

# No Place Like HOME

The surprisingly challenging task of behaving well with those who know us best

Cathy Norman Peterson

My family moved across town when I was in grade school. The new house was just six blocks away and had more bedrooms to accommodate our growing family. It was an easy move as far as relocations go—we kept our friends, our school, our church. But my siblings and I were dismayed about leaving the house we loved. It was uniquely ours—the bay window where we spied on the tennis players at the park across the street, the den where the twins once locked themselves in and my father had to rescue them by climbing through the window, and the upstairs bedroom with the sloping ceiling that three of us shared until another baby arrived. We vowed to each other that when we grew up we’d come home and buy it back. The new place was just a bigger building. It couldn’t possibly ever become home.

When we talk about the idea of “home,” we often mean returning to places from our childhood. A favorite alcove, the basketball hoop on the garage, the weathered kitchen table. But as we grow older and move throughout life, home also becomes, in the words of Robert Frost, “the

place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” As we near the conclusion of our series on civility, we return home, the place where life begins—and where it ends.

“The word *home* summons up a place,” writes author and theologian Frederick Buechner, “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 which 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.” Home is a place of refuge, a place of comfort, a memory that fills us with longing. It’s the place where it’s easiest to be, writes Buechner, and the place where it’s the hardest, for sometimes home can be a place we want to flee. Yet even in the midst of our complex emotions and experiences, home is always the place where we long to return, even if we can only do so in our dreams.

As we explore the complexity of life at home, we identify the need for a different kind of civility from any other sphere. What does it look like to practice civility at home and beyond?



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When we come home at the end of the day, we can exhale. We let our guard down. We unwind. We savor the solitude, or we tell the people we live with about our day. Home is the place where all the stresses and trappings of the rest of life can be released—at least momentarily. At its best, home is refuge and sanctuary and safety.

It's the place where we can be honest. That means our families and roommates and loved ones know us like no one else does. They know what we're like when our masks are off. They know our every quirk and fault

and foible. That also means it's easy to take that haven for granted. We can be *overly* honest at home, letting go of frustration or stress or anxiety that has accumulated throughout the day. We take things out on people at home that most of us would never do at work or in other settings. We slip into incivility. Living well with other people—as most college freshmen can testify—can be an ongoing crucible for character development.

Home is where we learn to navigate intimacy. At home we get on each other's nerves and in each other's space. We're stuck with each other,

even when we're irritable and weary. We can express our emotions at home, and we give each other space to do that. We muster up patience even when we would rather ignore our kids and roommates and spouses and check up on our Facebook friends instead. We deal with each other's mess and noise even when we would rather cocoon ourselves in pristine silence. Home is the place where we learn how to be civil even when our guard is down.

But such close, daily interactions

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also mean we know exactly how to hurt each other. When my eight-year-old son is feeling especially out-sized by his twelve-year-old brother, he chooses the weapon that will most wound, attacking with angry words, with incisive accusations. His aim is true. He can hurt his brother's feelings in ways no one else on earth can.

Thus, while the call to civility at home may seem underwhelming at first glance, in fact home is the place where civil behavior can pose the greatest challenge. Because the people at home know me so well, it's the place where vulnerability and openness can be most risky. To reveal myself at home is truly to lay myself bare. I can pretend to be kind and patient and generous at work. I can even feign niceness at church. But the people I live with know better. They are not fooled by my pretenses. And I am much more willing to tell my family that I am stressed or busy than I am to admit that I am lonely or disappointed or disconnected. If I reveal my true struggles at home, how will they respond? Tease me? Ignore me? Having faith in those who live with me is hard work. It's the gritty side of intimacy. It teaches me humility—even when I don't want to learn it.

Yet Christ's call to compassion applies here, perhaps even more than it does in public. Change your thinking, Jesus tells his followers. Even when you are hurt or wounded, return that rejection with love. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. What does this mean at home? When I am driven to anger and frustration by someone who knows exactly how to get under my skin, when a thousand little hurts add up to relationships that are distant and detached, or when tensions escalate at home, Jesus invites me to respond with love.

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In those lists of civil behavior we learned in kindergarten, one of the simple maxims is, "Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody." I am notoriously bad at this. I never want to be the first to "give in." Of course, it's easy to fall back on the perfunctory apology—the one my siblings and I perfected when we were young. We could toss off a flippant "Sorry" with scarcely a thought of remorse. My kids do the same thing, though sometimes they vary it for good measure. Recently, my youngest said to his older brother, "I'm sorry that *you* hit *me*."

While the apology may be easy to toss off, forgiveness is not. Referring to his own family of origin, Henri Nouwen writes, "There is a lot to forgive, not just because our family was not as caring as other families, but because all the love we received was imperfect." There is wide space for both gratitude and forgiveness with our families, he says, for we can trust that our families—brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents—*want* to love. But all of them, all of us, carry around unfulfilled needs. Is it possible, Nouwen asks, through the love of Jesus and the strength of the Spirit, to "step over our anger, our resentments, or even our hatred, and discover that their limited love is still real love, a love for which to be grateful"? It is a high call.

