

Nothing to Hold (You Can't Let Go): Embracing the Uncanny in Grateful Dead Songs of Home

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One day we reach our goal, and now point with pride to the long travels we undertook to reach it. In fact, we were not even aware of traveling. But we got so far because we fancied at every point that we were at home. *Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science (§253)*

Longing for home as a secure refuge from the stresses and anxieties of contemporary life stands as a dominant motif of human existence in societies throughout the world. But more than ever before, the meaning of home is an enigma fraught with contradiction. We seem forever torn between a desire to live in a safe, settled place and a longing for affirmation through experiences that carry us beyond the safe and settled space of our life. Our hunger for security and reconciliation inclines us to draw sharp boundaries between "inside" and "outside," thereby effecting walls of inclusion and exclusion. But in tension with this, we sense a tacit awareness of the constraints of the safe and settled mode of life and seek to expand our sense of home beyond these boundaries. In the process, home becomes an ambiguous domain, something we have, lose and long for all in the same breath of life.

The concept of home is comprehensible only against the backdrop and constant vigilance of the unhomey in our lives. The never-ending risk of disruption and displacement threatens even the coziest of homespaces. No matter how successfully we hold our decentering anxieties at bay, there is no way to erase them completely from our lives. As a result, we cannot take homespace for granted. When we are fortunate enough to have a sense of being at home, we must work to preserve and protect our home against the erosions, corruptions, erasures and transformative energies arising from the ever-changing circumstances of our life. Thus, while homespace offers protective insulation against the disruptions of the unhomey, it cannot secure the boundaries of home against the constant menace of displacement.

Even so, homespace provides relief from our face to face encounter with the unhomey. As such, home would seem to be a crucial artifice in human life. It should come as no surprise that we long for home when we confront the absence of its protective insulation from the unhomey reminders of our contingent existence and become attuned to the ease with which a human life can lose its contextual (and centering) frame of reference. The ultimate value of home seems to reside in its promise as a gathering force around which our life might become centered and grounded, within a place of existence offering insulation from uncanny assaults on our sense of security. But the vision weakens in the face of life's inertia. "In the end there's just a

song / comes crying like the wind / through all the broken dreams / and vanished years."

The uncanny menace of the unhomely strikes at all walks of life, unleashing nostalgic hunger, anger, violence, depression, withdrawal, social and political tension, nationalistic fever, exilic immigration, refugee camps, and gated communities. The menace of the unhomely has even spawned a host of critical attacks on the seductive dangers of our dominant social ideals of home, on the premise that these ideals simply ensnare us within webs of servitude and other exploitive forms of self-sacrifice. "It all rolls into one / and nothing comes for free / There's nothing you can hold / for very long." Still, for all the challenges it presents, the uncanny drive to secure a safe and happy home remains one of the dominant and defining focal points of contemporary existence. "Some folks would be happy / just to have one dream come true / but everything you gather / is just more that you can lose." In the end, the transitive life washes over us, and the voice is heard to whisper, "If all you got to live for / is what you left behind / get yourself a powder charge / and seal that silver mine."

But if displacement is a constant and uncanny element of the human dynamic, are we not all touched in some way by the fate of "exilic" existence? Such a recognition attacks the efficacy of our idealization of home as a personal, privileged domain over which we are entitled to exercise rights of inclusion and exclusion. As the tension builds between the safe, secure spaces of familiarity and the need to incorporate experiences beyond the domicile of the familiar, the meaning and function of homespace is transformed. The resulting dynamic promises to introduce complexity into our understanding of what it means to be a human being; it also begins to challenge our distinction between private and public domains of existence. But from this tension emerges a new sense of dwelling, albeit one that could leave more than just a few lives hanging in the balance. Central to this new sense of dwelling is the recognition of ongoing displacement and the uncanny challenge this poses to our life: "The wheel is turning / and you can't slow down / You can't let go / and you can't hold on / You can't go back / and you can't stand still / If the thunder don't get you / then the lightning will."

Searching for the Sound

Is there perhaps a signature Grateful Dead concept of home to correlate with this new sense of dwelling? Some fairly explicit indicators can be found sprinkled throughout the Grateful Dead songbase, which abounds with direct and indirect lyrical references to traditional and postmodern senses of home. Even so, I suspect without a definitive musical voice to inspire us, these lyrics would attract only passing attention as references to home. But when amplified by the structure of a Grateful Dead arrangement, these lyrical references are known to have awakened many a touching resonance in the heart and soul of their listeners. When such a spiritual resonance rises to the level of a "mood," as often happened in the midst of a live performance, these resonating moments can strike like lightning to suspend us within an epiphanous

moment of insight, perchance to reveal a hidden nuance at the heart of our sense of home.

