

THE SANCTUARY OF THE HOME

By Tricia Clark-McDowell

In her book *Home Sweeter Home*, author Jann Mitchell shares how she is “a recovering slob” whose years as a frazzled single mom resulted in a sink full of moldy dishes, misplaced and thus unpaid bills, and a home pervaded by TV and rock music. But with time and maturity, she says, she’s changed her tune — literally. Now her one bedroom, home-office condo, decorated in the southwest style, is like a retreat. Visitors love its coziness and warmth and the way it reflects who she is.

Jann attributes her newfound feeling of sanctuary to some key points, not the least of which is the fact that she is now well organized, with everything in its right place. She has avoided fads in her decorating, letting her home reflect her unique personality and interests, such as her love of New Mexico. She has also emphasized the handmade in her choices of furnishings, honoring her own creative (and often experimental) talents and those of her husband, other family members, and various artists. And she doesn’t hesitate to redecorate according to the changing seasons, simplifying the house in summer and adding items like pillows, throws, and table covers in the winter. Jann indulges her love of nature with the shells, rocks and such that she brings inside and celebrates the sacred through the creation of an ever-changing personal altar. “My home is now a sacred space I can’t wait to return to, “ she says, “either from the office or half way ‘round the world.”

Joyce operates a bed and breakfast and a small farm on a forested mountain ridge in California. From the outset, she envisioned it as a sanctuary, not only for her family but also for animals, fairy folk, friends, disabled children, and even strangers. “Our home has always been a haven,” Joyce shares. “Everyone knows where the key is. If you’re sad, hungry, or cold, this is the place. The B&B is an extension of that. I want people to come here to relax and play ‘Grandma’s house’ with little treasures, books and birds’ nests tucked about.” Her generosity has warmed the heart of many a guest. Not surprisingly, she calls her home “Place of Needs Met.”

Michael and Lucy share a home in Ashland, Oregon. Their story is touching in that Michael first found much-needed solace here when his mother owned the house. After years of estrangement from her, he came to heal the rift and lived in a 10x14 foot

cabin in the backyard for five years. Michael lovingly cared for his mother during a long illness, and when she died he moved into the house. He subsequently offered his friend, Lucy, refuge when she became exhausted from years of business travel. They have created their separate bedrooms as personal expressions of sanctuary. Michael's reflects his creative outlets in music, writing, and sculpting. Lucy's room is sparse and brightly colored, containing plants, original art, an altar, and a meditation area. The kitchen area, including a large table that easily seats ten, is open and seamlessly flows into a larger community room where guests gather for talk, meditation, chanting, and workshops. The numerous, yet simple art pieces and furnishings hold spirited energy. They have also created a wonderful labyrinth in their backyard, a place for contemplative walking and healing open to the community. Michael and Lucy recently married and held their ceremony, where else, but in their homey sanctuary.

Home may be the most important and readily accessible of all the reverent places on Earth. Yet, all signs indicate that our society suffers from a profound homesickness. Social researchers support this observation with the following fact: people move on the average of every two years. That's a lot of cardboard boxes! Homelessness, in a sense, is not exclusive to low-income or unemployed persons. It is not as much physical as it is a psychological and spiritual malady characterizing a true loss of connection to place. Far from seeking simple shelter, many people question if they are living in the right place.

We have said that sanctuary begins within oneself by perceiving and knowing one's own sacredness and acting more and more from that place. In terms of a physical environment — the *outer* expression of sacredness — sanctuary could be said to begin by accepting the premise that the home, or “the hearth”, is sacred turf as well. Just as family is at the root of all our human relationships, testing and training us in all aspects of right attitude and behavior, likewise, how we choose to create our home environment gives us the basis for interaction with all other environments. If we have a harmonious family life and an uplifting home environment, we will most likely possess or gain the strength and wisdom to overcome whatever challenges we might face when out in the world. Whether we are tested by conflictual relationships, a negative work environment, strong

materialistic desires, physical pain or illness, or anything else, when our foundation, our home life is secure and strong, we not only survive, we thrive.

How do you really feel about your own home? Do you have difficulty leaving at times —for work or errands — because your home environment is so cozy and warm, so conducive to comfort and relaxation? Do you generally feel a great sense of relief when you return home after a period away? Do your friends love to visit you because they too feel so much “at home” there? If so, you know you’re on the right track. If you have succeeded in creating a haven of peace for yourself and your family, it is quite likely that others will feel drawn there as well.

