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WHERE THE SEA DELIVERED US

The Need for Sanctuary

Ancestors, I'm at home, as close to the earth where your bones have settled. I climbed the clouds and saw your faces alight from resting. You remain in the very place the sea delivered you. I walk in your honor; your stories are now unburied, your spirits alive. I go forth speaking your names, feeling so close to your presence that anyone can see from the way I walk that you are inside me. If anyone yells as I cross the street wearing African attire, "This is not Africa!" I can respond calmly, "It certainly isn't."

In one sense, at the core of sanctuary is the failed quest to find home in the places we live. For centuries, millions have sought refuge from genocide, violence, economic loss, and political oppression, forced to venture into unfamiliar places. Some have climbed mountains, some have swum the seven seas, others have crossed deserts to save their families and their communities' lives. Millions have been forced to leave when their ancestral lands were destroyed; others have fled refugee camps that had become too dangerous to

remain in, leaving generations of descendants with an insatiable yearning to return home. Displacement is an embodied experience, imprinted on our bones. Since the advent of nations and boundaries, the discarded have left home and their descendants have sought to find it again.

Spiritual teachers espouse that home is in the heart. When I ask, "Where do I belong?" they respond, "Look within." But it is difficult to find oneself without acknowledging the social and cultural dimensions of homelessness.

I look at indigenous peoples and tribes of all nations (African, Native American, and many more) who have been disrespected and disregarded on the homelands their ancestors lived upon as sacred for millennia, and my heart weeps for their lives and identities. Their children are homeless. What can we say to them? Be at home within their hearts? Without residing with dignity on the lands of their ancestors, this may feel impossible.

If the spiritual quest *to find home within* were enough, what do you do when your soul cannot live in peace on the land that is your birthright? Perhaps you've moved to an urban space where gentrification and the purchase of entire neighborhoods are displacing generations of those you know and love. Maybe your family home or farm had to be sold because of an unpayable mortgage or taxes or insurance.

My family had to move four times before I turned twelve. The first time—I was two years old—we moved to a two-story house and lived above a preschool my parents owned and operated. By the time I was seven, my parents rented out the upstairs room, and we moved to a plush house in a middle-class neighborhood, one of four black

families there. Our house had five bedrooms, a maid's room, a courtyard with a pond and a fountain, a cottage behind the house, and a four-car garage. Relatives from Louisiana and Texas visited constantly, wanting to be in our house with the living room that was like a grand ballroom. Our success—the big house *and* a brand new Buick—meant attending a white, mostly Jewish school nearby. I was in third grade. My older sister was allowed to complete junior high at the all-black school in our old neighborhood, while my younger sister and I attended an elementary school in which we were two of the only three blacks.

The move was a culture shock. With my dark skin and fading Creole accent, I was different from the other kids, and the differences were unacceptable to the others. At eight years old, I didn't know how to survive the humiliation I experienced while barely able to keep up with the higher level of education at my new school. I didn't have a clue about timetables or multiplication. The other children were reading books as thick as the ones I had seen adults read. I kept quiet and when possible I disappeared into my desk. I longed to return to my old school and our old house, where my mother still worked in her preschool downstairs.

I stayed at the new school and made one best friend who was white and Jewish. We did everything together at school. We helped ring the recess bells, line up the students for vaccinations, and made flyers for the parents. But after school, I was not allowed to play with her.

Her maid told my mother that her parents were prejudiced. I didn't understand what that meant until sixth grade, when my friend and I signed up to take violin lessons at school. After months the decisions were made about

who would be offered these special classes. As the names were being read, both of us perked up, confident of our acceptance because of our great service to the school. They read my friend's name and we celebrated by giggling into our hands. But my name was never read. I couldn't believe there wasn't enough room for one more child and that there wasn't one more violin.

My best friend and I left school that day barely speaking to each other. When I got home, I asked my mother why I wasn't chosen, and I watched her eyes drop. That night, I cried in my bed until it finally became clear to me. I wasn't white. I had moved from the black school where my identity was closely tied to our culture. My innocence vanished, and I learned that for some, love is conditioned. Once a talkative child, I grew quiet in the struggle to regain my balance. I felt a keen sense of loss, living in a world that favored white people.

My friend and I remained close until graduation. Under my influence we both signed up to attend the all-black junior high school my oldest sister had attended. Our parents were shocked for different reasons. In the end, she went to a private Jewish school and my family moved again.

