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# Household Words

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## I. Home

The Germanic words for home may have been derived from two Indo-European words: *kei*, which means lying or settling down, a bed or couch, as well as something beloved, and *ksêmas*, which means safe dwelling. These linguistic ancestors also yield the Greek *koiman*, to put to sleep, which is the root of *koimeterion*, a sleeping place or cemetery. In time, the word for *home* in several European languages (*ham* in Anglo-Saxon; *heimr* in Old Norse; *háims* in Gothic; *kemas* or *kaïmas* in Lithuanian; *caymis* in Old Prussian, etc.) also came to mean a village, town, or collection of dwellings. Home is both a community and a safe beloved place to lay down your living or dead body for the night or for eternity.

Now, we use the word *home* to refer to one's fixed residence, the center of domestic life and interests as well as the center of the neighborhood, city or town, state and region to which one properly belongs, in which one's affections center, in which one finds refuge or rest. But in the past several decades in the United States, Australia, and increasingly elsewhere, *home* also has come to designate a building that is a place of private residence. According to the real estate industry's limited and desacralized definition of the word, *home* is just a physical structure, one's mailing address, for the time being. This makes light of the fact that some of the despair felt by people living in refugee camps or "homeless" shelters is that they are not homeless. They know where home is or was or should be. They know it as the place where they would most prefer to lay their bodies down, the place they dream of when they sleep, a place and circumstance that can't be bought or sold, that persists even when taken from them by bombs, tanks, tornadoes, eviction notices, or wrecking balls.

## II. Hearth

The Anglo-Saxon word *hearth* and what it means has changed little in the past couple of millennia. Then and now, it refers to the brick, stone, tiled, or tamped earth floor of a fireplace. Metaphorically, the hearth refers to the fireside as the center of home and family life.

What strikes me about the word *hearth* is that it contains within it two other Anglo-Saxon words, *heart* and *earth*. Though of different etymological origins, these three words feel linked. In fact, if you circle the two words, *heart* and *earth*, within the word *hearth*, your circles will interlock. Earthen, heart-filled hearth, humankind's first altar.

Instead of tending a fire that converts oxygen and wood into the heat and light that warms bodies, that converts hard, cold, raw food into something more palatable, and that keeps away the terrors of the night, I work for people who give me the money that buys the gas that fuels the motor in the furnace in a corner of my basement and the electricity that fuels the stove in the corner of my kitchen. This is the hearth that I keep. Though my house is too tiny and my income too small, I dream of buying a wood-burning stove or of hiring someone to build a fireplace so that the hearth I keep will be single, near, and more elemental.

In the meantime, to take the edge off my heating bill during the hardest Nebraska winter in many years, I bought a White-Westinghouse electric space heater at K-Mart. When the nine heating rods become radiant

orange and the fan blows the heat outward, my children and I gather around it.

### III. Body

The Germanic tribes that settled in England fifteen to sixteen centuries ago had various names for the body: *bodig*, *feorgbold*, *feorhhus*, *flæsgchama*, *lic*, and *lichama*. But their most provocative name is also a metaphor: *banhus*, bone-house. And by extension, the mind is personified in the Old English narrative of the Biblical *Exodus* as *banhuses weard*, the guardian of the bone-house.

Obvious physical similarities exist between a house and a body: the skeleton of a body corresponds to the frame of a house; bodily cavities to rooms; the various bodily orifices to windows, doors, chimneys, and other points of ingress and egress. To enter a body or house without the owner's permission is an act of aggression, a violation of private, inner space. Yet, this metaphor breaks down rather quickly. A house is a shell or container that becomes inhabitable space when one adds furniture and a source of heat and light. Bodies, however, arrive as inhabited space, possessing all or most of the essentials, even if small, undeveloped, or defective.

While the shape of the houses we inhabit influences how we perceive space, the shape of the body determines how we perceive everything. The body is, in Anne E. Berthoff's words, "our primordial speculative instrument" as well as the source of the images by which we "represent our recognitions." Try to imagine how an earthworm, spider, heron, or cow perceives the world based purely on the number, position, or lack of limbs or eyes.

Yet people have long conceived of the body as the temporary and earthly abode of the soul or mind. In *Gorgias*, Plato wrote that the body is the prison of the soul. The unknown author of *2 Peter* conceives of his body as a shelter or outer covering: "I think it right, as long as I am in this body [*tent* in the Greek], to arouse you by way of reminder, since I know that putting off of my body [*tent*] will be soon."

