

Character and . . .

the Places of Home

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Character and the Places of Home

Annalee R. Ward

Young Lacey Lawrence of New Orleans survived Hurricane Katrina after passing police rescued her. Floating on an air mattress, she watched as they shoved the bodies away with their oars. She never did hear what happened to her uncle. She and her family managed to stay in New Orleans, but she found herself adrift. “I was at this new school, my friends were gone, and kids would be saying things. . . . I was getting into fights; violent ones. That was something I never did before, ever. But you lose everything and you don’t know how to deal with it” (Carey).



Natural disasters can lead to sudden displacement and homelessness.

Hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, fires, famine across the world. Wars, conflicts in too many places to list, create refugees and exiles, migrants who seek to immigrate to a new place. All lead to displacement on a global scale. People are homeless for many reasons. Add to that the desperation of poverty, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol abuse, and we have more homelessness. Perhaps that seems too far off. Perhaps you are someone who has moved for school, a job, or family needs. You may have physical shelter,


but the questions of *where do I belong* and *who am I in this new place* emerge with urgent ferocity no matter the reason for displacement.

Displacement disorients. Displacement destroys connectedness. Displacement damages our identity. Displacement calls into question all that we hold dear—or perhaps sharpens it. Placement, in contrast, orients. Placement grows connections, relationships. Counting a place as one’s own means belonging to and with a particular community. Placement reminds us that our values are tied up in the particularities of place that have formed us.

In this journal, we look at the concept of home, which gives specificity and emotional content to the idea of place. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman writes about place:

Place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. . . . Place . . . is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom. (4)

Place, home, and character are intricately related.



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Character and . . . the Places of Home begins a conversation on the relationship between the concepts. Does moral character have anything to do with our identity and belonging to a place? Where might character intersect with the places of home? Does character shape those places and if so how? How might

particular places of home in turn shape our character? These kinds of questions began our discussion and research, ultimately leading to the essays in this issue.


This journal emerges out of a process of reading and discussion over the course of a semester. You’ll notice that most of the authors cite *Beyond*

Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh. This book, along with *Place: An Introduction* by Tim Cresswell, initiated our discussions and, in many ways, framed them. We also hosted an interdisciplinary conference titled “Character and Place: How We Shape Home and Home Shapes Us” where Brian J. Walsh was the keynote speaker and Scholar-in-Residence.

We discovered this topic is both generative and expansive. Authors often ventured down a path only to pull back and decide it was too big to tackle in these small essays. As far ranging as our potential topics took us, we returned often to two truths about places of home: 1) Places of home vary and change for all of us, and 2) what remains constant are visceral cravings, emotional memories, and deep longings sometimes for the nostalgic and sometimes for the out-of-reach imagined ideal. Adding into our discussion the role of moral character complicated our investigations in ways that forced us into deeper reflection. These ideas about place, home, and character call for a bit more introduction.

Places of Identity and Boundaries

The idea of “place” apart from a particularity is an unhelpful abstraction. Before putting it into conversation with notions of moral character, we used Tim Cresswell’s work, *Place: An Introduction*. He argues, “Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world” (19). It is “a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world” (18). Place matters because it holds meaning—without meaning a place is just a space (16). Our interactions with a place give us perspective and context from which to live our lives.



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Within that context, we enact the practices of our lives which in turn shape our notions of who we are and thus that contextualized place becomes “a way-of-being” (19). In Cresswell’s words, “Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori

label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice” (71). And our becoming is a becoming in connection with the community of that place. It is deeply tied to memory—ours and others’—and to the stories, the narratives of the lives lived there (128).

In order for a place to exist, we need some sort of boundaries, some way to set apart this place from that place. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh also explore the relationship of identity to place, but do so through a recognition of boundaries.

Boundaries are constitutive of identity. . . . Without boundaries there can be no sense of “place” as home, as a site of hospitality, security, and intimacy with local knowledge. Without boundaries there is no locality and thus no sense of membership in a particular community, family, or neighborhood with an identity distinct from other communities, families, and neighborhoods. In short, identity itself is impossible without boundaries. (52)

Boundaries exercise power to create a place to belong and a place of identity.