As the property values and taxes increased in our Jewish neighborhood, the fees from my parents' pre-school remained modest. So, we sold our big house, paid our back taxes, and purchased yet another home. A huge moving van came and took us to Inglewood, which at the time was a white Protestant suburb just outside L.A., where homes were reasonably priced. The city of Inglewood is primarily populated by black and brown today, but in the early 1960s, there was only one other black family on our block. In terms

of blatant racism, my life at school and in our neighborhood worsened, and the connection between displacement and dehumanization sealed together in my mind. Surviving meant assimilation. Not fitting in meant never feeling welcome, body and spirit never being at home.

These experiences of displacement followed me into adulthood and produced a perpetual fear of homelessness because of how I was embodied. In what neighborhood would I be welcome as a nonconformist, queer, black, woman? Where do I belong?

Similar experiences of homelessness occurred much later in my life. In 2013, my partner and I had fallen into serial homelessness, spurred by the quadrupling of rents in Oakland, California. We rented a home in Oakland and rented out a home we owned in Albuquerque. We tried to buy the home in which we were living in Oakland, so we sold our New Mexico home to have the funds. The bidding system for purchasing the home was not in our favor, and we didn't get the house. It led to six sublet agreements in other places, one after another, to stay in Oakland, and our savings dwindled.

As a Zen priest, I was asked by several people, "What lesson did you learn from losing your home and having your financial resources drained?"

I couldn't respond.

A quick answer would have minimized the emotions that were erupting inside me. I didn't want to reduce a journey into the depths of my suffering into a simplistic response. If I had been looking only for a physical home, it would have

been easier. But I needed a place that would fill the ancient hunger for home that resides in me from an ancestral past.

My feeling of displacement has its roots in the African diaspora and the systemic dehumanization of blacks in the Americas and around the world. I needed time to reflect, to explore the nature of intergenerational homelessness without figuring anything out. I could barely breathe.

During my time of reflection, I met with the former owner of the home my partner and I had been unable to purchase. It was a beautiful day in Berkeley's Elmwood district. My former landlord and I each expressed our disappointment in our not being able to purchase her home. I tried to stave off feelings of victimhood, but the struggle persisted. As I continued, it became clear the sense of not belonging, the loss of language and culture, and the wish for a perfect home is imprinted on my bones. I saw that trying to purchase her home was an effort to resolve an experience of uprootedness that goes at least as far back as the slave trade. With this insight, I walked out of our meeting as if I'd never seen Berkeley before. I was in an altered state, feeling as lost as my ancestors must have felt when they landed in this country. My world had changed, and I was trying to reorient myself to a very new perspective. The loss of her home had uncovered what had been buried beneath each response to rejection my whole life. It marked the beginning of a slow, gradual path toward compassion.

Pema Chödrön, a nun and renowned western Buddhist teacher, reminds us that the mantra at the end of the Heart Sutra is meant to ease fear and cultivate compassion within suffering: "Gone, Gone, Gone Beyond, Gone Completely Beyond—Awake, So Be It." Yet we aren't transcending or going beyond suffering. Our lives are gradual paths of

groundlessness. When we can accept that people and things are always shifting and changing, our hearts can open.

When we're overwhelmed by pain and suffering, or by groundlessness, we move to the next beyond. Pema Chödrön says we are developing a compassionate and patient relationship with our fear. The quaking in our lives is the very nature of going beyond, flexing and extending our heart muscle that is often stiff with arrogance, opinions, anger, self-righteousness, and prejudice.

The experience of renting six sublets, one after another during our period of homelessness, forced me to ask once again, "What is home?" Each time we found a physical home and experienced suffering, we were living out the mantra, "Gone, Gone, Gone Beyond, Awake." The experience wore down our fixed views of home and of life. As it became too much, we had to go back to basics, to the ordinary things of our lives, not waiting for a gigantic breakthrough but allowing the disintegration one step at a time. When fear, angst, frustration, or "why me?" arises, ground yourself in the ordinariness of your life and live one day at a time. Suffering teaches us this. When we suffer this much, we can only be still and take each moment as it comes.

Homelessness is like walking in a dark forest, step by step. It's an initiation. Feel into the mystery, not knowing what you might touch. In this way, homelessness can be the beginning of a new life even when it feels like the end. In the midst of an initiation, how you see life is tested and if you are open, it will transform you. Going forward, you'll see the world in a different way, as when I walked out of the tea-house in Berkeley and saw a new and different city. A gradual breakthrough of consciousness began when our bid

to purchase the house was declined. The seed for transformation was planted.

