The Journey Towards Home: The Places and Spaces that Shape the Individuation Process

by Renée LeStrange, Ph.D.

One recent morning, I awoke with a feeling of centeredness and being reconnected to the world. I dreamed I returned to a place of home, a place where I lived for nine years and left twenty-seven years ago. In the dream, I was trying to reach this home-place, and step-by-step got closer and closer until I saw the entrance to the subway that would take me the final leg of the journey back to this home in New York City. I knew I had made it then, and woke up with the satisfaction of being united with a place that meant so much to me. I have dreamt often about this home-place, much more than any other place I've lived, including my childhood home or my current home in Atlanta. And the dream place matches my experience living there: New York was a place where I really first grew up, started living a life that felt truly my own. What is it about certain places that they become part of who we are? Why do some places become so meaningful to us—certain houses, cafés, neighborhoods, woods, beaches, cities, countries? What makes a place a home, anyway? And what role do homes and other places we experience serve in the process of individuation, living into our true selves, becoming who we know ourselves to be? And finally, what is the relationship between being at home in the world and being at home with ourselves?

These questions have intrigued me over the years as I have looked back at the many geographical moves I have made across our country and where I have experienced both being at home and homeless or "out" of place. Although there is a body of literature about "place attachment" in the discipline of environmental psychology, and writings about the phenomenology of place, I felt there wasn't enough in C. G. Jung's writings or in the depth psychology literature to help answer those questions for me. Therefore, for my doctoral dissertation, I interviewed a group of people about the places they have known, some they could call "home" and other significant places they have experienced, and about the prominent places in their dreams, their dreamscapes. We started with what ancestral home was, where they were born, where their families "came from" (even that figure of speech implies the close link between place and identity), covering the places they've lived across their lifespans up to the present, and finally what they envision as their "final resting place" (LeStrange, 1997).

What was clear from the interviews was just how central places are, how integral the particular features of specific places are in our process of becoming. They are intimately connected with individuation, "the task of incarnating the Self, that is, bringing the Self into flesh-and-blood reality, in this world, in this time" (Lockhart, 1987). I use the word "place" to mean the sum total of an experience of a geographical locale, along with its history, its anima loci, the social and personal experiences a person has had there, and his or her emotional responses to the experiences. Place is etymologically "a broad area," encompassing a breadth of features and meanings. Individuation is often not viewed as a process taking into account the environment in which, by necessity, it takes "place." Biologists have demonstrated how the genetic constitution of an organism by itself is not determinative of what an organism becomes; there is an interplay between the genome and the environment that determines the outcome of development. Humans must not be any different.

Carol, one interviewee, grew up in a very "tight" family structure, near her mother's extended family. Her mother felt confined in her role as homemaker yet was too fearful to break out of it herself. A parallel behavior was that the mother rarely ventured much past the family home. Carol felt the pressure early on to take over the mantle of homemaker like her mother, but she was independently finding freedom out in the neighborhood, riding her bike on the sidewalks of the Midwestern city, exploring with her friends outside. This dichotomy of "tightness" and "freedom" continued to play out as she grew up, married, and moved to several different cities and states. One of the first moves she made with her husband was into a house on a cul-de-sac, thinking it would give her some safety and freedom to walk her babies, for the kids in which to play as they grew up. However, she found instead that the structure of the cul-de-sac gave her a feeling of being trapped, in too tight a space, not free to go anywhere further than the top of the street. They subsequently moved again, finding a more open landscape where she started to thrive. "It was a big two-story house on a gorgeous piece of land…Talk about a place!...The yards are very large and flow together, there's no walls separating people….Everybody was open." She began gardening, growing green things as she herself was growing in a way she hadn't before. She had found room for herself in a house and neighborhood that combined to give her a sense of room for growth. And then, after six years in this stage, her husband grew restless and wanted a new job and so they moved to a different city in the Midwest. However, she found another experience of being "trapped" or in too tight a space. The town was old, provincial, where everyone goes to this club and wears this kind of designer outfit: "It was who you knew, what your husband did, it was a very social-oriented community." In addition, she found the winters to be too long and cold. In other words, she found that social structure and weather can be as confining as cul-de-sacs. However, with the individuation process already constellated, it was as if she knew what kind of space she needed and pressed for a change. She and her family ended up in Southern California, where I interviewed her in her open-design, spacious house in a neighborhood with sidewalks like the ones that gave her a sense of "reach" in her childhood hometown. She showed me the products of this expansive self—her artwork, poetry—that could only come into being, it seemed, in the appropriate facilitating space.

The stories of others revealed a similar theme; particular

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places facilitating or impeding the individuation process and becoming an integral part of the outcome. We can look at Jung's building of and his living in his Tower home at Bollingen for what it reveals about the symbolism and power of place (as described in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*). He himself called this home a "concretization of the individuation process." Each step of the building of his home, which occurred in several stages over a 32-year period, was built in response to an intuitively felt need for a new and particular kind of space that could accommodate his evolving self. He started out building a rounded maternal hearth and ended the construction years later with an upper story that represented "an extension of consciousness achieved in old age." This process took him from the enveloping and nurturing space of a maternal womb, symbolizing a new phase of individuation or rebirth, to a place, many years and experiences later, that symbolized an extended range of consciousness [the greater expanse afforded by an upper story) that develops as individuation progresses. The Bollingen home that was thus created was an important place for Jung all those years to do his creative work, where he felt his No. 2 personality come to life, and where he felt most connected to his ancestors and the deep psyche. "At Bollingen I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself."

