

# The Concept of Home: Traditional and Modern

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I have just returned from a trip to Norway with my Norwegian wife, Inger. We toured the home locations of Inger's parents, one now a township on the rugged western coast focused on seafaring pursuits [Aarsheim] and the other an area inland with farming at its core [Kvakland]. Both locations are where extended family continues to reside and both areas are known by the last names of their main families. Inger's father's surname and Inger's maiden name are the name of the extended family as well as the name of the specific area in which that family resides [Aarsheim]. And in the case of Inger's father, the name of the area and her maiden name trace back to before history was written for the area in the 700 A.D.'s.

While Inger married me and has become an American, and while she has lived in the United States now for most of her life, she remains intimately tied to her Home base in Norway. "Aarsheim" – the specific place on the planet, the extended family that lives there, the identity in the shared surname of many of the individual residents living there, and the huge time depth of this overall situation – I would argue that these are the key ingredients in the traditional concept of Home. And, importantly, it is this perspective on what Home means that is shared by most native/aboriginal bands and tribes – worldwide. Moreover, for bands and tribes, often their very origin legends defining themselves as both humans and as a cultural group are tied to specific locations in their Home territory.

Very few modern Americans understand or appreciate Home in this traditional sense. But this was the concept of Home for 99% of human history prior to the development for most humans of civilization over the last 3,000 years. And we are still trying to convert tribes, chiefdoms, and "warlord" based ethnic groups to our more consolidated nationalistic/federal social structures!

Each of the components defining traditional Home have weakened for several reasons over the history of civilization, especially in recent western civilization. First, industrialization, urbanization and technological advancement in the last 150 years have promoted mobility in the population. Second, the once strong tie to the land/place of a rural, agriculturally based society has diminished with consolidation of family farms into much larger corporate farming operations. Third, huge technological advances have led to much greater agricultural efficiency, resulting in fewer and fewer family members and workers being required to do the farming work. Lacking local options, farm and ranch children

have had to move elsewhere to find employment opportunities. Fourth, as the population of rural areas has declined, a great many small farming towns and the community centers they constituted have ceased to be viable. Fifth, the commitment by modern society to a long period of universal education for children and adolescents has made it possible for rural children to prepare for an outward career and life orientation. Sixth, the development of county, state and national transportation systems and personal vehicles to utilize them has made it relatively easy for children raised in rural and suburban locations to leave to far away locations. Seventh, greatly expanded communication systems [eg. television, cell phones, the internet, social media] have facilitated access to a vast domain of personal and public information and greatly expanded and facilitated connections among humans worldwide. This communication system serves a whole array of purposes which makes moving “away” that much easier.

What is gained in this modern context and its definition of Home? First, individuals are much freer to select an occupation that accords with their personal interests, skills and talents. Second, much greater mobility affords individuals with the ability to move to distant locations in pursuit of their best opportunities. These individuals can make – and often have to make – multiple such moves in the course of their careers. Third, those who experience the extended family and small community as oppressive can more readily escape in pursuit of a happier situation. Fourth, the ability for individuals to maximize their career opportunities can lead to the accumulation of greater personal wealth which can result in a higher standard of living for these highly mobile individuals and their nuclear families. Fifth, the ability to live at a higher economic standard permits individuals to support greater opportunities for their children, who have a better chance to repeat the overall process. Sixth, an argument can be made that in general the pace of “progress” increases for civilizations under these modern free flowing conditions which favor rapid change. Greater personal freedom is the overall benefit of the departure from living life within the traditional concept of Home.

What is lost by living life from within this modern concept of Home, which celebrates individual freedom and mobility and societal change overall? First, Home becomes a much more vague notion as its geographical place loses stability and time depth. Home becomes where the individual is living now, not where the extended family has lived for generations. Second, there is no relationship between the individual's name and the name of the location where he or she is living. A house or apartment becomes a home mostly through movable internal furnishings and decorations. Third, with repeated movement, commitment and involvement in the local community becomes much more tenuous – at least for adults. If the individual family remains in place for at least

several years and the children remain in a single school system with consistent friends, children may be the only ones who develop a deeper, more detailed sense of Home in terms of place and a sense of community. Accordingly, many modern Americans look back to their childhood and adolescent years as the time when they had the firmest sense of Home. Fourth, in the modern setting, individuals are more isolated without the ability to rely upon the extended family for advice, support and security. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins become mostly acquaintances, and the role of revered and respected elders mostly disappears. As a result, this modern concept of Home caters to adults in their “productive” years, leaving adolescents struggling for a long time to get there and older citizens “discarded” in what can be their lengthy retirement years. Fifth, there is more reliance socially on colleagues and friends. But friends developed periodically over the course of a mobile life are seldom known in the round, in depth, and with the level of commitment that pertains in the traditional extended family Home setting. Stated more generally, impersonal rather than personal social relations predominate in the urban and suburban situations under the modern banner of Home. Sixth, the focus on individual freedom results in weakening even the primary marriage commitment, as reflected in the fact that divorce has become the norm. And for children, divorce fractures the solidarity of the nuclear family. So, as important social units, the extended family tends to become remote and the nuclear family weak in the modern situation. Seventh, in the midst of relative isolation and the loss of dense, personal, face to face relations, individuals tend to pursue less satisfactory substitutes: 1) virtual connections to others via the internet, and 2) intimate, anthropomorphized connections with pets [the emergence of “emotional support animals”]. Eighth, many modern Americans suffer their decline into old age more alone, frequently clustered together in assisted living facilities and nursing homes set apart from the rest of the community. Death itself often arrives in one of these facilities or in a hospital ICU rather than at home surrounded by family. Overall, by applauding the pursuit of individual freedom, it is the depth and density of close social relations and the deep commitment and involvement in community and place that have been lost in the modern concept of Home in America.

Modern Americans would do well to recognize that the modern concept of Home has arisen for most humans only in the last 200 years. In terms of the history of modern humans, this is a brand new approach that is in its initial phase of being tested for its long term viability. By contrast, the traditional concept of Home has been fully tested and proved viable in all human social and ecological contexts over hundreds of thousands of years. Additionally, in support of viewing the modern concept of Home with caution, the argument can be made that the pace of technological and economic change that is promoted by the modern free and

mobile approach to life and Home does not allow sufficient time for the needed societal adjustments to occur. With change outrunning social adaptation [required level and degree of cooperation], it is reasonable to observe that the viability and sustainability of the entire system of modern civilization is put at risk [eg. failure to deal with the global challenges of overpopulation, of climate change, of worldwide epidemics, of potential nuclear holocaust, etc.].

The modern, mobile approach to American life and Home promotes individual freedom and the opportunity for career oriented adults to pursue occupational and material well being – anywhere. The traditional more settled approach to life and Home supports less such freedom but offers more security in deep, dense and durable relations in extended family, local community, and intensely familiar physical place. Each approach to the concept of Home has its advantages and disadvantages.

Is there an option to bring together the best of both of these approaches to life and Home? More likely there needs to be a creative compromise which we can only seek if we are aware of what we have lost and where we seem to be headed in our otherwise casual acceptance of the current modern concept of Home in America.