To the extent home moods are sustained by a signature Grateful Dead arrangement of lyrical expression, a certain performative interaction attunes the ear of the listener to a compelling and poignant sense of home. In my numerous concert experiences, I came to trace this phenomenon to Garcia's trademark lyrical touch. Of course, Garcia's lyrical touch alone can hardly account for this phenomenon. Without the collective tensions comprising the syncopathic interconnections of the various contributions from the band, there would have been no space for the emergence of Garcia's lyrical voice. But what Garcia did with this music, the special nuances evident in his performance of these songs, gave expression to a range of feelings, emotions and calm acceptance of ideas tuned to the ear of his listener. For the phenomenon to recur, I suspect Garcia's manner of setting these ideas to music would need to be replicated from the standpoint of a complex life history nourished in a personal context of evolving wonder and trust.

Garcia's remarkable capacity to hold and temper the unfolding texture of a song (his rather extraordinary "lyrical tase" and talent for sculpting a song with syncopathic feel) empowered him to set musical ideas in motion and deliver them to receptive audiences as they were suspended in the emotive grasp of a compelling performance. With this special blending of emotional and conceptual nuance, a Grateful Dead performance could awaken our resonance with a complex conceptual orientation to home. In special cases, these experiences could reveal to us the vital uncanniness of home. I want to explore some aspects of these songs to see if there might be a signature Grateful Dead concept of home.

I must confess right away I believe there is, so I would seem open to the risk of constructing an operative concept of home based on reflections drawn from my own personal interactions with the music. And I suspect this is somewhat unavoidable. But there is a good chance this construction grows from the seeds of my attraction to Grateful Dead music, and from the same nourishing factors that gave license to their creative energies: the same 19th and 20th century postmodern thinkers -- from Blake and Nietzsche to existential philosophy and the theatre of the absurd -- as well as the same crystalizing events -- from the Beat revolution and liberating pulse of Beatles music to that moment of awakening in the late '60's when the clock struck a chord of confusion and people actually started to think we could maybe change the world...by just *doing* it... and beyond this, to the sobering recognitions of the '70's and '80's, as well as the occasional reconstruction of optimism and vitality, and above all, the growing older together -- seeing what could not be seen before -- and the ongoing efforts to translate these insights into the currency of our lives. In so many ways, these experiences actually *did* "all roll into one." There really *was* nothing we could hold for very long. We could see the lonely streets, we could *hear* the songs crying in the night, and a lot of this life actually *did* begin to seem like a dream. The

soaring jam and spoken lament of a heartfelt Stella Blue riding the emotional crest of Garcia's lyrical voice really *could* "hit home in a thousand ways," as Robert Hunter so wisely expressed in his stunning "Elegy For Jerry." "Now that the singer is gone / where shall I go for the song?"

The Trip Home: In Search of the Space Between Here and There

A special dimension of home begins to emerge in Grateful Dead songs expressing implicit *counter-references* to home, such as we find reflected in songs like "Cosmic Charley," "Truckin'" and "Row, Jimmy." The action in these songs is not "at home." It's on the road. The point is not that Cosmic Charley and Julie lack a home. Cosmic Charley is being called home by his mother, and the wistful Julie is being told in a familiar voice to go back home, where she "belongs." But the homes that await them upon their return are surely no more than resting zones recharging themselves to become launching pads for adventure. The spatial touch of these songs, sustained by lyrical phrasing and subtexts of melody and feeling, opens a sense of home at the heart of our experience of the performance. The lyrics infuse this space with the leashing discourse of social command, but the home-site of Cosmic Charley's imagination and fourpaw Julie's ecstatic joy captures our attention, even as we suspect the commanding voice will undoubtedly win in the end. Their true homes exist in the space of their adventures, not waiting for them back at the family homesite. Even so, these shifts in homesites should not suggest an alienation from the family homesite. These two galloping wanderers will be glad enough to return home to a warm meal and soft landing for their saturated bodies. But Cosmic Charley is a child of wonder living in a world of discovery. His home, the one calling to him in a voice tuned to his ear, is also reflected in Julie's "like to walk on air." Catch a rabbit by his hair and you might like to be walking on air, too.

