going Home

My phone rang. I picked it up, “Is this Fr. Tracey?” “Yes,” I hesitated, “Eileen X gave me your phone number.” “Ok!” The gentleman went on to introduce himself and pitch his request.

“My uncle died in California recently. I was out there for his funeral. We had a Mass and all that for him there. The family is bringing his ashes home to be buried and we were wondering if you would be available to say a Mass here for him and do the burial.” “Have you talked to the priest in your parish about this?” I asked. “Yes, we have. But he is not available to say the Mass or do the burial. That is why we were wondering if you were available to do it?” “Have you asked the priest there if he was okay with me doing it? I asked. “Yes, we have and he has no problem with you doing it.” I assured the gentleman that if everything was in order, I would be glad to do the funeral and burial for them.

There is something magical about home; something cathartic; something that is deeply rooted in our psyche, in our DNA. If we ever go on a journey to someplace else – near or far – the return journey home always feels quicker, probably because it is driven by a repertoire of experiences, memories and comfortableness. We all have been endowed with a wandering spirit. Yet, no matter where we roam, there is an internal GPS that seems to guide us home.

In my father’s family, there were eleven children. All of them, except one, emigrated for a time to England. Six of them remained in England permanently.

In my mother family, one of her uncles emigrated first to England, from there to the United States where he worked with the telephone company. Like many of his generation who emigrated, he lost touch with his family for over forty years. It was only through writing to a neighbouring family back home that he was able to ask them: “Is there any of my family still alive back there?” His family never gave up on him and their nightly prayer was simple but powerful – “If you are alive, we hope you are happy. If you are dead, we hope you are at peace.” After forty years of no contact, he returned home. And, it is ironic that he became my godfather. I, too, like him, left, not by necessity, but by choice, for forty years and did come home eventually.

When conversations take place about home, it is not so much conversations about landmarks and landscapes, songs or stories, memories or meanderings. They all show a longing, a hunger, for home. The hunger is not for food, but a hunger for a place where our heart rests.

The hunger addressed by these conversations is not just about physical food. These conversations are not just for people who have moved away from their homelands. There is a universal hunger for that place where our hearts are fuelled—that place we call “home.” So, as we go through life, we are always searching for links back to that place.

Often, home is not so much a place but a moment in time which felt like home. Maybe the home we grew up in wasn’t an idyllic place we remember fondly. Sometimes home is another place, person or a group of people, or an experience where we felt that fullness of heart.

Irish Poet, Patrick Kavanaugh, in his poem, “The Great Hunger,” reminds us that

‘God is in the bits and pieces of Every Day
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.’

God is incarnate in the bits and pieces of our days; a God who not only places in our hearts a restlessness and a wandering spirit; a desire for rootedness and a place called “home.” a hunger for intimacy and a place to belong; a desire to be complete in an incomplete world.

For years, “Red” Hugh travelled the unfamiliar places in California until they became familiar. They became his home away from home even though he had carried part of home with him no matter where he roamed. Home would always be the place his restless heart guided him.

We finished the burial prayers for Hugh. His daughter, gently and reverently, placed the urn into the small concrete opening. Momentarily, she bowed to it; took a single red rose and placed it on top of the urn. She kissed her own hand and patted the urn with the kissed hand. Then, spontaneously, she burst into song – “You are my sunshine.” A chorus of those gathered joined her in song.

The funeral was over. The burial was complete “Red” Hugh had gone to his eternal home and I was on my way home, wherever that might be.