

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

I'm early. I am at a stately housing complex for about three hundred senior citizens that is located near my boyhood hometown in Virginia. I don't quite know what to do with myself, so I linger in the corridor outside the room where we are to meet. It takes me a short while to notice that a small, trim woman with animated hazel eyes is seated nearby on a cushioned bench.

"Are you the philosopher?" she asks me when she sees that I see her.

I don't quite know how to reply. I have trouble with the label "philosopher." I think, "What is a philosopher?" Walter Kaufmann, a modern philosopher who until his death in 1980 at the age of fifty-nine was a professor at Princeton University, compellingly described a philosopher as someone who fights our fears "to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs" and tries to make us "more sensitive to other points of view, and to show how an outlook that is widely slandered and misunderstood looks and feels from the inside." John Herman Randall, Jr., who was a professor of philosophy at Columbia University for over half a century, said the most essential and creative function of a philosopher is that of a "statesman of ideas" in whom "speculative power—the power to look upon what is—is added to critical acumen—the power to make it all fit together [and] work out a newer and more inclusive idea, which will embrace the warring beliefs, and accord them both intellectual justice." At his "most impressive," a philosopher can give us novel perspectives "on all time and all eternity."

Finally, in reply to the woman's question, I say, "Well, yes, and no."

She laughs. "You're a philosopher all right," she says. She has a German accent.

"Where are you from?" I ask her.

"Well," she says, and then pauses. Now it is her turn to consider how best to respond. Eventually she says, "Until I moved here two months ago to be close to my brother after my husband died, I lived for years in Rome. I was a pediatrician there. But I never thought of it as home."

"Are you from Germany?"

"In a sense" is her enigmatic reply. "I was born there. But I guess the truth is I've never really had a home. I'm not sure there's any such thing as home."

No such thing as home? I don't press her to elaborate right then because it is time for Socrates Café to get under way. The room we gather in is informal, almost homey. It has small round antique tables with bright white cloth covers and comfortable cushioned chairs.

"What is home?" I ask the thirty or so participants, exchanging a knowing look with the woman with whom I was talking before the session began. She simultaneously smiles and frowns at me.

The woman sitting right beside her, who for my benefit is wearing a name tag that says "Mildred," says, "I'll tell you what home *isn't*." Pounding her palms on the chair on which she is sitting, she then says emphatically, "This place is not my home. The only reason I'm here is because this is where my children dumped me. I'd rather be anywhere else but here." She then reminisces a bit about her years in New York. With evident pride, she says she moved there six decades ago, against her family's wishes, to be a social worker. "I left my cozy home in the Midwest by choice and made a new home for myself in the Bronx." She almost beams with pride as she says this. Then her expression

seems to darken. She looks around at all of us in the room. "But I am not here by choice. So it can't be home. A home is a place you choose to live."

"Very few of us ever had the luxury of choosing where we live," another resident replies. "I lived where I could find work and provide a good home for my wife and kids."

Another resident then says firmly, "Home is where your bed is. This place is where my bed is. This place is my home."

Mildred calls out, "How many of you feel like this place is your home?"

Only three participants raise their hands, and they do so tentatively. "I must say I'm surprised that so few of you think of this as your home," says the resident who believes home is where your bed is.

"This is one of my homes," says an elegantly dressed woman with lustrous gray hair that falls below her shoulders. "I still have my home in Florida, too."

"Do you come and go between them?" I ask.

"Well, no," she says. She seems almost embarrassed to have to admit this. Then she says, "But I never plan to sell it. As long as I have it, I feel I still have a home there."

She pauses. "What about that expression, 'make yourself at home'?" she then asks. "It makes me ask myself, 'Where are the places I feel at home?' Even though I've been here for several years now, I still don't feel at home. I still feel here like I did when I first moved into my house in Florida so long ago. That first month I was there, it was still just a house. It took time for it to become a home—not just the house but the entire area. But eventually, it became more than a home—it became the place where I learned to cook, where I made lifelong friends, where I fell in love." Then she says wistfully, "I thought I'd eventually come to see this place as a home, but I still haven't. It's still just a house."

"How does a house become a home?" I ask.

"Well," one participant says with a laugh and a sardonic smile, "I think first of all you have to want to live there. Even if there's other places maybe you'd rather be, if you had your druthers, you have to somehow feel that it's your place, your . . . base. I just don't feel that way about here, and I don't know if I ever will."

"I don't think I've ever thought of any of the places I've physically lived since becoming an adult as 'home,'" I say. "I think I feel about them as you do about houses. I used to think it was because I moved pretty frequently, but then I think that as a child, I moved frequently too, but very quickly I came to think of whatever place we lived in as a home and not just a house."

