

## **Home Place: Five Intimations of Coming Home**

Reflections on the ministry and theology of The Rev. Larry Ainsworth

Given by The Rev. Joe Summers on October 15, 2005

“When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I grew up, I gave up childish ways. For now we see as through a dark glass, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” I Cor. 13:11-13

Larry was my father-in-law. Having a great father-in-law is a mixed blessing. The bar gets set pretty high. Few ministers will publicly express their uncertainty about “the after life.” But that’s who Larry was – a person with a lot of integrity – a person who wanted to keep it real. Thankfully, he was also a friend and mentor whose ideas and theology I’m still learning from and being graced by.

Over the last year I asked Larry to share with me some of his favorite sermons. I want to share with you some reflections, words, and images based on these sermons. I’m entitling them: “Home Place: Five Intimations of Coming Home.”

### The First: Happiness and the Home Place

In one of his Mother’s day sermons Larry quoted the famous author and historian Will Durant who once wrote:

Many years ago I lost happiness  
I sought it in writing, and found a weariness of the flesh.  
I sought it in travel, and my feet tired on the way.  
I sought it in wealth, and I found discord and worry  
And then one day, at a little station  
out on a wooded cliff near the sea,  
I saw a woman waiting in a tiny car  
with a child asleep in her arms.  
A man got off the train, walked to her quickly,  
embraced her and kissed the child gently lest he should awaken him.  
They drove off together to some modest home.  
And it seemed to me that happiness was with them.

While many believe an unhappy childhood determines the rest of your life, and many seem to experience it that way, Larry felt he had an unhappy childhood, an unhappy childhood home, and a really happy adulthood—a happy adulthood home. He credited this largely to his wife Susan, and to his children. I think he was speaking for himself when he quoted Thomas Jefferson who once said, “The happiest moments of my life have been those moments I have passed at home, in the bosom of my family. Abstracted from home, I know no happiness in this world.”

### #2 Creating the Home Place:

Larry was committed to being grounded in reality. He said that in the womb we may have known a life where we were fully secure, warm, comfortable, a place of no worries, but life after birth is no paradise. Life is about constant change: age, health, great challenges, death. Being separated from his father and being raised by a mother who was often critical left Larry feeling, in some ways, like an orphan and yet, through hard work, through the gifts of the Spirit, he was able to transform that experience into a passion for creating home places, places where people feel they are accepted and affirmed, honored, cared for and nurtured, places where they can feel real connection, real love.

While Larry credited his family for his experience of home, I think they would all say it also had a lot to do with who he was and his commitment to trying to create the kind of non-judgmental, non-shaming, affirming, fun, playful space that he rarely experienced as a child.

This is what so many who went to Larry as a counselor, or pastor, or friend, or camp director, found in his presence – a place of acceptance, a place of being honored, a place of real connection.

### #3 Faith and the Home Place:

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

It sounds so simple but while the capacity to accept, affirm, be open to others may come naturally to some, for those who life has badly scarred – it is anything but easy and natural.

For Larry, faith was what enables people to persevere, to become fully human, despite all they’ve experienced in life. Faith is what enables people to create home places—spaces of real love, real connection even in the midst of suffering, loss, and death.

William McKinly was one of those who embodied the kind of transformative faith Larry believed in. McKinly’s life was one of tremendous hardship: both his children died, his wife became physically and emotionally disabled as a result. It would have been easy for him to hide from this suffering in his political success but he never did, choosing instead to spend all his free time with his wife. Faith was what transformed what could have been a kind of victim’s life into a victorious life. When he was shot, his first words were words of concern for his assassin, a call not to hurt him. His second words were words to his secretary: “My wife, be careful how you tell her, oh be careful.” His increasingly debilitating condition did not change that spirit as after seven days he said to his doctors: “Gentleman, it is useless, I think we ought to have a prayer,” and then prayed “good bye to all, it is God’s way, his will, not ours be done.” And then, asking his wife to bend over him, he whispered in her ears his favorite hymn “Nearer my God to thee.”

While Larry was deeply suspicious of a lot of God talk, this kind of faithfulness, showing up, doing your duty, loving and caring for others, even in the midst of suffering and death – meant

everything to him.

### #3 The Work of Coming Home

For Larry, The God place, the place near the heart of God, was a home place, a place free of hurt, a place free of death, a place of love and security where you don't have to feel anxious or afraid, a place of release, and unlike our other home places, a place beyond loss and death. Being rooted in this space empowers you to create these spaces for others.

To create this space for others you need to be rooted in reality, rooted in the present. Larry once wrote a brief piece about for his pastoral counseling center newsletter on the connection between coming home to ourselves and being awake.

Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road. The man was struck by the extraordinary radiance and peacefulness of the Buddha's presence. The man stopped him and asked, "What are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?" "No" said the Buddha. "Well then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?" Again the Buddha answered, "No." "Are you a man?" "No." "Well, what then are you?" The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

The story reminds me of a client whom I saw once a week for a year. Each session she faced a wall and on the wall was a large, colorful picture of red and brown and yellow flowers. After a year facing that picture, she came in one day and remarked, "Oh, you have a new picture?" This woman's problems so preoccupied her that she had not been awake to what was going on around her. After a year of pastoral psychotherapy, her problems began to diminish and she began to be able to enjoy the world around her.

In many lectionaries the epistle reading for the first Sunday of Advent is: "The time has come for you to wake up from your sleep." Romans 13:11. When the Christ child comes and he is always coming, we need to be awake. Wakefulness is a spiritual condition to be cultivated and cherished.

Wakefulness is being able to focus one's attention on the present moment. The problem that we human beings have is that we tend to focus on the past and the future and therefore, are not FULLY ALIVE to the present moment. ("Fully Alive", Huntington Pastoral Counseling Center Newsletter, Fall 1991.)

### #4 Home Place for others

The church, at its best, was another home place for Larry, a place where everyone belonged, a place where everyone was part of the family and carried each other in their hearts. His sense of the church as a home place had a lot to do with what drew Larry into the ministry.

For Larry, the heart of Christianity was about giving your heart to God and to others. He had no patience for those who used Christianity to justify exclusion or prejudice or being narrow minded. Individuals must grow up, be open to being totally transformed by God, so that they

can be in loving relationship with others. So, too, the church must always be willing to grow and change. Yet too often the church, like many of us individually, finds reasons to hold onto its fears and resist change, to resist being awake. On this day, let us pray for ourselves and the church that we might indeed create homes where all are welcome, all are affirmed.

#### #5 Coming Home:

Larry's commitment to living in reality, to not giving into fantasies based on past harm or loss, left him skeptical about an after life and yet--throughout his life and preaching we see him living by the faith that the God of life can bring us to life -- even after death. In this great mystery of life, it is my prayer, my great hope, that Larry has indeed found that home, in the heart of God, where there is neither sighing, nor dying, but life everlasting. Amen