

## The Road Home

*by Lauren Kingsland*



The return of the warm weather has sent me to the garden center for the flowering plants that become my balcony garden. Selecting colors and shapes that “play well” together is a familiar task, not unlike what I do all day in the quilt studio. With plants my goal is a variety of leaf shapes, flowers and heights with some repetition of color to tie them together. This year my color is red. When I choose fabrics for a quilt I don’t have to consider the half day of direct sun available or how much they will grow, so it’s another same-only-different artistic activity. This annual pilgrimage to the nursery is part of the rhythm of my life and one of the ways I make whatever place I live into home for myself.

Our homes and gardening are important to many of us here in Gaithersburg. During my walks past some of the more lavish places in our midst, I’ve wondered if people really make a distinction between house and the more abstract concept, home. The Kentlands Garden Tour in June 2005 was a chance for me to find out. Visitors to my Arts Barn studio during the tour were invited to write on a fabric square to the writing prompt - “Complete the sentence, Home is...” The fabric was a pebbly looking pale cream/blue wide stripe which would become a path through houses and gardens in my concept.



Seventy-four people took the time to share their brief description of home, and most wrote in their own words. I did get the quotations “Home is where the heart is”, “Home is where you hang your hat”, complete with a sweet drawing of a hat, and the quote from Robert Frost, “Home is where when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Much more often were things like, “Home is where the children play”, “Home is my sanctuary”, “Home is a comfy couch and a good book”, “Home is where you are loved and needed.” There was one family that shared their street address, but that was the only reference to a particular building, and they were from out of town.

My friend Charity Goodman, an anthropologist, did a little data analysis on these quotes and found three main themes among these responses. Most often home was the presence of particular people, noted either by relationship or by name. Tied for second place was the idea of security and of being loved. The results were not surprising. We all look for home and long for a place to belong. We know in our hearts that, despite the advertising claims to the contrary, home is not the house, but what goes on in the house.

This informal investigation was particularly important to me then because I felt homeless myself at that time. My children are grown and on their own, their father is married to someone else, and my house where, for so many years, we had lived as a family was sold to someone who immediately cut down the big trees. I may have had a safe place to sleep out of the rain and enough to eat, but my home had evaporated. In order to rebuild that sense of home within myself, by myself, I needed to ask what home actually is. I learned that home is an idea, a template, that we carry with us in our hearts, like the snail carries its shell on its back. That idea allows us to move from place to place and adjust to interpersonal changes without being lost. We may be coming home or going home or looking for home, but we all have a sense of what it is.



My quilt "The Road Home" evolved from these written blocks. They are arranged in a path that spirals from the upper left corner through complex wild green fields, past many pieced houses, to one house at the center. My original concept had been more orderly, predictable and idealized, but these community participation quilts take on the energy of everyone who writes on them. The sweet rows of houses and planned gardens of my first thought could not express the variety and truth of those

words. The road is not necessarily smooth and takes unexpected turns through unsettling places, but there is sanctuary along the way like the snail shell home we carry in our heads.

When the finished quilt was on display in the Arts Barn gallery in early 2006, I often went out of the studio to talk to viewers about what they saw. For some people the road started at the center and the journey was outward. Others saw the house in the center as the home destination. I heard stories about grandparent's rural homes. I heard about leaving a distant country to find a new home here, far from a birthplace to which there might never be a return trip. Elderly widows told me about selling their houses after being in one place their whole adult lives to move near their children. All were stories about the search for security, being with someone who loves you, and then finding and tending a place where one can put down roots and live.

I've settled at last into a new sense of home and have resumed the annual rhythm of my life after a period of syncopation. For me, the garden is a gesture of making my home harmonious with the natural world that is home to all of us in a bigger sense. My balcony garden is just as important to me as the old yard, and easier to mow. I value the companionship of my son, Ben, and my Mom when we get together. My home is not the house, but the community of friends and neighbors.