Discerning a path to healing and forgiveness through our hurts and pain is one challenge. Laying bare our sins is another. In January the archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, presided over a "Liturgy of Lament and Repentance" in an effort to move

toward healing in the aftermath of the horror of abuse in the Catholic Church. The service drew the attention of the editors of the *New York Times* for the archbishop's unusual depiction of genuine contrition. He and Cardinal Séan O'Malley, archbishop of Boston, lay silently prostrate in front of an altar stripped of adornments. They washed and dried the feet of eight victims of abuse. The archbishop told the 400 worshippers gathered in a Dublin cathedral, "When I say 'sorry,' I am in charge. When I ask forgiveness, however, I am no longer in charge. I am in the hands of the others. Only you can forgive me; only God can forgive me."

The *Times* editors commented, "Archbishop Martin offered what may be the most specific apology yet, showing an understanding—rare among his peers—of the difference between lip service and true repentance." In the face of scandal and a pervasive unwillingness to apologize for sin, the archbishop demonstrates what theologian Miroslav Volf talks about in rightly remembering wrongs. While the wrongs we commit against each other at home may range from carelessness to deeply damaging, we are called to do the hard work of healing through remembering and forgiving together.

In what other ways can we cultivate deeply civil behavior toward those who are closest to us? We make counter-cultural decisions to intentionally spend time together—sitting down together at table to eat meals, turning away from the various screens that demand our attention, saying no to the myriad of good options vying for our time. We constantly re-learn how to say no to personally attractive opportunities in order to have even a hope of being present for the other

people in our house. The challenges are constant, and we usually notice them just when we are failing. Civility at home means I stop multitasking and pay attention to a detailed account of the movie my son watched yesterday or a blow-by-blow description of the boys' stick battle on the way home from school.

Yet a civil home is not exclusively insular. Rather, it is a place where we cultivate hospitality. It is a place that reflects Christ's church, functioning as a body while at the same time welcoming others in. As a teenager, I was mystified when I visited a friend's house and her mother proudly showed me their plastic-enshrouded living room furniture, clearly pleased with its pristine condition. While the reluctance to actually use our furniture may be reminiscent of a bygone era, perhaps our culture's eagerness to embrace a more relaxed lifestyle has affected our ability to welcome others into our homes. When my friend's mother set aside a room in the house specifically for guests, perhaps on some level she was recognizing the importance of cultivating space to receive friends and strangers.

Today we hardly value etiquette the way previous generations did. We associate "Miss Manners" with obsessively proper behavior, involving stilted protocol and buttoned-up demeanor. But the word *etiquette* originated in the eighteenth century French court of Louis XIV when the king's gardener noticed that people were tramping through his gardens. He put up signs, or "etiquets," as warnings against such behavior. Those signs or tickets were used later to gain access to court functions. And when soldiers were traveling home from battle, they used the tickets to

gain shelter in the homes of the king's subjects. Rather than empty ritual, those early etiquettes became a symbol of hospitality and shelter for those in need.

So etiquette—opening our homes and ourselves to others—can be an act of grace. My husband grew up in a teetotaling house, and he often tells the story of the day his parents

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invited a neighbor for dinner. The man's wife was out of town caring for an ailing parent, and he happily accepted, announcing, "I'll bring the wine!" An adolescent at the time, Kurt vividly remembers the family conversation that ensued in which his dad explained, "Making Mr. Free feel welcome in our home is more important than our rules, so tonight your mother and I are going to have wine with dinner." It was a formative moment for him.

As we nurture and practice various aspects of civility at home, we also go forth to practice civility in the world. In some ways our culture encourages us to be insular. We talk about "family values," and place the family at the epicenter of our ethics and morality. But such an inward focus short-circuits our ability to develop civility that is more than merely polite behavior. Over-valuing family can produce intolerance and rigidity if it leads us to devalue the larger community—the exact opposite of civility.

Every few years, the fads in parenting seem to swing between the extremes of hyper-discipline and a laissez-faire approach. "Tiger moms" who refuse to let their kids bring

home Bs or settle for second place give way to proponents of "un-schooling" who send their children out to play rather than confine them to traditional classrooms or force them to do math homework. Along the way both camps make passionate arguments in defense of their positions. Regardless of where we land on that spectrum, each of us is quick to

justify our own choices about how we form our own family. When we reflexively defend our children and our parenting, those defensive attitudes can translate into bias and inflexibility.

Rather than viewing home as the pinnacle of our relationships, perhaps we do well to consider it a "thin place," as the Celts called the space between heaven and earth where the distance seems to dissipate and the veil is lifted. With such a perspective, we develop a more elastic understanding of family. We invite friends and neighbors and acquaintances to participate in our family time. Perhaps we bend our rules to allow our children to accept invitations that widen their community, even if we haven't thoroughly vetted every friend who invites them over. This demands risk and trust, but wisely letting our kids venture out of the fold and entrusting them to others who are not exactly like us is an act of faith in the ideal of kingdom community.

Such faith is the beginning of generosity and the goal of civility. We trust the work of the Spirit in the people around us. We let go of our self-protective defenses. As we forgive each other, we are empowered to welcome others into our homes and into our lives. ■