News
EarthBeat



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by Donna Schaper

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"Where are you from," asks the woman next to you at the cocktail party.

This is a question that many people ask, as we make a new friend or acquaintance. It's better than the former cocktail party gambit of, "What do you do?" That has been socially deemed somewhat rude, especially if you are talking to someone who is a "housewife" or unemployed.

Now, the much preferred question is to ask about origins.

Everybody is from somewhere, and the answer is usually pretty simple. You know where you are from — or think that you do. The question, instead of stumping, invites connection. New York, we will say, or Chicago or Toledo or Louisville. "Ah," says our interrogator, "I know someone from there." Or, "I was once there, just drove through." We make a connection through geographies.

We have better connections, though, than our place of birth. Or our mother's maiden name. Or our Social Security number.

We could also say I am an Earthling, or a human being. I am an Earth being, I am from earth, will go to earth and am now on Earth. That expansive definition will surely amuse your partner, as she may argue that she is the same. There, you just multiplied connection.

You could even make a joke and say that you have a *pied-a-terre*, French for "a foot on the ground." That may be truer of many of us, the kind that move around a lot, even if we might prefer not to. We may actually have a couch or room to occasionally use or a frequent-flyer number that attaches to one hotel or the other. We call those places intermediate homes.

This Earth/earth answer about our origins is true. It is original. We live on Earth, it is our common home. We have our feet on the ground — or again, so hope that we do.

The day we realize that, whether we have a drink in our hands or not, will be a big day. From it, care of the Earth will occur. We will enjoy a domesticity together. We will keep house together. We will be caretakers together. We won't act like we are renting. We will act like we are at home.

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Instead of making the joke from Saturday Night Live's Coneheads — "We're from France" — we won't think we are lying about our origin to fool someone. We will be telling the truth. We will love our planet Earth the way the Coneheads loved their home planet.

Still, many people feel homeless on Earth, and not just those who sleep on the street. There is a widespread spiritual homelessness. Even Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote it a while ago:

> I rode by a house, with the windows lighted up
> Looking pretty as a Christmas tree
> And I said to myself,
> As I rode by myself,
> Everybody's got a home but me.

It is a stunningly beautiful song, even though it comes from a musical, "Pipedreams," which was a flop. There is also the famous Lutheran hymn, "I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home." And there is that song that keeps Mother's and Father's Day in business: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home."

Author Edwidge Danticat speaks of "alien residents" in her book *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. She speaks of people who fear deportation or who have already been deported or those who self-deport because they just can't take the uncertainty of homelessness any more. She understands that even "documented" people can feel homeless in their homeland. She surely gets how people who are undocumented wonder about where they belong.

For people between countries, being an Earth citizen is a powerful answer to the question "Where are you from?"

I have long believed that it is the very identity Americans have as "immigrants" — the people who took over from the natives and then imported slaves to do the hard work — causes a severe sense of homelessness. We imagine we earned this country we call home, but it's not really ours.

On the "On Being with Krista Tippett" radio show in April, Rev. angel Kyodo williams, a Buddhist sensei, argued that the good news right now is that we are stopping to deny our origins and starting to stare straight at them. We have become strangers here. We are no longer in denial about that. We are intending to face it.

We are diving to the bottom of the iceberg as opposed to skating on its top. We know we have turned ourselves into resident aliens — when all along, Earth is our home; we only feel homeless. In reality we are from earth and return to earth.

We have a home.

[Donna Schaper is senior minister at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Her last book, *Never Enough Time: A Practical and Spiritual Guide* (Rowman & Littlefield), suggests people approach "time famines" by rearranging their priorities and changing the way they think, even if they can't change their circumstances.]