Homelessness is more than just the loss of a physical home. It is also the loss of culture, connection, identity, and affiliation. This hunger for home is deep and wide, touching the nerve of ancient displacement and dispossession. In modern times, we see homelessness as a crisis of industrialization. But its roots are ancient and visceral, a trauma that passes from generation to generation.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.

I first heard this poem before entering the path of Buddha and recognized in it the cry for a lost ancestral home. The tears welling from deep inside me expressed a longing for connection with my origins, to know the ancient ceremonies, medicines, rituals, dances, and ways of the land that were lost in becoming American slaves. Later I realized that Thich Nhat Hanh is encouraging us to see ourselves in the other, to open our hearts to every living being, including perceived enemies, and to forgive everyone.

I couldn't do it right away.

I couldn't feel the interbeing of joy and pain. I couldn't digest the lines in his poem, "I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate..." I couldn't be both the mayfly on the river and the bird that eats me. I couldn't be the slave and the master, the one who hates and the one who loves, the oppressor and the oppressed.

I did not feel interrelated to other living beings as the poem teaches.

I had mountains to climb before I could reach that understanding.

A reflection on the naming of enslaved Africans helped to see more what was tangled with the feelings of homelessness. While other ethnic groups' names were changed at Ellis Island, enslaved Africans—more than *ten million* purchased and traded—weren't even considered human and were given the last names of their *owners*. While many have changed their names, most people of African descent still have surnames that are more like brandings.

My last name, Manuel, is Portuguese. King Manuel of Portugal, the largest slave trader of the time, brought Africans to the Caribbean, in particular Haiti, and so I carry his name, a man who was blind to my ancestors' humanity. Our slave owners' names are not without connection, because they evoke a relationship with our new origins in America.

Those who have reclaimed African names, been given them at birth, or when entering the priesthood of an African tradition, such as Ifá, Candomblé, Santeria, or Vodoun, still may work hard to fit in on the continent from which enslaved Africans were dispersed. It's not just that descendants of

enslaved Africans have suffered enormously; we've had to do so without our names or knowing our blood lineages. For us, the effort to find our place can feel abstract, even numbing. Without our true names, it is difficult to consider anywhere home. The destruction of names, tribes, lands, cultures, languages, and truths, and the absence of documented lineages are a large part of our struggle. Wise spiritual teachers rarely consider this when they offer guidance for "finding home."

When the journey of finding home takes ancestral homelessness into account, we begin to understand the need for sanctuary in a new way. The hunger for home is deeply layered. When seeking a vision of being healed, multigenerational displacement motivates within some of us a desire for our indigenous lands of origin or to create sanctuary or shared community with those of similar ancestral origin, places where we can enter life fully without fear. We need places to breathe and heal our disconnection from the earth. Our spiritual journey requires us, first of all, to understand the pain of the loss of our ancestral identity and to experience the extent to which we have wandered. This loss of homes is in our bones and begs to be acknowledged, not merely transcended.

Those who have tasted dispossession through slavery, holocaust, war, ethnic cleansing, massacre, or forced migration are admonished by patriots, "If you're not happy here, go home!"

"I *am* home," we think, or even say, but we might not feel home in a place where we are told in many ways we don't belong.

A friend who lives in Haiti told me that in the Haitian *Kreyól* language, the word for home is *lakay*, which literally means "being at home."

This is significant because *having a home* and *being at home* can be entirely different experiences. Having a home conjures up a physical locale. We are born in a place, indigenous to some land, somewhere. We have residency, or citizenship. Among some Haitian people, it is important to know exactly where you are from. When first meeting, they try to situate you in relation to others. The question, "Where are you from?" literally means, "Where are you a person?" And if we are not *at home*, when homelessness is deep-seated and outside our control, where are you a person?

From the moment we acknowledge that there is discord between our homeplace and *who we are*, we no longer feel at home. Suddenly, we're uncomfortable with our surroundings and become distressed. We may find ourselves living on the streets, because we don't feel at home anywhere. Being at home is an experience in which our heart and spirit resonate with *the place* we dwell. It's being settled and still—as we are in sitting meditation.

Home cannot be an experience of shame, terror, or rejection, but one of safety, freedom, and being respected by others, experiencing love and being embraced, being known and knowing who you are.

During a difficult financial time, I lost my apartment on Lakeshore in Oakland. It was in the year 2000, when the rents of Oakland were increasing dramatically, and I found myself sleeping in my car for one night. A friend had offered me a place to stay that night, but I didn't feel at home in her house. So I said I had another place to stay and left

feeling great sadness. I had no idea how difficult it is to find a place to park where you can sleep in your car. Everywhere I parked, the neighbors called the police.

