



HOME IS WHERE YOU HANG YOUR HAT

Darcie D. Sims, Ph.D., CHT, CT, GMS

As fall fades into winter, as the days drift into night and the temperature begins its downward spiral, the holidays approach. Casually at first, they appear on the calendar, but then, too quickly, the days speed by, each more and more filled with things to be done, projects to be completed, gifts to be bought. Suddenly, it is time to celebrate.

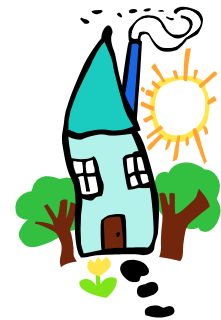
But sometimes, I can't remember what I am supposed to be celebrating. Sometimes I can't quite get into the spirit of the season, and sometimes I just want spring to come-quickly.

As the holiday season approaches, my thoughts always turn toward HOME ... that magical place where Mom is always there, filling the house with the wonderful smells of chocolate chip cookies and bubbling stew on the stove.

HOME. That mystical place where Dad is always there, filling the house with his music and his stories.

HOME. That place where we belonged. That place where time stood still, and things stayed in the same place, and I knew where the grocery store was without consulting a map.

HOME. It was the anchor in my life though that probably sounds funny to those who knew my family. Being military, we moved so frequently that my mom never had to actually clean house. We just got transferred! By the time I left for college, I had moved more than twenty times.



We lived in grand houses, small sets of military quarters, renovated barracks and once, in a structure that had been troop quarters-complete with a large, support post in the middle of the living area and a wooden fire escape in my sister's bedroom. (As a child, I thought it was grand; as a mother, I can now appreciate my own mother's probable dismay).

We lived in foreign countries where no one spoke the same language. We lived in places where our holiday seasons meant nothing, and where we simply did not speak of our beliefs. We lived in isolated places and in crowded places; but no matter where it was or what it looked like, it was HOME.

I always knew I was home because of the wonderful smells and sounds that seemed to flow from our house. It was a place filled with music, good food, lots of people and plenty of excitement. There was a constant stream of people flowing in and out of our houses. No matter where we lived, there was always someone sitting on the couch or helping in the kitchen.

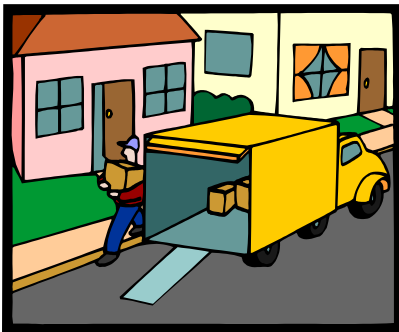


I learned early on that "company" was a word to be associated with polishing the silver and picking up my toys. When "company was coming," you couldn't use the fancy towels in the bathroom and you had to put on a dress (or at least wash your face and look "decent"). "Company coming" was sometimes a curse, sometimes a blessing, but always an adventure.

The holidays were always special to our family, and no matter where we were in the world, HOME was the place to be at holiday time. The holidays brought out the very best silver, linens, cooking talents and the special china. It was a time to celebrate, renew and reacquaint ourselves with our heritage, our rituals, ourselves. We gathered together to play, to eat, to exchange gifts and to celebrate each other's presence. Some years, the celebration was less than at other times, and sometimes it

was hard to find much to celebrate, but always there was the gathering of the family and the recounting of the family's blessings.

As I grew older, it became more and more important to maintain that anchor, to keep those family ties and rituals that bound our family together across the scattered miles. We stayed in touch by phone and by letter, but still, an enormous effort was made to return to our cave ... that safe place where time stood still and love reigned.



The trouble was ... HOME kept moving! We rarely ever had the holidays in the same place two years in a row. We kept our address written in pencil (just as I do now) and after awhile, the only thing that didn't change in our home was the presence of Mom and Dad. Often the holiday greeting card came with a carefully drawn map and detailed set of instructions on how to get HOME.

So we gathered together, wherever the wind took us, always strangers in a new place but always together as family.

It became my own tradition to continue as I married military and we, too, became gypsies -- exploring the world, but always knowing there was still a place called HOME for us.

HOME was in the jungle, in the desert, in the mountains, in the plains, in the Midwest, the East, the North, the South, the West. Sometimes it was easy to get home, while other times, it took real creativity!