At the turn of the millennium we are as convinced of the split between body and mind as were the ancient Greeks, the early Christians, the old Anglo-Saxons. When we fail to meet our own expectations, we say that our spirit is willing but our flesh is weak. When we encounter hard times, we say that it takes everything we've got to keep body and soul together. "Posthuman" artists, extreme body-mind dichotomists, believe that through technology they can transcend the "wet sack" that is the body. The Australian performance artist, Sterlac, had wires inserted into his limbs and organs by which his audience could manipulate his body via the Internet and then watch his responses. "Ping Body" is what he calls this piece of work. (His other works include "Evolving URL Body," "Metabody," and "Extra Ear.") Sterlac says that through his art, "The body becomes hollow, with no meaningful distinctions between public, private, and physiological spaces. . . . One no longer looks at art, nor performs as art, but contains art. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul but simply for a sculpture."

Even people who know better have a hard time letting go of the body-mind dichotomy. Candace Pert, the biochemist who discovered opiate receptors and other peptides that are the biochemical units of emotions, says that the peptides and their receptors "float around on the surface of the cells." Yet she confesses that it took her fifteen years before she could believe the deep story in her research: that mind is not just in the brain but "part of a communications network throughout the brain and body." In other words, mind, emotion, and body are in our every cell. The body is at once the guest and the host, the dweller and the dwelling place.

### IV. Sojourner

Within the Old Frisian *sojerner* or *sojourner* is the word *journey*. The Low or Late Latin root of this word is *diurnation*, a day's travel or work. Generally, a journey refers to prolonged traveling; thus a sojourner is one who resides for a while in a place that is not her home among a people who see her as neither native nor alien.

A sojourner is someone trying to go home again or trying to find a place and people that could become home.

In the Hebrew scriptures a sojourner is one who lives in mutually responsible association with a community, trading obedience and labor for protection. The sojourner's status and privileges aren't due to kinship and birthplace but to the "bond of hospitality" between host and guest. "The stranger who sojourns among you" was exempt from the ban on eating the flesh of animals who died natural deaths, yet could participate in the assembly, was entitled to equal justice, and was required to celebrate the Sabbath, keep laws, observe festivals, etc. Sojourners gathered wood and carried water for their Israelite hosts.

In a sense, all humans were or are sojourners, since human history is essentially a travel narrative: the story of the migration of one's people from that earliest home in East Africa or the Eden of the imagination to the other side of the river, ocean, plain, or mountain. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are sojourners, just passing through, never completely at home on the earth or in our bodies. God is our host whom we turn to for protection and companionship: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears! For I am thy passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers." (Psalms 39:12) And sojourners are to be good guests, helping with the supper dishes, not taking too long in the bathroom, accepting that our ways may not be the ways of our host, never completely unpacking our bags.

## V. Nostalgia

European medical men first diagnosed homesickness in the seventeenth century among Swiss peasants who hired out as soldiers in foreign countries. For some of these mercenaries, homesickness was a fatal condition. In his 1688 medical treatise, *Dissertatio de Nostalgia oder Heimweh*, the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer called this body- and soul-sickening longing for home *nostalgia* (*nostos* meaning homeward journey; *algos* meaning pain or sorrow in Greek). Nostalgia is a longing to go back—to homeland, hometown, house, hearth, family. In short, to wax nostalgic is to yearn to return to that far away, long ago place-time that is home. For me the curiosity is not that some soldiers, immigrants, refugees, nursing home residents, and first-year college students suffer from the insomnia, absent-mindedness, loss of appetite, melancholy, and general wasting away associated with extreme homesickness or home-withdrawal, but that some do not.

## VI. Relic

On a high shelf above the stove, I keep a small wooden box that once belonged to my maternal grandmother, Mae Parris, the last relative of her generation. This box came to me not after she died on July 11, 2000, but after she broke up housekeeping and entered a nursing home—the only time I ever saw her cry. The wood is the color of cedar, though it doesn't smell like cedar. On the top front of the box, "Recipes" is written in green cursive with a cluster of green leaves at both ends of the word. On the bottom front of the box lid are red and yellow apples and a red and yellow pear. Inside the lid is a Bisquick recipe cut from a magazine for Easy Drop Danish Cookies. In the front interior of the box are recipes cut from newspapers and magazines for Hominy Casserole, Lightning Fudge, Cottage Cheese Dressing, Create-A-Crust Apple Custard Pie, Easy Cheesy Turkey Loaf.