So I found a less patrolled—and less safe—part of the city where neighbors were unlikely to call the police, and I dozed off and on fearing for my safety. I cried many times, wondering how people manage to sleep in their cars night after night. After that, I was offered a lovely place to stay, but I had a different view of those who live on the streets and particularly in cars. I understood how important safety is to being at home.

My refusal to stay with the friend and instead to sleep in my car revealed to me that some people don't feel at home in shelters or even in their own family's homes. Many don't feel at home anywhere. When we feel estranged, we can't say we're home. To feel *at home* includes being recognized. Without being seen, we begin to disintegrate, and our ability to think, see, hear, and function diminishes, as though we're dying. It's difficult to see yourself as whole when you're not acknowledged. How can we be brought back to life?

Offering sanctuary to those who are invisible, displaced, or discriminated against because of class, ethnicity, heritage, beliefs, race, religion, sexuality, gender, or physical ability is to respond to expressed hatred in the world. Accepting refuge in a sanctuary is a chance to reclaim who we are.

"Taking refuge" is the English translation of *saranga-mana*; *saranga* in Pali "means shelter, protection, or sanctuary"—a place where safety and peace are possible. To take refuge in the three treasures—Buddha, Dharma, Sangha—is to follow a path that leads us home to who we are, a path of awakening.

Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki says, “We began to strive *for ourselves*, strive for God” (italics added). We reach out for love and acceptance and through practices like prayer and meditation, ceremony, drumming, and chanting, honor ourselves and evolve in a creative spiritual community. Revitalizing ourselves in community gives us the energy we need to shift our sense of who we are and transform the way we live.

Taking refuge, we gain insight and see possibilities. With the support of others, we awaken to the conditions that cause us suffering. When we say, “I take refuge,” we’re appealing to what brings us home to ourselves.

Tenshin Reb Anderson writes, “If taking refuge is the return flight to our own true nature, the appeal is not made to something outside ourselves nor to something inside ourselves. It is made to the great openness of being that transcends outside and inside and from which nothing is excluded.”

Buddha, when he discovered that he was subject to old age, illness, and death, left his privileged home. He could no longer live in the family palace. The illusion of comfort vanished. In the sanctuary of the forest, he began to recognize a path to understand the full range of suffering and experience his connection and interdependence with others. He found a place within himself where no one is “less than” or other or invisible.

The Bible says that, in the beginning, God created heaven and earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness prevailed. Then there was light. Conditions changed, chaos ensued, and people were expelled from the Garden. Yet in a Zen Buddhist worldview, light and dark coexist. One does

not follow the other. And everything flickers between light and dark, void and matter. This is the nature of life. Neither transformation nor chaos is random.

The movement of living beings between home and homelessness is patterned and has been systematized from the beginning of time. As expressed in Buddha's second noble truth, there are underlying causes and conditions of chaos and homelessness in all their variations. It is not by chance. And this flux is rooted in the ways we shape our lives in response to our ever-evolving needs and desires as living beings.

If we study the patterns and conditions of pervasive homelessness, we can predict the moment of the next economic upheaval, whether it's war, famine, climate imbalance, annihilation of a tribe, or other kinds of disaster. Those without resources become refugees. Over and over, impending displacements are ignored until the crisis becomes unbearable. We ignore the patterns and conditions.

Consider what was known about the levees in New Orleans before they broke in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina. What might have happened if the levees had been shored up years earlier, as had been recommended? And consider home foreclosures before the intense marketing of dangerous derivatives and mortgages to folks who could barely afford to feed themselves. When unscrupulous corporations began investing in neighborhoods, it was clear the pattern would force rents to soar, pushing out folks from their places of birth. When wild animals in surrounding woods begin to forage through our trash, we know this is a sign we will be forced to coexist. We need only look at the indicators around us to know there's about to be an upheaval.

Without examining the patterns, we continue to experience the ancient and unnecessary chaos of systemic homelessness and the consequent spiritual hunger for home. Because of chaos in our lives, we need sanctuary. I sought sanctuary from the experiences of hatred I encountered in daily living. I needed a place to meet myself upon the "return flight" to my true nature.

Ruijin, an ancient Zen master, once said, "Carving a cave of emptiness from a mountain of form leads to serenity from the ocean of misery." If we carved a cave—a sanctuary—within the mountain of misery, will our essence freely abide?

Is serenity available to all?