



THE MEANING OF HOME

State of the Family Report 2017



FINDING HOME IN CARING COMMUNITIES

by Damian Le Goullon

Damian has extensive experience providing education to disadvantaged communities. He works at A Place to Belong, a Brisbane based mental health network. He is the Coordinator of the Reading and Writing Program, which was the Winner of the 2015 Anglicare Australia National Award. As a Research Higher Degree student at the University of Queensland, he is investigating adult disability participation in community education.

George came to our reading and writing group to improve his literacy. George and his family have inherited dyslexia, a condition that has long been recognised as having genetic origins (T Scerri and G Schulte-Kurne, 2010). He was struggling with this hidden disability, feeling that it was harder to find work, maintain financial security and to be able to care for himself and his family. Once we got to know George, however, it became apparent that he needed more than words; he and his family needed a place to call home.

A Place to Belong is a service with a vision that encourages communities to 'walk with' people who have been isolated, estranged or alienated by social attitudes to mental illness and disability. We aim to activate community support and care rather than rendering people invisible through the segregated support of institutions. The idea of situated care is central to our approach. Care should be recognised not only as a behaviour but an attitude of "being with another" (Swanson as cited by J Dyson, 1996).

Situated care describes the supportive environment that can be created when we are connected with one another and open to each other's realities.

It is a person-centred approach to care, which recognises and is responsive to the unique situation of each person (M Schillmeier, 2017). By focusing on cultivating situated care, we help people who all too often experience exclusion from society find a place to belong; we invite them to make a home in communities that care. In this piece, we explore the notion of home as a site of situated care. We discuss the experiences of three people, George, Kathy and Anna, who are supported by A Place to Belong. The idea that home is defined by our interconnectedness and care for each other resonated strongly with George, Kathy and Anna, who have each overcome experiences of isolation and found the care they need by connecting to their families and communities.

It is often said that home is where the heart is. This discussion prompted the group to suggest that home is where the *hearts* are.

HOME AND COMMUNITY AS SITES OF SITUATED CARE

When George became a grandfather, he gave up his housing commission flat for his daughter who had been unable to secure affordable housing for herself and her newborn. This act of care left him

functionally homeless, living in a disused farm property where he faced social isolation and declining health. George tells us:

I had been working at markets till the Brisbane Floods. After the floods, I had free rent on a ramshackle property but no wage. The property had no windows and no running water and the pesticides in the tank also affected my health. When my daughter came to visit, she was eaten alive by mosquitos. I drove over an hour each week to learn to read. Then my car broke down.

Having no option but to live in inadequate housing, where public transport was limited and there were few opportunities for social contact, George became isolated from his family and the communities where he had previously belonged. Without connection to family, employment or a community, he experienced a profound loss of social participation; not only was his housing inadequate, but he had lost his home - a place to belong.

George's story illustrates the difficult experiences that many people with disability have in finding a place where they can experience safety, security and belonging. For many of us our first experience of home is imbued with the personal care of our family community.

As adults, we need to belong to a community that cares: a community that respects our need for physical and emotional security; friends and allies from the community who can help us to connect to others and to ourselves. We need people to check on us and listen when we respond to that particularly Australian question: 'How are you going?' These personal and attentive relationships and environments of situated care help to make us feel at home.

"Adults need a community that respects our need for physical and emotional security; friends and allies from the community who can help us to connect to others and to ourselves"

A Place to Belong encourages and supports community relationships. When personal problems arise, rather than refer them to other services, we suggest that people activate their

personal networks to find the care they need. I encouraged George to reconnect to family and situate himself closer to their support. Once George found temporary accommodation in the community of his choice, he developed relationships and found opportunities that helped him to find a home. In his new home, George has cultivated an environment of situated care. He invited me to visit his new house, his horses, his Harley and his new partner, who has offered to be an ongoing support for George's literacy. He now also returns this care to his community as a volunteer with a local charity.

HOME SAFE AND SOUND

Access to informal incidental care and concern fosters a sense of being at home in your local community. These are communities where you know others and others know you (P Barringham and N Barringham, 1997). It is important, then, especially for people with disabilities, that interpersonal contact is considered in urban design (PJ Clarke et al., 2011). By situating homes in built environments that have well-designed access to public transport, accessible walkways and public spaces, we can make it easier for people to

meet with friends, neighbours and relatives and establish new connections in and around their communities. Anna agrees: "We are building homes and cities for cars not people. Good public transport is vital, footpaths and parks are important, we need safe spaces for pedestrians and shade on our streets in Brisbane."

Kathy shares her story about how she struggled, as a young woman with a disability, when she left family care and moved into a unit on her own. She says she did not feel welcomed by the community:

When I first moved into my unit it wasn't home. The units had lots of people with disabilities. People were always watching out for their car parks. They didn't get out to meet other people. You had to watch your things I felt at home when I locked the door.

Without any connection to the other residents, Kathy felt insecure. She didn't even feel that the flat belonged to her due to restrictions on how she could decorate the unit. With time, Kathy found the company and care of the young people in the community allowed her to be herself and feel more at home. "It is sometimes a challenge to fit in if you don't have children. I started feeling better when I got to know more people my age. It's nice to chat," Kathy says.

Anna, a local resident of Brisbane's West End, described the contribution affordable housing has made to community diversity and belonging. Anna gained occupancy eighteen years ago of a public housing flat. It was at a time when the local community demanded public housing to offset the gentrifying effect of inner city development. "It is affordable housing and it allowed me to raise a child as a single mum," says Anna.

Anna's neighbourhood is important to her sense of belonging, saying "A respectful, nurturing environment is important to me, as it is good to be acknowledged within the community. I like it when you go for a walk for a coffee and you bump into people who know you."

Anna's long term tenure supported the continuity of her community relationships. This meant that Anna had access to well informed situated care when the voices she was hearing began to impact on her and her daughter's wellbeing and her daughter moved out, leaving her living on her own. At this difficult time, Anna took solace in her home and community who helped her to remain connected and get the support she needed, saying "As I live alone with a mental illness, I need good safety nets. Some of my safety nets are the community I live in, my family and friends."

"In seeking a home, we are looking to be situated amongst people who understand and care about us"

In seeking a home, we are looking to be situated amongst people who understand and care about us. Home can extend beyond the door if

we receive welcome from a community that cares about our situation. A Place to Belong was named to invite people with disabilities to make themselves at home in a community that cares. At times our social systems risk congregating people with disabilities or excluding them from their communities of origin. People with disabilities are left financially and personally insecure. Communities which value diversity and welcome people with disabilities are home builders. Surely a community that cares is a home for us all.

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