Behind the clippings are perhaps 150 index cards, about half of which contain recipes written in Granny's own hand. She wrote legibly and rarely misspelled a word, commendable for a woman who did not go to high school. As I read the cards, I discover a charming quirk: my granny's words start on the line but slant upward, as if moved by the slightest impulse to be airborne. When a "t" appears as the final letter in a word, the tail swings up and back as if to cross the "t" but stops short of this goal and arcs outward instead. Another suggestion of flight.

I do not remember eating many of the foods for which these cards provide instructions: Ham Jambalaya, Carp Burgers, Egg Noodles, Ozark Venison Stew, Carmel Dumplings, Grape Wine with a Balloon, Sauerbraten

Rabbit, Bran and Cheddar Cheese Batter Bread. But the cards remind me that Granny loved anything that included cornmeal (three recipes for corn bread; two for cornbread dressing; one each for cornmeal dumplings, corn dogs, and hush puppies), anything escalloped (cabbage, corn, apples, oysters), moist, fruity cakes (numerous, batter-spattered, edge-worn recipes for apple or peach cakes) and rhubarb pie (two recipes, both for a cream filling).

This keepsake, this surviving fragment, this movable shrine, this relic is a fitting reminder of what I knew about my granny (in her letters to me, I saw her handwriting become looser, more prone to spelling errors and flight as she aged) and that about which I knew little (the hearty noon meals that she cooked for herself and my grandfather). And this recipe box reminds me why the ancient Greeks trekked to those temples claiming to possess Orpheus' lyre, Helen's sandal, or the stone that Kronos swallowed; why medieval Christians sought those shrines claiming to possess John the Baptist's jawbone, Jesus' foreskin, threads from Mary's tunic or a piece of the true cross; why Bob Marley devotees trek to 56 Hope Road in Kingston, Jamaica, where they can see Marley's herb garden, his blender, his rusted bicycle. Pilgrims know that the part is equivalent to the whole, that through a *relic* (the Latin *reliquiæ* means remains) the saint, prophet, martyr, hero, or loved one lives. A single recipe card, say for Ironworker Bean Soup, evokes a kitchen where my grandfather is sitting at the table re-organizing his tackle box, a lost reliquary, and my grandmother is at the counter, chopping onions, garlic, parsley, and celery ("tops and all," the card says) to add to the white beans, ham bone, mashed potatoes, catsup and water simmering on the stove.

## VII. Niche

To the ecologist a *niche* (from *nidus*, Latin for *nest*) is not just the passive receptacle into which eggs are laid and the young sheltered but a statement of dynamic relationship. In his 1936 *Animal Ecology*, Charles Elton wrote that the word *niche* is used to describe "the status of an animal in its community, to indicate what it is doing and not merely what it looks like." *Habitat* is an organism's address; *niche* is its profession, the job it performs in the ecological system.

Figuratively speaking, a niche is "a place or position adapted to the character or capabilities, or suited to the merits of a person or thing." Sometimes one finds her niche ready and waiting; sometimes she must carve it out for herself. What is lacking in this dictionary definition are the mutual adaptations stressed by the ecological definition. If one is to live harmoniously, she must not only consider if the alcove she enters is tall, deep, and wide enough, but if she will complement the contents of other niches, and how she stands in respect to the main events—feasting, dancing, governing, worshipping, passing to and fro.

## VIII. Settle

To make coffee in my green-speckled, Sierra enamelware coffee pot, I add about one-third cup of ground beans to a half pot of filtered water. When the water is hot enough that it begins to roll, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee beckons to me. But it is too soon to pour coffee, since the grounds are still in suspension. I remove the pot from the burner so that the water-saturated grounds will sink to the bottom of the vessel. Several minutes later, I pour dregs-free coffee. I regret that I don't have a glass pot so that I can watch the coffee-water clarify and the grounds sink into a dark, dense layer.

