

The Meaning of Home

As expected, my return to Austin this weekend has been a unique experience. Each August for the past ten years I have returned from Europe like clockwork to our home on Mary Street. That first week is always the most challenging. Adjusting from the slower, quieter village life days in Europe to the abrupt shift of urban stimulation takes some effort. Before long, however, I'm able to rediscover my personal "Austin-zone".

The summer images of still, damp forests, toes in icy streams, the visual beauty of historic architecture, and heartwarming visits with German relatives fade all too quickly. But soon these images are replaced with the ever-changing beauty of morning swims at Barton Springs, the evolving Austin skyline and treasured meals with my growing family around the table. I am so fortunate to have these diverse, rich, rewarding experiences that each nourish me in their own unique way.

Last spring, with deliberate intention, we chose to shake up this pattern, when we listed our Mary Street home for sale. We set our sites on the goal of greater fluidity between our lives in Texas and Europe. Since that intention was set we have ridden the unpredictable waves of transition, sometimes with grace and other times not so much. Our plan to establish an affordable home base in a community that respects its natural resources, within a reasonable distance for our children is well underway. The foundation of our San Marcos home has been poured, and all of the intricate decision making – from tiles to lighting – is happening now.

This new construction will become our Texas home for the months we're not in Europe, but with only a foundation visible important questions have arisen.

Where is home right now?

Where did the concept of home go when I turned in our Mary Street keys?

Have we been homeless all summer?

Throughout these past months I have been led down an unexpected path that has required me to reconsider the idea of "home" and brought up these questions.

What is my definition of home?

What makes a house a home?

Is home always a house?

In pondering these questions, I've come to a surprising realization: perhaps the structure we call home is actually secondary to our feeling and experience. I can recall multiple times over my fifty plus years when all I yearned for was to go "home" and yet it wasn't a particular building that fulfilled my longing. Often returning to the building known as "home" increased the longing. Have you ever had that experience yourself?

Could "home" be a feeling instead? A sense of belonging that comes from deep within? Possibly even more than belonging, perhaps home is related to a sense of purpose. Maybe the two even go hand in hand, when we have a purpose we feel we belong. Hmm that is something we all might want to ponder.

When we have a purpose, we belong. This might provide an explanation for the fact that when I sit in the *hofgarten* of Joachim's family surrounded by relatives I without doubt feel at "home". It might also explain why I could refer to our mountain top *gite* in France, which never contained a single personal item of mine other than my clothing, as "home". Both experiences evoke a sense of purpose and belonging in me, and the sensation feels very much like the "home" I longed for as a child.

This idea of purpose and belonging can be further put to test when I consider our final weeks on Mary Street. While I no

doubt experienced the feeling of “home” for ten wonderful years on Mary Street, that feeling dramatically shifted once the staging began to put our house on the market. When my practice was dismantled and packed away and a good part of my kitchen put into storage I completely lost my sense of belonging and purpose in that house.

So this leads me to the present moment, my returning from a summer abroad to a furnished rental. Rather than walking into our Mary Street home, in which each every corner was familiar, I stumbled in my jet-lagged state into a space entirely unknown. Not only was this new structure void of our familiar furnishings, but the original setup did not allow space for our individual interests. So we’ve spent this first weekend bringing in some essential items, as well as carving out space for us to gather as family and spaces for each of us as individuals. It’s not a big house, so we’re having to be creative!

We will have the perfect opportunity to test my new idea of home in the days just ahead. Will it feel like a home now that I’ve created my early morning space to meditate and write and a corner for my standing desk to teach and meet with clients online? Will it feel like home now that Joachim has a quiet spot (to work through his scary data problems only he could enjoy) with his guitars nearby for an occasional respite of jazz? And Sebastian. When he has his jewelry bench up and running and a place to complete this semester’s homework undisturbed will he, too, feel at home? Time will tell. But it already feels as if we’re off to a good start.

What does all of this talk of home bring up for you?

Have you considered your personal definition of home?

How has it changed over the years?

Do you relate to my proposal that our sense of home is connected to our sense of purpose and belonging?

I’d love to hear your thoughts as I, too, continue to consider this meaning of home.