Only once in our entire military career of twenty-eight years, did we fail to get home for the holidays, and even then, we simply changed the calendar so that when we could open that door and feel the warm embrace of safety and love, we were HOME for the holidays.

As the years went by, the faces around the table changed a bit. They grew older. (No one ever grows younger!) Hairstyles and fashion fads came and went, each announcing some change in the status of the owner, but never really changing the person beneath the bee hive, the wedge, the crewcut or the spiral perm. Bell bottoms, wide lapels, trench coats, letter sweaters and granny dresses could not disguise the person we knew and loved. It often, however, fueled much discussion and more than a few "comments" through the years!

We came to count on HOME and probably began to take it for granted. HOME would always be there. It was our anchor, our stability in a world gone crazy, our right as human beings. All living creatures have a home, and we drew heavily on the support of that concept. Unlike other families who have an actual place to call HOME, we created a home within. Mother taught us that our roots grow deep, not in a particular place, but deep within us. HOME was more of a feeling and a creation of the mind, spirit and heart than of structure.



Sometimes I felt cheated because I had no real home to call my own. I have often been the "pioneer" of a place, putting down the first steps, the first blades of grass, the first flowers in the a newly dug garden. But I have never stayed around long enough to enjoy the fruits of the harvest. I have never seen the trees I planted grow tall nor the bushes and shrubs mature (although the nurseries where I buy them assure me that these plants "will be lovely in a few years")

HOME may not have been the same place year after year, but it was the same people and the same love around the table. The faces were more lined, the hands trembled as we closed fingers around each other, and sometimes there was an empty chair to reach across, but HOME was always there.

Until now. This season there is no home. There are no wonderful smells of cookies baking, there is no music floating out across the snow-drifted yard. It has all been sifted and sorted, boxed and packed and dispensed to the winds. There is no HOME anymore and I don't know where to go! For the first time in my life, I don't know where to go this holiday season.



The anchors are gone; no longer dancing in this realm, leaving behind empty tracings of their last step. Memories linger but do not yet comfort. It is still too soon to let the joy come through the pain. The memories still echo of the notes of Taps. The final vision is not yet one of peace. There is NO HOME this year, and I don't know where to go.

Despite the years of trudging through this valley, I am, once again, here in the midst of despair. Surrounded by packing boxes that say "New Place, New Town, New Faces, New EVERYTHING," I find myself looking at the calendar, counting the days until we can go HOME for the holidays, then remembering: there is NO HOME now, unless you count a still place on a quiet hill, "home."

There is no one to call, no one to change my address in the address book. Now, my sister and I are the keepers of the family Bible, records and address book.

I suppose that is exactly what I am to learn from this latest journey through the Valley. I am the keeper of the home now. It is now my job to rekindle the fire and keep the embers burning. For us, HOME has never been a place. It has never been a place to hang our hats, but it has always been a place to hang our hearts. As long as there is breath within any one of us, there is heart; and where we hang it is less important than that we do.

So, instead of marking the calendar and planning the great escape to HOME, this year will be the year I bake the cookies and create the magic and set the table and

serve the turkey (or serve the turkeys, depending upon your point of view in our family!). This year, as always, the holidays will be spent together ... hearts linking even though the hands may not quite reach across the miles and worlds.

My roots are deep **INSIDE** -- just where yours really are too. No place can be the magic in your life. It is the life and breath in that place that keeps the joy alive. Whether you have fond memories or terrifying nightmares, HOME can be wherever you ARE. It can be whatever you make it become.

You can bring horror and sorrow, or you can bring light and love. You can create a nightmare or a dream. The choice is yours. You build the foundations for your home each time you touch the heart of another soul. Your family circle may be smaller this year, larger than last, or almost non-existent, but there is a family for you ... if not here, then somewhere inside you.



HOME. I don't know its address or its phone number, and I am not sure there is anyone there to answer anyway; but I do know it exists, and it lives within me and you and anyone who has ever loved, even if only for a single moment. HOME is where you hang your heart; that special place deep inside where the magic begins.

No matter what holidays these are for you, they are yours to wrestle with, to play with, to experience, to cherish, to claim.

Breathe in and breathe out, breathing in peace, blowing out tension. Breathe in joy, blow out sadness. Breathe in love, and let it fill those empty places until you know you are HOME, safe within the magic and the memories of your heart.