The verb *settle* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *setl*, a seat, stool, or place of rest. At some point the Old English verb *setl* and the like-sounding Middle English verb *saughtel*, which means to appease or reconcile, became synonymous. Thus, *to settle* means the moving downward of the heavy part or parts or the stilling of disturbing or agitating movements. Sedimentary rock, water-deposited pieces of plants, animals, rocks, and minerals that have settled and compacted, is the foundation of most of North America. One who has settled down has ended her days as exile, refugee, sojourner, pilgrim, or vagabond. One who has settled her accounts

has ended the dispute, paid her debts, and is ready to start anew. When rain settles the dust on the road, we open the windows, hang sheets on the line, and enjoy brighter faces, cars, leaves, feathers, sky. What is settled is set and still. But not every stationary thing is settled.

## IX. Citizen

Once, the mass of adults dwelling in the United States were referred to as "citizens." A citizen, from the Latin *civitatis*, a state city, was a person who, by birth or naturalization, owed allegiance to a geopolitical unit, especially one with a republican form of government, and was entitled to full civil rights. But not so long ago, the media, economists, politicians, and others who comprise the powerful, impersonal "they" to whom we so frequently refer, began speaking of the American people as consumers instead of citizens. Being a consumer is good, we are told, because consumerism, a progressively greater and greater consumption of material goods, is the heart and soul of the American economic system, the very foundation of our freedom.

This new label reflected or initiated a shift in our collective sense of responsibility. While a citizen strives to balance wants and resources, a consumer (to consume is to destroy or devour) feels little or no need to restrain or restore. While a citizen's relationship to the other members of her community and nation is securely bound by a sense of mutual obligations (civic and political duties in exchange for civic and political privileges and protections), a consumer remains outside of this circle. In a nation where so many aspire to be greater and greater consumers, to be little or nothing more than one's preoccupation with the getting of things is considered fruitless only by the radical fringe—those consumed by a passion for self-reliance, deep community, God, art, or the life of the mind.

## X. Neighbor

The Old English *neahgebur* is formed by compounding *neah*, meaning *nigh* or *near* and *gebur*, a *dweller*. Quite simply, a neighbor is one who dwells near you. But what is near? In his 1996 *Home From Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler defines a neighborhood as "A five-minute walking distance (or quarter-mile) from the edge to the center, thus a ten-minute walk edge to edge, or one-half square mile." Kunstler's definition is too expansive for Mrs. Vasek, who lives two doors down from me. If she steps into her front yard, she has ventured far. Kunstler's definition is too narrow for me. I set out from my house each day for a three-to-six-mile walk, heading in whichever direction exerts the strongest pull that day. This is my neighborhood. But is everyone I meet on my city rambles my neighbor?

When the testy lawyer asked Jesus a similar question, Jesus answered with the story of the Samaritan who stopped to help a man of unidentified race, rank, and religion, who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead at the side of the road—a man ignored by a priest and a Levite, also traveling that road. Since the lawyer knew that he was required by Mosaic law to love his neighbor as much as himself, he probably hoped that this teacher would offer a purely geographical definition. How much easier to love people whom we barely know (perhaps the lawyer and his near neighbors comfortably avoided the depths by only speaking of weather, garbage service, pets, grass, and gutters), but that seem so much like us, than to love those others—the sojourners, the exiles, those left for dead on the side of the road, those on the other side of the ideological fence. While Jesus did not offer an easy, terse, bumper-sticker definition—"Support Your Neighbor. Buy American"—he did offer a geographical definition of sorts. If a neighbor is anyone who extends mercy and lovingkindness to us; if a neighbor is anyone to whom we could extend mercy and lovingkindness, then each person in the parable—the half-dead victim, the oppressed Samaritan, the Samaritan's oppressors—is a neighbor. Therefore, if no one is too far from our home territory, too like or unlike ourselves to be considered our neighbor, then home, the point from which we determine all distances, is everywhere, too.

## XI. Heaven

The earliest meaning of the word *heaven* was probably spatial: heaven is (or the heavens are) the canopy-like expanse over the earth in which the sun, moon, and stars appear to float. And, too, early people believed that their deities resided up and away in some celestial abode, far from earthly cares and burdens. Siva's heaven was in the highest, most glorious summits of the Himalayas. In Babylonian astronomy the heavens were divided into seven stacked layers, with the seventh heaven being the highest. Both the Hebrews and the Muslims adopted this idea. Thus, Yahweh and the most exalted angels resided in the seventh layer—heaven's heaven. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, heaven is God's throne; the earth is God's footstool.