After a moment's pause to collect my thoughts, I say, "Sometimes I think the only time I feel at home is when I'm on the road. I was a freelance journalist for many years, so I traveled constantly and I got used to spending most of my nights in motel rooms. To this day, after I'm home for more than a week, I start to get antsy. I pull out the atlas and look at all the places I've been and all the places I'd still like to go."

A demure woman named Audrey who for some time has seemed on the verge of saying something finally says, "I lived most of my adult life in a beautiful apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It's just occurred to me that all those years I lived there, I never felt like it was home." She is silent for a moment and then says, "I wonder if it's because it was only an apartment instead of a real home. But I don't think of here as a real home either. I wish I understood why. . . ."

"What is a real home?" I ask.

"A *real* home is a place where you knocked and they let you in," says Mildred. Looking at Audrey, she says, "I bet the reason you don't think of the places you lived as homes is because they

weren't places you ever chose to live, but places that were chosen for you. Even though they let you in, you never knocked."

"I think you're absolutely right," comes the soft reply.

"A real home is where you were born and raised," says a woman who throughout the discussion has been standing in the doorway, leaning heavily on a cane. For some reason she hasn't or won't come all the way in to join us.

"My childhood home, which is nearby, and which is where my parents still live, doesn't feel much like home to me anymore," I say to her. "My bedroom slowly but surely became an extra room for my mom. In fact, I don't even have a key anymore."

"You can't go home again," a resident laments. While fingering her pearl necklace, she eventually says, "Well, maybe you can. But it's not the same and you're not the same. You can go back, but is it still home? Or is it a new home? Is it a stranger's home?"

The way she has questioned her original view about home reminds me of George Webber, the protagonist in Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, who said that "the essence of belief is doubt, the essence of reality is questioning." For Webber—whose life often mirrors that of Wolfe himself—home is the place you come from, and the place you leave in order to discover the world beyond and, in the process, break out of your existential eggshell. Years later, Webber returned to his native home after writing a successful novel. But he soon fled when its denizens expressed outrage over his book's scathing social commentary about his hometown. The book's final memorable passage is said to have come from a voice that has spoken to Webber in the night: "To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth." In his lifelong sojourn in far-flung places, Thomas Wolfe himself seemed to have found "a land more kind than

home." But he evidently did not consider this land to *be* home. And even though he felt he couldn't go home again, he still felt the home of his youth was home. It was part of the fabric of his being. In a physical and an existential sense, Wolfe felt a rootedness and a connectedness there that no distance in time or place could erase, and that no other land on this planet, no matter how kind, could replace.

After a thoughtful silence, the retired pediatrician says with an air of finality, "Home is where your friends are. My brother is here. And in the two months I've been here I've already made four good friends. And that is enough." She pauses and then says more hesitantly, "So . . . it is becoming home here, sort of."

"Home is where your heart is," Mildred says.

"What does that mean?" I want to know.

"It's where you have pleasant memories," she replies. "It's the place where I learned to ride a bike and to drive a car, the place where I had my first kiss, the place where I go for family reunions, the place to which I make almost all my long-distance phone calls. It's the special place I care about more than any other."

"I come from a broken home," another resident responds. She is perched precariously on the edge of her chair and leans forward with her elbows on her knees and her face pressed between her hands. "I don't have many pleasant memories from there, but it's still home to me. I think it's better to say that home is where you have memories, pleasant or not." She pauses and then says, "But I'm already wondering if even that's correct. I mean, we have memories of lots of things besides home."

"I think memories themselves are a type of home," says a man sitting beside her. "Vladimir Nabokov wrote that 'memory is the only real estate.' Maybe he meant that you can be stripped of everything else you own, but no one can take away your memories."

SOCRATES
CAFÉ

"My older sister has Alzheimer's, so she has been robbed of her memories, and of her identity," another participant says. Everyone falls silent. He eventually adds, "I really think we're straying too far when we start talking about places besides a physical structure being a home. For instance, my sister lives in a nursing home. Most of the time she doesn't even know exactly where she is, but it's still her home."

"If that's so, then are all the places where we've each lived at one point or another in our lives in some sense 'home'?" I ask.

"No," the pediatrician says, shaking her head. "I was born and raised in Germany. It was my homeland, but it is in no way a home to me." She relates that she and her family had to leave Germany to escape the horrific Nazi persecution of the Jews. From there she went to Italy. "Germany in no sense is or was my home," she says.

"But your roots are in Germany," one woman says to her.

"It's *not* my home," she replies firmly, and falls silent.

"Even though it seems that all of us have at least a somewhat different idea of what home is and where our home is," I say, "is there some sort of connecting thread for the concept of home that we all share?"

