

Cleaning House

*'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'* Robert Frost

Far beyond a physical structure where we eat, sleep and store our stuff, home is a network of relationships where, as Robert Frost noted, "when we go there, they have to take us in." Home is the place we go to sort ourselves out. It is that place where we go when the world beats us up – when we lose our jobs, our romantic relationships crash and burn, or we simply get lost in pain that is too much to bear on our own. For most of us, this connotation of home is filled by our families of origin. These relationships and the physical and emotional safety nets they provide are essential to our physical and emotional well-being.

Still, most of us take our relationships with our family of origin for granted. Rather than feeling grateful that we have people who will catch us when we fall or take us in when we need it most, we tend to focus on their failures. We point out our parents' horror about our non-gender conforming clothing and behavior and the failure to mention our romantic partners in their Christmas letters as a sign that they are hopelessly homophobic. We keep count of the awful gifts they've given us over the years – the electric razors, footballs, tacky jewelry, and Chicken Soup for the Soul books – as signs that they have no clue who we are and condemn them for not putting in the effort to figure us out. We expect them to be different and in doing so create our own suffering. We resent them for who they are not and do our best to push them to be who we want them to be. Oddly enough, resentment never improves relationships; it just creates dissatisfaction and conflict. Even if we turn away from them to find "home" elsewhere, resentment keeps us emotionally attached because it pushes us to obsess about how they hurt, betrayed, disrespected and/or failed us.

Robert Frost's notion of home is the minimal standard. At its best, home is more than a safety net. Home is where we feel accepted and embraced. When we're home in this more embracing sense, we can relax and be ourselves. Home is the community of people who share our experiences, worldview, and dreams. And home is our chosen family – the people we chose to invest our time, lives and future with.

Even though our chosen families tend to accept us where as we are in terms of our gender identities and sexual orientation, our limited ability to accept people as they are can make these relationships as disappointing and frustrating as our relationships with our families of origin.

Al-Anon revolves around the principle that it makes no sense to get angry with an alcoholic or addict for getting drunk or high because that's what they do and getting mad at them doesn't change anything. It's like being angry with someone whose legs are paralyzed because they can't walk. Instead, the idea is to accept that getting drunk and/or high is what alcoholics and addicts do, that that is their limitation, and to make choices about how to respond based on this acceptance.

If you want to have a home where you feel truly comfortable, you have to clean your relational house. You might have plan accordingly because you know that your husband or wife sucks at being on time or compromise with your girlfriend or boyfriend about how tidy or clean your house is. And you might have to let go of that chip on your shoulder about how your

parents let you down. And you'll definitely have to walk away from relationships that are hurtful, disrespectful, or abusive.

Once you have cleaned your relational house, you can focus on the positive attributes and the gifts your remaining friends and family bring to your life and feel grateful for them. You'll be able to engage them from a place of love rather than resentment. Your relationships will flourish and your sense of being home in the broader sense of the word will expand. Home won't be the place of last resort. It will be a place where you feel secure and emotionally embraced.

To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com .

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