By affirming the need for some sort of boundary to create meaning-filled places of identity and orientation, we stand in a tradition that believes in a God of love and justice who calls us to live truthfully and establishes boundaries. Boundaries, then, create a meaningful moral order and a place to stand to affirm concepts of good and evil, right and wrong (Wuthnow). Without a sense of being able to affirm one place, one community, as good, or some actions as right and some as wrong, we lose authority and even ability to stand against injustice and inhumanity. Bouma-Prediger and Walsh put it this way:

If all we have is border crossing and boundary blurring in a postmodern context of radical pluralism, then we have no place from which to make ethical judgements, no borders or boundaries the transgression of which constitutes oppression, no ability to distinguish the cry of the oppressed from the arrogant exclamations of the oppressors. (49)

At the same time, boundaries, if too impermeable, create insiders and outsiders, marginalizing some. The key, note Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, is to ensure the boundaries are penetrable and provide “both definition and openness, structure and flexibility” (54). People need to be able to enter a home. The door serves as a boundary but also an invitation to cross into the place.

At Home in a Place

As we consider the power of place to shape identity, and create a locale of belonging through the very existence of some kind of border, our thoughts move particularly to the places we call home. A residence offers one understanding of home, but life’s transitions, schooling, marriage, economics, all often bring changes to our homes. Sadly, “sometimes we know home by what it is not” (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 41), because for some, home represents pain. However, we consider such a home an aberration. Home ought to be a place of safety, of security, of stories and memories, smells and rituals, of food and family, of identity, of belonging.



Home conjures up deep emotions, memories, and nostalgia.

Home also conjures up nostalgia for a place that has deep associations with experiences, emotions, and people. That nostalgia continues to remind us of a longing, a memory or experience just out of reach. Frederick Buechner reflects on that feeling in his book, *The Longing for Home*.

The word *home* summons up a place—more specifically a house within that place—which you have rich and complex feelings about, a place where you feel, or did feel once, uniquely *at home*, which is to say a place where you feel you belong and that in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment. (7)

The geographical and emotional locations of home, rich with memory, rarely if ever remain the same. How many of us don't find ourselves longing for something that isn't there?¹ Our lives of mobility, our pursuit of education and jobs, even the fact that we keep growing older and changing—all of this contributes to a sense of uneasy displacement, of longing to keep things the same even as they slip through our fingers. Are we ever really at home? Or do we create homes in many places throughout life?

It's that last question that directed our discussion of the intersection of character with the idea of the places of home. Inhabiting a place is a way of being through practices that form habits of character, traits of virtue and even vice.

Character and . . . the Places of Home

Where does moral character intersect with the places of home? The answers lie in the everyday practices of life.² Our very character is shaped by the places we dwell and the places, real or virtual, we call home, the places where we find ourselves at rest physically, psychically, and spiritually. The community (ies) we interact with has potential



Positive life-giving habits lift up the places of home through the compassion, justice, and integrity we live out.

influence (see Jones's article) as does our environment (see Hoffman's article).

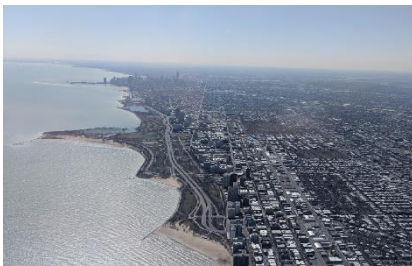
Anthropologists have long studied the morality of particular places and the way the places exercise influence on individual character and ethics. Nigel Rapport in a collection titled *The*

Ethnography of Moralities, for example, examines the way English landowners have developed a particular morality in relationship to what they consider "outsiders." Places shape our character.³

But it works the other way too. We have power to influence the places we call home. "Indeed," notes geographer Smith, "the very term 'place' as used by geographers means much more than a certain location, and it is in the human threads of place that morality enters" (279). Our attitudes expressed in our actions and everyday practices reveal our

character traits. David Harden notes the power of attitudes to shape our relationship with a particular place, observing that seeing a place as “something to be escaped and exploited or the accepted and respected” (61) will lead to vastly different lives. Positive life-giving habits lift up the places of home through the compassion, justice, and integrity we live out. By nurturing our desire to care for the places of home, we’ll discover a yield of places of hospitality, places of authenticity, places of gratitude and compassion. Opening up our eyes to the goodness in those places has positive impact. “When we see our surroundings not as stuff to please us but let ourselves see their intrinsic value instead, we create the opportunity to see our surroundings as sacramental pointers to goodness outside of our interests and ourselves” (Harden 46). Thus, the give and take of character’s influence on places and place’s influence on character has potential for positive impact.

