"DINNER AT THE HOMESICK RESTAURANT"

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Once upon a time, I read a haunting novel by Anne Tyler titled Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant.

It is about a family living in Baltimore - a mother raising two sons and a daughter with the father having left one day when the children were young. It shows their bonds, their fractures, their confusions, heartaches, compromises, dreams, surviving, and occasionally thriving.

One of the boys, Ezra, as a young man drifts into the restaurant business, first assisting Mrs. Scarlatti whose establishment is sophisticated, elegant. When he later takes it over as his own, the transformation is radical. No more fancy haute cuisine, no more dim lighting, no more brocaded curtains.

He opens the space up, more light, informal tables, plain wood plank floors, and an open kitchen. He hires waitresses whom Mrs. Scarlatti thought fit only for truck stops rather than only male waiters. And the waitresses were better with Ezra’s soup. "Try our gizzard soup,” she would say. "It's really hot and garlicky and made with love." (20 cloves of garlic was the secret.)

And Ezra soon decided not to have any written, fixed menu, just daily specials.

He’d cook what people felt homesick for - tacos like those from vendors' carts in California, which the Mexican [patron] was always pining after; and that wonderful vinegary North Carolina barbecue that Todd Duckett had to have brought [to him] by his mother several times a year in cardboard cups. He would call it the Homesick Restaurant.

Thus, the name of the novel, Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant. Ezra had found his place in the world as a servant and creator, a server of food and of love.

He circulated among the diners as Mrs. Scarlatti herself used to do. He urged upon them his oyster stew, his artichoke salad, his spinach bisque and his chili-bean soup and his gizzard soup that was made with love.

And, of course, the restaurant flourished.

On special occasions, Ezra would host gatherings for his own family with a special meal, special linens, special care. However, throughout the novel, they are
never able to finish a meal together. Something happens; there's a fight, someone is upset, and someone leaves.

Will they ever have a complete meal together?

The two themes that beckon to me this morning are that of home and of family relationships, matters that are more salient at least for some of us at this Thanksgiving time - either because of presence or absence of home or family.

Where is home? What is it? What are we homesick for? What are you hungering for?

And what do you do with all those family situations that are sometimes hurtful, as well as sometimes healing? Maybe all is well with you and yours, no tensions, no odd behavior, no unfortunate patterns that get in the way of the love we need to give and to receive. No grudges, no painful memories that surface.... If so, give thanks, give thanks.

First, on this matter of home, there are the familiar lines from Robert Frost: "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in."

To which the farmer's wife responds more in keeping with the father in the parable of the prodigal son,

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Those lines are from the poem “The Death of the Hired Man,” which tells the story of the hired man who goes to a farm couple's home to die rather than to his brother's home nearby, despite the aggravations between the farmer and the man.

Not so much where "They have to take you in," but more fittingly, "Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Home is a place where love is served and may well transcend boundaries of genes or geography. To be sure it remains true for many of us that some of our truest homes are places of family and loving histories in specific places. My “home church” is in Knoxville, Tennessee, a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I call it that for the love I received.

And in thinking about homes and food and having had a birthday last week, a powerful memory came back to me. I was perhaps seven or eight. It was my birthday. It was bitter cold for mid-November in Tennessee, and I was playing outside into the dark, probably next-door at a neighbor's.

Summoned to come to dinner, I went in the back door to the kitchen. The windowpanes were steamed up as the boiling water for spaghetti was being drained. I
walked into a warm, bright room. It was my birthday, and I was going to have my favorite meal - spaghetti and meatballs - still my favorite meal - and then, as was my mother's custom, a homemade cake with chocolate fudge as icing. I realized again this week that I never got around to getting that recipe from her, which I suspect she never wrote down but just served with love.

My “home church” remains in Tennessee, yet surely this too is a home I cherish. My family home, my own home is also here these past 30 plus years.

The poet, essayist, activist June Jordan looks at home differently - almost nomadically. She embraces the reality of changes, transitions and new creations, and updating her figures, those of us in this country are expected on average to move 11.3 times in our lives.

As June Jordan for herself contemplated moving once again, she raised a social, societal, question - a larger question, not just philosophical, but practical for so many whom society injures – especially true today: "The question is whether non-Europeans and whether children, everywhere, possess a human right to sanctuary on this planet."

And of course they do, but there is this reality of white racism, white privilege, and this matter of the mistreatment of children. Both are sources of anguish here and worldwide where so many are denied a safe home, a semblance of acceptance or dignity.