But, too, heaven is a state of being. It is the goodness, light, and bliss that comes from being in God's presence. In contrast, hell (in Old English *helan*, to hide, cover to conceal) is the place of darkness, evil, suffering, and sorrow: the place where God is not. Many of the biblical passages that mention heaven could either be referring to a literal place not of the earth or to an inner, God-present state. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3) "Provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys." (Luke 12:33)

The line between literal and figurative language is neither clear nor fixed. "Dead" metaphors, for instance, have lost their tangy metaphoric sense and have become bland literal usages. Time is not money, but because we perceive both as valuable commodities and limited resources, we say that we spend, budget, borrow, invest, waste, lose, or run out of time. Though the Judeo-Christian god has some of the attributes of a father, it is not one. Though nature has some of the attributes of a mother, it is not one.

We forfeit some of our freedom and flexibility when we forget the figurative or non-literal nature of our metaphors. For instance, a belief in heaven as a literal place beyond the blue encourages the attitude that the earth is not one's home. When Woody Guthrie visited the migrant worker camps in California in the 1930s, he found the Carter Family's version of the old Baptist hymn "This World is Not My Home" to be extremely popular:

This world is not my home  
I'm just a-passing through  
My treasures and my hopes are all beyond the blue  
Where many Christian children  
Have gone on before  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

According to Guthrie's biographer, Joe Klein, Guthrie believed that the effect of this song "was to tell the migrants to wait, and be meek, and be rewarded in the next life. It was telling them to accept the hovels and the hunger and the disease. It was telling them not to strike and not to fight back." Guthrie was "outraged by the idea that such an innocent-sounding song could be so insidious."

Not fighting for justice is only part of it. If we live as if the world is not our home and that heaven is over yonder, we will always be sojourners, never settling into a place, never putting down roots; nor will we feel compelled to return a portion of what we've been given. If we live as if the world is not our home, we will never embrace the entirety of our being—earth, water, fire, air, as well as quintessence. If we live as if the world is not our home, we will spend our lives waiting for our invitation to the feast to arrive instead of taking our seat at the laden table. To live as if heaven is over yonder is to miss the pieces of heaven scattered before us. Why not fall on our hands and knees and gather as much heaven as we can bear?

Or, Guthrie may have missed the point. Instead of deceiving themselves, those who take the metaphor of the God-filled, heavenly state as a literal, out-of-this-world place, indeed those who take any of their metaphors literally, might be engaging in the ultimate creative act: bringing into existence that in which they have placed

their faith.

## XII. Homewell

When I returned to my growing-up place of Burlington, Iowa, for a visit from whatever faraway place I was living at the time, my grandmother and my great-aunt Pertsie would each say, "I've sure been homesick for you." This struck me as a moving, though odd use of the word *homesick*. To be homesick is to yearn for certain people, but always within the context of a place and often a time. I guess that these two sisters believed that no matter where they were, if one piece of their image of home was missing, then they weren't completely at home. Homesick wasn't the right word for that feeling, though I know of no word in our lexicon that is. Perhaps *home-scattered* or *home-torn* could have named what these two women felt so sharply.

Nor is there a word in the lexicon that names that state when all the essential pieces of home are together. But today, January 23, 2001, I have brought forth the word that my great-aunt and granny needed and am introducing it into general currency. *Homewell* is not only pronounceable and spellable but is a compound word whose meaning is decipherable at first glance, at first hearing. (Is there a word for the aural equivalent of *glance*?) Yet, the longer you abide with the word *homewell*, the more the meaning unfolds. The Anglo-Saxon word *home* is that place where we lay our bodies down and our individual abode within a community. The Anglo-Saxon *wel* or *well* means "agreeable or suitable to one's wish or will." Now, it not only means suitable or proper, but good health (I feel well today.) or favored (She is quite well-off.). The Anglo-Saxon verb *wellan* or *wyllan*, means to bubble up, to flow, spring, or gush from or forth. The Anglo-Saxon noun *wella* or *well* is a deep hole or shaft sunk into the earth in order to tap an underground supply of water. Metaphorically it refers to the source of an abundant supply. When you are *homewell*, you feel rooted, nurtured, aligned, synchronized, whole, plugged in and flowing. When you have *homewell*, what is essential—hearth, home, love, community, belonging, memory, creativity—is with you.

"Now that we are all here," my granny and my great-aunt meant to say, "we are homewell."

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All definitions are from the 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

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