

Home

'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like Home.
- John Howard Payne, Home Sweet Home

What does "home" mean to you? What images and feelings does the word trigger? Do you think of a room, a dwelling, a landscape, your family, a nation? Does the thought of home evoke happiness? Sadness? Contentment? Frustration?

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy chants "there's no place like home", but what does she mean? The house she lived in came with her to Oz, but it was no longer "home" without her family: Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. Part of the process of becoming an adult is leaving home in the sense of physically moving away from the house and family that we grew up with. After what is for most of us a temporary housing period during our studies, we establish our own home when we are "grown up", either on our own or with a significant other. Even after getting married, though, there may be a tendency to think of the house one grew up in as home. When and how we establish our own homes in the physical seems to vary greatly.

The need for shelter is one of the most basic human needs, but home is much more than a roof over our heads. Real estate agents in the US no longer sell property, but "homes", suggesting that the purchase comes complete with living happily ever after. In line with the trends of increasing wealth and the desire to keep up with or outdo the Jones, houses in the US began to grow to gargantuan sizes in the 1980s. I have my doubts about whether the people living in those "McMansions" (defined by the Wikipedia as "both large like a mansion and as culturally ubiquitous as McDonald's fast food restaurants", and also called Starter Castles and Garage Mahals) have succeeded in buying a "home". Perhaps as a counterpoint to the supersize me frenzy of the McMansions, and in reaction to rising fuel costs, one of the latest trends in the US housing market is mini houses. With 100 square feet of living space, they are smaller than one of the numerous bathrooms in 10,000 square-foot Mc Mansions. These tiny houses resemble a child's drawing of an archetypical house. The archetype at the other end of the size scale is the castle, stuff of childhood (and grown-up) fairy tales and dreams. Who hasn't dreamt of living in a castle? In real life, though, they tend to be dank and drafty and not very homey.

Home is not simply a place, but a set of feelings: familiarity, comfort, safety, belonging, being able to be oneself, love. Home is deeply connected to our identity. Our homes reflect much more than a style of interior decorating. They reflect who we are, where we have come from, who and what is important to us. In the rebellious teenage years our decorating taste often diverges from that of our parents as we separate from them in order to establish our own identities. As we get older, many of the traditions and treasures from our original homes get woven into the fabric of our adult lives and homes, just as our identities are distinct from but also connected to those of our parents. "Home is where the heart is" as Pliny the Elder wrote, but our

hearts get pulled in different directions as we become adults and set off on our own. The single, guaranteed constant is me and how I define myself in relation to the place where I am and people I am with.

Expatriates face a tremendous challenge by having to re-establish a sense of home—for some, numerous times in various places. Women, as biologically-determined and socially-programmed nurturers, often carry the main burden of this task. Though one's profession may dominate one's life and provide a large chunk of one's identity, the workplace is not home. Therefore, every member of the family needs to help in building a new nest after relocating. No matter how short or long an expat sojourn may be and even if there is another place in the world that you plan to return to, creating "home" wherever you are becomes the foundation for a sense of well-being.

For each of us, home is a refuge, a place where we feel sheltered, protected and nurtured. How we conjure that sense of refuge varies. I discovered during a house remodeling project, that for me, even in the most basic surroundings (in our case a cellar room), dinner by candlelight and fresh flowers on the table instantly transmitted the quality of home. Other symbols of home are music, photographs, or mementos. Rituals and traditions (daily, weekly or seasonal) also convey a sense of home. When we leave our cultures of origin, the automatic sense of belonging and knowing how things work is lost, a deeply unsettling experience. Recreating this takes time, conscious effort and an act of will.

Being wholeheartedly in the moment where I am is the essence of home. There's no place like here and here is where you are. Make it your home, at least for now.