If you feel differently, in other words, your home is not a particularly pleasant environment in which to be, reflect upon the aspects that you are not happy about. Have you created an environment that is sterile, obsessively organized, or devoid of that “lived in” quality? Or have you perhaps succumbed to an overwhelming sense of clutter and disorganization? Do you spend an inordinate amount of time searching for things that you’ve misplaced simply because you have more belongings than you really need or too large a home to be able to adequately care for? How might you be able to change this situation in your home and reclaim that true sense of sanctuary that lives somewhere in your heart?

In reflecting upon the gradual transformation of our own disheveled home, I think of five key points, which are worth considering.

1. **Does your home reflect your current interests and passions**, or is it more like a museum or mausoleum — full of relics of the past? Give yourself permission to periodically cull and update your furnishings, the color of your walls, and various types of lighting, even the artwork in your home. Seasonal deletions or additions of accent items can give a fresh look that renews the feeling of vitality in certain rooms. Stagnant environments promote stagnant thinking and boredom. Even small changes can make a home and its occupants feel different.

2. **Have you brought nature into your home** by including plants, fresh flowers, and special objects from your wanderings, such as shells, rocks, feathers, pieces of wood, and the like? Such items have a power and beauty all their own, serving as poignant reminders of the natural world, which surrounds you. Do the windows of your home look out into a well-kept yard, garden, deck, or balcony, which serves as an additional link to nature, encouraging you to spend time outside?
3. **Do you honor the sacred in your everyday life** through the creation of one or more altars that in some way embody your relationship to Spirit?
4. **Are you mindful of the mood you want to create** in a given space, allowing you to fine-tune that environment with the appropriate lighting, music, scents, photographs, artwork, textures, and colors? In particular, is there a room or quiet corner in your home into which you can retreat for sanctuary time alone? Without this necessary time and space for reflection, it is difficult to keep up with the incessant demands of the world.
5. **Have you succeeded in simplifying your home environment** so that maintaining it does not require more time and energy than you have? If you are overwhelmed with the amount of possessions you have and the immense responsibility demanded for their care, it might be time to lighten the load. Clear out and clean one room at a time. Give things away. Reduce unwanted clutter. If this proves excessively difficult because of your attachments to items, have an objective friend or family member help you. Most people are quick to recognize what is unnecessary in another's home!

Here is an example of this process. We had a certain corner of the living room with which we were very dissatisfied. Clearly, its potential was not being utilized. Why did we pick *that* particular corner of our living room to create a little isle of grace? Part of it is the six-foot long bank of four multi-paned windows. Through these windows the low afternoon sun casts muted earth tone colors and backlights the leaves of the nearby deciduous trees. The sound of the pond is inviting. And the eye can wander over forty feet up the woodland garden path to the entrance of the meadow garden. Of course,

one can also watch birds and our cats frolic around beneath the green canopy of the nearby 200-year old fir trees whose limbs reach down as if to cradle and bless our home. But all this revelation came *after* we rescued that end of the living room from a terrible fate of many years: a dark bulky brooding broken player piano against the wall, on top of which perilously perched a bazillion dust-buried *things*. And an unsightly six-foot tall bookshelf plus two smaller bookshelves haphazardly crammed with papers and books, like French fries stuffed in a cardboard sleeve. Oh, not to mention the worn, torn bamboo area rug. Oops, almost forgot, the supposedly “quaint” windows had so many panes that it was literally a pain to look out!

Now, however, this corner space *feels* right. The piano went to charity, as did the rug. The smaller bookshelves were dispersed, while the taller one was positioned differently so as to act as a partial room divider. The two middle panels of windows were replaced by one large clear pane (incredible transformation!), and the walls were painted a desert earth tone to starkly capture the late afternoon sun. Add a small womblike couch, round muted ornate rug, intimate lighting, reverent spiritual icons, a hanging plant, and a scented candle. Voila! Fifty square feet of flat out inviting soul space!

Perhaps one of the keys to creating this inviting quality in a particular setting is sincerity. Somehow you just know if a place is a real sanctuary or is only pretending to be. It takes time and energy to make a place look and feel lived in: human energy being invested continually over months, even years until good associations and warmth and heart literally soak into the furniture. This inviting quality can't be faked. The Velveteen Rabbit had to be well loved and well used to finally become real. Similarly, your house can only become a true home and haven if you fully engage you heart and soul in the process. It's challenging yet rewarding work that cannot help but pay rich dividends in the end, with creative perseverance and a willingness to be real.

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