June Jordan also invokes one of her mentors, Buckminster Fuller who always wore several wristwatches so that he might more easily know the time anywhere in the world. He was always traveling far-and-wide around the globe, and she listened, "puzzled and without envy. But why... would anybody travel like that; didn't he have a home? Didn't home matter to him?"

"A person is not a tree," he answered her.

And she observes that only slowly did she come to comprehend and begin to embrace his intent: "The whole world will become a home to all of us, or none of us can hope to live on it peacefully." (Technical Difficulties, pp. 21-22)

To be sure, we - you and I - are different from one another, and some of us are more rooted in family or place than others. Some of us make our homes where we find ourselves, always on the move. What unites us and what remains is the heart, how we serve and love.

Where is it and how is it that this happens for you? How are the hungers fed and the love given and received?

Ezra continued to live at his birth home with his mother, who was probably too angry, too needy, too self-contained, too proud, and too independent and whose love
was hard to take at times. For Ezra, the Homesick Restaurant became a new home, one he created, building as he did a larger and larger family of customers.

Home then, it seems, is wherever we might find the love we need, and just possibly one place where we can give the love we need to give.

What makes a place home for you? Familiar things, treasured things, treasured people, or pets or food, and how wide is your home, your heart? Your answer will be deeply your own.

With Thanksgiving upcoming, many of us, at least many who grew up in this country, may have or had certain family rituals, some of which may still continue with all their blessings and challenges. Some bless and some perplex us, yet we repeat them. Some heal; some hurt.

Frederick Buechner, novelist and spiritual guide, offers in one of his novels a character named Leo Bebb, a minister. Leo each year provides a Thanksgiving feast, and he invites anyone in town to come. When they assembled, he would say:

We all got secrets.... Hurtful things. Long ago things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like everyone of us has lost his way so bad we don't even know which way is home anymore, only we're ashamed to ask. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and ask? Why, what would happen is we'd find out home is each other. We'd find out home is those who accept us, loving us lost or found or any which way.

Ezra, at the Homesick Restaurant, serves food to show his caring and at one point reflects about his relationships with others:

I'm worried I don't know how to get in touch with people.... I'm worried if I come too close, they'll say I'm overstepping. They'll say I'm pushy, or ... emotional, you know. But if I back off, they might think I don't care. I really, honestly believe I missed some rule that everyone else takes for granted; I must have been absent from school that day. There's this narrow little dividing line I somehow never located....

And to all this, his mother responds rather typically, "Nonsense, I don't know what you are talking about."

So he finds his own way, like each of us has to do, discovering for ourselves that experience is our teacher, and he, like so many of us, seeks a wider family and a different kind of home.

There is some helpful theology in all of this, saving theology.
Amidst the hurts and pains, the secrets, the neglect and profound nurture, we create our homes, and we give and receive love. Albert Camus once wrote, "Absurdity is king, and love saves us."

And one of the homes we create, for which I give thanks at this season, where we can meet each other, meet ourselves, accept ourselves, accept others, grow our souls, establish connections, is this kind of Homesick Restaurant we call church, we call religious community. I have been a guest and a waiter and a cook and a dishwasher in such a place, where we try to make things with love. Such a place, such a community helps bless the world, heal the world, and heal us in our broken places. It is a saving grace, and it requires of us our best efforts, and sometimes not even that, like our families or our personal homes. Sometimes, just showing up…. Grace awaits…..

Our hungers and hurts are real and the soups, and breads, and chili, and salads, and homey offerings we concoct in so many ways offer life and Life Abundant.

Home is where we meet and greet others, laugh, love, cry, celebrate, even get angry but also forgive and join hands. We thrive, and we learn to give thanks for the simple graces, the simple joys of each day. With that strength, we look upon the world and those who hunger and, who have no safe place, and we simply go about shaking the foundations wherever they need be in order to bend this world toward justice.

Family may hurt us, and we have to understand - accept - that it comes out of their hurting places, which we may or may not be able to transform by our caring.

The German writer Goethe offered as his last words, "Light, light, let there be more light." The 20th century Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno considered those words and suggested, "It is not more light we need, but more warmth. Warmth, warmth, warmth! We die of cold, not of darkness. It is not the night that kills, but the frost."

As fellow guests, waiters, waitresses and cooks and dishwashers at this restaurant, we stoke the hearth into a goodly blaze, we come with our hungers and hopes, and this business, just as it was with Ezra, has been turned over to us. The Homesick Restaurant is not so fancy, not terribly sophisticated, or pretentious, but the food here is good and served with love.

Such a home makes all the difference in the world, not for ourselves alone, but for those who shall join us and our guests known and unknown throughout the world.

Welcome home…..