Extending this idea of place as a setting and product of the individuation process, Barbara Hannah described how as Jung was advancing in years, he had dreams of another house at Bollingen, one across the lake from where his earthly abode was located. In the dreams, the "other Bollingen" house appeared in various stages of construction. In his last year of life, he reported that in a dream, "he saw the 'other Bollingen' bathed in a glow of light, and a voice told him that it was now completed and ready for habitation" (Hannah, 1976). The individuation process, as symbolized through his building and inhabitation of Bollingen, seemed to continue: "The unconscious psyche…behaves as if the psychic life of the individual, that is, the individuation process, will simply continue" after bodily death (von Franz, 1986).

A prominent theme that emerged out of the research was that a rhythm of home and journey is involved in the lifelong path of individuation. Home and journey can be thought of as two states of being, two ways of being engaged in the world or with oneself that together, or alternately, create the person who comes into being. The meaning of "home" was multilayered for my interviewees, as it is in the English language. Home was referred to as the place of residence regardless of the emotional feelings associated with it, or a place where the person had lived for an extended period of time. However, it was used primarily for the special feelings that come when experiencing a place one may or may not have known for a long time but one that gives a feeling of "rootedness, where one belongs, where one comes home to oneself." It was spoken of as the center of the individual's world that supports his or her individuality, which satisfies specific psychological and physical needs and desires. One put it: it is where "I feel I'm accepted. I can be myself, I can be real. I can be who I am and let that come out. It's OK. It's safe." Another: home is "when I'm aligned with myself, when I'm in touch with myself… There's an inner comfort and security and inner warmth," "a nurturance there, a sustenance." The places of living considered to be home were both residences and places away from the residence, the "homes away from home" such as places of work or play, or a certain geographical region. Places of belonging were places where people felt at home in themselves; home in the world corresponded with places where they could be at home with themselves.

One interviewee, a woman born and raised in a large city in China, called the city her "original place," "connected to my sense of who I am… This is the place that created me almost, molded me." From the etymology of the words "origin" (root word meaning "to move, set in motion") and "mold" ("earth, soil") come the sense that this city represents the particular soil on earth from which she has sprung, where her life journey was set in motion, and whose particular qualities shaped the person she became. Another who grew up in New England, said the place was "bred in the bone" for her, inferring that "New England" was built into the supporting structure of the self as she developed in that environment.

The phase of "journey" was seen as the movement away from home or within home, the expanding, the reaching, exploring, letting go of the known and encountering the unknown. Journey may begin when home becomes stagnant, no longer able to contain the growing self, when one is "called to adventure," to journey outward, whether that be in physical or psychological space and is either intuited or forced upon one [as Campbell (1949) explains in the start of the hero's myth]. One research participant, Maggie, described a time in her life when she outgrew the containment of a teaching position that once felt supportive:

> "It was time to move out of that stultifying confining [place] even though that's exactly what I needed when I was 20 and 27. [I needed] someone else setting parameters like crazy for me, because I certainly didn't think I could set them for myself… Then after awhile, I knew that I'd be 'leaving home,' so to speak. That's when I had more and more of a voice. I stayed for a long time until I knew that."

Ann dreamed of a house at the end of a curving line along with the words, "the long and winding road to a home." This symbolized for her the long and winding road she has taken in her own geographical and psychological journey looking for a safe home-place. Another participant used the metaphor of "tacking," as in a sailboat:

> "I think I've spent my life searching for home. And in doing that, I've like tacked, like sailing, from place to place, trying to find what that means to me… I can't go in a straight line to my goal… It's an intuition. So, I'm going to zigzag all over the place, but it's going to keep moving forward. It takes a lot of time to do this kind of sailing, but if you want to go in that direction, that's how you have to go. The direction was basically finding out who I was and finding a place for myself and connecting to the world."

Then at some point, the new findings, the "boon" in Campbell's hero myth, need to be brought back home and so a renewed process of homesteading begins. The new discoveries, the new experiences then have a chance to become integrated into a broader sense of self. A period of settling into a new home-place may begin and the cycle continues. An interviewee envisioned "old containers breaking; bigger, stronger ones being built as I continue my growth." One is "reborn again and again until full psychic

development is reached" (Jacobi, 1967).

New York City was the place where my grandparents and great-parents settled when they journeyed from Europe for a better chance at life. Although I grew up outside New York, we visited grandparents and relatives there often and the place seemed to internalize as "ancestral land" for me. When I moved there after college, it was not so much as a rational, thoughtful move to recover a connection to the past and to my ancestral line. It was "fate"; life led me there without my being fully aware of what was happening. However, it turned out to be the first time in my life I felt truly at home, feeling the freedom and opportunity to really find out who I was. It has remained in my psyche as a home-place to which I return in dreams, and in waking life, as often as possible.

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