The essays in this journal are arranged to begin with a common understanding of home as the particular place we reside and the importance of hospitality; move to the local geography of home and the power of our consumption in our community there; stop over at college to consider how homesickness from this change of address can be borne with character-shaping practices; and conclude by considering the potential of nature to nurture our character.



Relationships, space, and place matter.

Places of home are studied by many, but one extensive report comes from IKEA. For its 2017 “Life at Home” study, IKEA conducted interviews and surveys of more than 22,000 people in 22 countries on what makes a home and concluded that four things matter: relationships, space, place, and

things. The articles in this issue touch on all of these in some way but focus on them as they engage moral character.

Kerr takes up the challenge of considering the importance of hospitality through the practice of homemaking. “Homemaking, like worldbuilding, is a world-ordering enterprise. To turn space into place is to establish

normative boundaries that bring a certain kind of order to the life lived with those boundaries” (Bouma-Prediger and Walsh 53). Too often, however, images of perfection in home style and entertaining get confused with the holy work and spiritual requirement of creating a welcoming and open space for others. Her honest wrestling with self-doubt and homemaking aspirations encourages us all to be more hospitable.

Jones engages the place of home from the perspective of community. David Harden observes,

Our western culture with its market economics and technological cravings has moved us away from concerns for community first and into a hyper-individualism. By moving away from an emphasis on relationships with God, humans, nature, and even goods, our ethics eschew the particularities of place, of local communities. (101)

Jones’s response to this kind of problem challenges us to model authenticity and integrity by rejecting the easy consumerism of national chains and big box stores. Instead, when we support local businesses we encourage the particular development of a community ethos that fosters a moral environment via personal relationships. This leads to relational authenticity.

We move from a look at ways to exercise one’s character influence on place in Jones’s article to Crawford and Bryant’s focus on homesickness at college, a way of considering how particular places contribute to character formation. Buechner notes, “The longing for home is so universal a form of longing that there is even a special word for it, which is of course, *homesickness*” (71). When students find themselves not yet at home, but rather, feel homesick, universities need to acknowledge the issue, its potential negative effects on the students and even their own retention rates, and find ways to empower students to work through it. The authors challenge institutions to engage in holistic moral education that seeks to develop students’ perseverance, resilience, and sense of purpose.

Hoffman’s article takes us outside to the place of nature. He explores the possibilities for nature to nurture our character by providing

opportunities for caring and stewardship, by displaying the pleasures of diversity and the need to protect just access to that diversity. He concludes with the reminder that nature engenders awe and gratitude. A recent study led by Paul Piff found that a sense of awe increases prosocial tendencies toward altruism, generosity, and ethical behavior as well as decreases feelings of entitlement. If we can find ourselves at home in nature more often, we may discover we are growing into better, more moral people.



Nature engenders awe and gratitude.

Brian Walsh’s response essay, “Meredith on the Subway,” prophetically reminds us of the power of the grand narrative of the biblical story of God’s work in Jesus Christ to shape the places we live and the ways we live in places. By practicing a life of compassion, integrity, and justice, we contribute to the making of homes that are havens of hospitality.

Conclusion

In a world of displaced people, there is no shortage of a need to belong and no shortage of a need for a place to call home both spiritually and physically. When we have a secure identity and live in love, we have the ability to look outside of our home with the eyes and hands of our loving Savior. Yes, problems of displacement and homelessness abound and longing for belonging remains. But remembering that character development occurs in particular places opens a lens to deeper insights into ways character and place interact and foster a symbiosis of a kind. Looking at how homes and places have shaped us gifts us with the vision and responsibility to shape the places where we find ourselves in such ways as to create hospitable places—homes even—for others.

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Notes

¹An ultimate, transcendent meaning of home is not addressed significantly in this journal issue, but certainly undergirds much of our understanding of the world and our place in it. Frederick Buechner addresses the longing with an answer. “The home we long for and belong to is finally where Christ is. I believe that home is Christ’s kingdom, which exists both within us and among us as we wend our prodigal ways through the world in search of it” (28). Augustine says it this way: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

²Alasdair MacIntyre writes at length about the role practices have in virtue, and the need to pursue this excellence for a lifetime within a social context (273).

³Significantly, however, place is not a sole determinant of character. “Can we expect persons to transcend the values of their time, or place? Evidently, some are able to, and hence argue or act for a better way of life, otherwise the moral particularities of old eras and communities would never have been challenged and changed” (Smith 296).

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