A woman sitting beside me says with hardly a moment's pause, "It seems that home is a place, a special place, where we each in a certain sense reside. For many of us this place can be nice and comforting, for others it can be rather awful and discomfoting. But in all instances it's still home."

"I think you're right," says a whisper-thin man. He has been silent until now. He then says, "Whenever there was a war near our home, we moved. During my childhood years, to escape the Bolshevik Revolution, we moved from Russia to Canada. We then eventually moved to Hawaii, then to the mainland of the U.S. when World War II broke out. I know that some here are uncom-

fortable with this view, but my home was not a house. My home was my family. My home was the people I loved most."

"I'm the only family I've ever had," another participant says softly. The severely stooped man clutches the black cane that lies across his legs. "I was raised in an orphanage. It wasn't a pleasant experience, and I never considered it home. After I left the orphanage, I lived by myself and relied only on myself—until now, when I have no choice but to accept help from the staff here at this residence. But like the woman said at the beginning of this conversation, this is not my home." Then he thumps his chest and says, "I am my home."

There is a considerable lull. Finally the man who spoke before him says, "Since this discussion is called Socrates Café, I've been thinking about Socrates. And I think, for Socrates, home was all of Athens. And that's one reason why, when the tribunal who prosecuted him gave him a choice of being exiled from Athens instead of being put to death, he refused. Because to go out from Athens would've made him feel homeless. He preferred death to homelessness."

He looks at the pediatrician. "Germany is only where your roots are. Like you said, home is where the people you love are."

This moves me to say, "The one and only time I went with my mom to the coal mining camp in West Virginia where she was born, I said to her, 'So this is your home.' And she replied, 'This is where my roots are, but you are my home.'"

"Did your mom always make you feel at home asking questions?" the retired pediatrician then asks me.

"She sure did," I tell her.

She asks me to tell them more about my mom and where she is from. "The coal mining camp where she was born and raised is still standing, still intact, though it's a ghost town," I say. "Since that first time I went there with my mom, I drive there whenever

I can. I try to imagine how my mom, in this oppressive environment, was able to so much as imagine that there was any other world, or any other possibilities for herself.

"Somehow, with little encouragement from anyone else, my mom developed a love for the written word. She would sneak away to the little library built by the coal baron at every opportunity and read every book she could get her hands on. By reading, she began to discover the world that lay beyond the mountains, and she began to discover the universe in her mind. I don't think I've ever met a more gifted critical thinker than my mom.

"Even when I was a child, instead of telling me the answer," I go on, "my mom pushed me to develop my own belief system, to discover my own way, my own truths, by my own lights. I was a relentless interrogator who peppered her with question after question. But she never replied, 'Just because, that's why.' She never was the least bit exasperated by my bottomless well of questions. In fact, she seemed to enjoy every single question I asked. Whether I asked, 'Why is the sky blue?' or 'Why is there a sky?' or 'Why are there questions?' her first response typically was 'Why do you think . . . the sky is blue, there is a sky, there are questions?' And from that starting point, we'd have a dialogue. She challenged and pushed me to discover my own answers."

"It sounds like your mom is a big reason why you're doing what you're doing now," Mildred says.

"I think so, absolutely," I reply. "The more I think about it, the more it seems like it was only a matter of time before I would have to start something like Socrates Café."

"Just like Socrates," Mildred says, "you feel most at home when you're philosophizing with people anywhere and everywhere who want to philosophize with you."

She smiles and says, "Don't you think Socrates Café is your home?"

HOMeward BOUND

Is where I am, for all intents and purposes, who I am? Is my home one I carry with me, my way of being in the world? Are my world and my worldview one and the same? What if I said *where I am* is *who I am*? Would that seem outlandish? Is the *where* consistent with the *who*?

At times I feel about my home the way Mark Twain did about his house in Hartford, Connecticut, where he wrote: "Our house . . . had a heart, and a soul, and eyes to see us with; and approvals and solitudes and deep sympathies; it was of us, and we were in its confidence, and lived in its grace and in the peace of its benediction." At other times my sense of home is more like writer Jim Morgan's when he wrote in *If These Walls Had Ears: The Biography of a House* that "the story of America has always been the story of a search for home. It's a restless journey in which we never seem to arrive."

FREE AT LAST

At a Socrates Café in San Francisco held on National Secretaries' Day, a somewhat harried-looking woman sits silently while I ask for questions. Like someone who is dying to propose a question but at the same time is afraid to ask, she keeps raising her hand halfway in the air, then jerking it back down just as I look her way.

"Do you have a question?" I ask her.

"No," she replies while her head protests, nodding up and down.