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More Than Four Walls:
The Psychology of Home

Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.

By Marilyn Ferdinand
When American actor, poet and author John Howard Payne wrote the lyrics to “Home! Sweet Home!” in 1823, he certainly had no idea that this homage to his little thatched-roof cottage in East Hampton, N.Y., would still be going strong 200 years later. What is it about the homely sentiment expressed in this tune that has captured the imagination of so many people?

Joe Ferrari, professor of psychology and Vincent de Paul professor in DePaul’s College of Science and Health, is trying to find out. “I’ve been fascinated with trying to understand what ‘home’ means,” Ferrari says. “I’m a social community psychologist, and one of the things we study is context, setting, how well people fit in a setting. Unlike many areas of psychology that look at deficits in a person, community psychologists look at what skills a person possesses and how to enhance those skills.”

When we think of home, we may picture the house we grew up in or where we have lived for many years. Ferrari emphasizes that the psychology of home is something different from the longing for a physical structure or location, which generally falls under the research areas of community and place attachment. Community develops among people who actively share something in common. For example, living in the same town can foster a sense of community among individuals, but so can being a DePaul graduate, a die-hard Cubs fan or a professional accountant. Place attachment, generally speaking, is the bond individuals form with environments they find meaningful. A favorite museum, a first apartment or a specific stretch of beach are all places to which we can become emotionally attached.

How, then, does home differ from community and place attachment? Ferrari says, “There’s something about home that makes us feel comfortable. In the psychological sense of home, it is something more than a physical place. There may be a security there, a sense of feeling safe, feeling at ease, feeling like you can just relax. It’s a pretty nebulous, but important feeling we have.”

**Home in Different Contexts**

One way to think of home is as a state of mind triggered by memories, but Ferrari is cautious about assigning too much importance to them. “Memories of home can be positive, but they can be negative for some people,” Ferrari explains. “I keep thinking of the person from an abusive household where home wasn’t there.” However, because home may be such an essential part of our psychological makeup, those with negative experiences often find home in other ways.

“People experiencing homelessness don’t necessarily feel like they are without a home,” Ferrari asserts. “It can be derogatory to call someone homeless, as if they’re somehow less than a full person because they don’t have this thing. In actuality, they may have a home—they just don’t have a house.”

Ferrari also is interested in the concept of home among those with transient lifestyles. “Let’s talk about military personnel and veterans,” he says. “They travel around the world, often staying only several years in any location. So what is home to them? I’ve talked with veterans and children of veterans, and they say, ‘Home is different to me than some building. Home is not a place for me, but a state of mind. I guess I have had many homes.’”

**Why Study Home?**

The psychology of home is an important new area of study because of the millions of baby boomers heading into retirement. It has been forecast that by 2030, the U.S. population of those age 80 and older will increase by 75 percent. According to “Where Do We Go From Here? Long-Term Care in the Age of the Baby Boomers,” an article that appeared in the spring 2015 issue of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys Journal, “Community-based long-term care options for the wealthy and the poor are beginning to expand, but for most middle-class Americans, the services they need to remain at home continue to be unaffordable and piecemeal.” Thus, traditional nursing home living will continue to be needed for millions of elderly people who will be unable to remain in their homes.

Fortunately, caregivers already know how to help seniors prepare for a rupture to their homelife. Ferrari says, “When we take senior citizens and place them in nursing homes, what do we do? We bring with them some things that make it more homelike. We need to realize that as we get older, we have to let things go. It doesn’t mean we have to let go of the memories.”

Likewise, with the number of displaced persons at its highest level in recorded history—59.5 million, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—understanding the psychology of home could help aid workers relieve the stress, anger, sense of loss and rootlessness many feel when forced from their homes and homelands by war and environmental disasters. “The very first step,” says Ferrari, “is to be absolutely sensitive to the fact that the person has lost their home. Home for them is going to be very different. We must strive to reassure them that there is a chance for a new home waiting. Just like you take a house and add on a new room—it’s still that house, but you’re changing it. We need to realize that people need to do that when they immigrate to a new country. You keep the structure, but you need to change it.”