Pure anticipation intersecting its prey at a point suspended within a musical cocktail of attentive feeling, the listeners are positively at home in an intense suspension of concentration and focus, as alive in their mind as they are in the context of the performance, and living in both spaces at one and the same time. But what type of home is this, to be totally absorbed in the musical world of dancing thoughts and feelings, in the kite-flying world of free-play imagination, or in the rabbit-chasing world of a puppy's adrenaline rushes? If home is a comfort zone of adventure, openness, curiosity, perhaps it is also a space for escaping the "leashing" discourses of social discipline and inoculation. "Your typical city involved in a typical daydream / Hang it up and see what tomorrow brings."

In the Grateful Dead's signature home anthem, "Truckin'," we find a concept of home given over to sojourning, not as a backdrop for journeying from place to place but as the focus of the journey itself. Home and

sojourner are presented as inseparably bound together: the mode of being "at home" expressed here is reflected in the guise of *sauntering*. In a sense, being at home on the road reveals home to be the *place* of sauntering. In this mode of life, we are most at home when we are looking *outward*. In some ways, this form of being at home is always already a *moving out*. But such a mode of life is also a holding forth and nourishing of a "pregnancy" of life bearing the inexhaustible promise of adventure.

Dislodged from the grip of the familiar, we are exposed to startling and inexplicable aspects of life, to the unfamiliar, and to a kind of estrangement in the proximity of the wild. The implication is we let ourselves become too absorbed by the normative schemes and cultural grids of our life. We can hear echoes of Emerson's plea for self reliance, not to *separate* ourselves from the herd but to become *immersed* in it, with all our senses and curiosities firing on all cylinders. A song like Truckin' became a powerful vehicle for trips into deep subjective space, not just through its celebration of a radical disruption of the unexamined life but also through the band's trusting exploration of the natural movement and extension of the musical trip. Locked in and flowing along, we could search for a fragile balance and a vision of our own. But as Thoreau and others have remarked, we could only "find" ourselves once we "lost" the world (including the comforts of a home-site steeped in the traditions, prejudices and conformities of the social setting into which we were born).¹

These explorations feed on a steady tension between domesticity and the wild. Along the way, the home-site of our life must bear the weight of these experiences. My exposure, my ups and downs, my shining light and broken dreams all fold into one, until it dawns on me "what a long, strange trip it's been" and I withdraw "back where I belong / Back home" where I can "sit down and patch my bones / and get back Truckin' on." Along the course of a life, we get Terrapin'd, Candyman'd, Stella Blue'd, Bird Song'd, Wheel'd by a crack of thunder-lightning, Black Peter'd with No Mercy, Cumberland Blues'd, and China Doll'd to the point of no return. Suddenly we're spacing nostalgic for that cozy homesite waiting for us "down on Lazy River Road," where "starlight dew" and "hazy moonlight" glow amber in the night and children play hide and seek in their own back yards because "Mama's backyard won't do." Here at last we can tap into a sense of home where the people we need "will always be there / for the price of a taxi ride," and where the one we love can rest assured, "All the others I let pass by / I only wanted you." "Oh, how your bright eyes glowed / way down, down along Lazy River Road."

But soon enough, the uncanny rifts awaken a deeper longing for home. The ear is awash in a soul-wrenching hunger, something we can no longer mistake for the call of "Furthur!" -- an emotional urgency which slowly builds into an over-saturated, stone-weary cry for home: "So many

¹ See Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature* (Sage Press: 1994), chapters 2 and 3, for a discussion of Henry David Thoreau's "project of self-fashioning" and the value of wildness.

roads, I tell you, so many roads I know . . . All I want is one to take me home." All these roads to "fill" and "ease" my soul, but not one road to take me home. And then we feel that mournful climb through the emotional register of deep-tissue memories, feelings, and all the touching pains and sorrows reflecting life's erosion from "the winds inside and the winds outside." What ever happened to that Box of Rain that was supposed to "ease our pain" and "see us through?" Suddenly "the world looks dark and mean," the holy are on their knees, the timid are pleading their pleas, "and no one knows much more of this than anyone can see." As the voice rides a wave of instrumentation, we find ourselves in the mood of another mournful, soulful landscape of life's erosions, cradled in the pathos of a time when home was the setting of our unbridled hunger for discovery: "Gave the best we had to give / How much, we'll never know / Never know."

This aspect of homing reflects a tenuous friction between our desire to have a *place*, a *home*, or a *ground*, and our desire to go *beyond* these structures, to leave our home, to be free for travel (and for the experience of wildness). This tension signals a kind of estrangement operating within the confines of familiarity. "I guess they can't revoke your soul for trying / Get out of the door--light out and look all around." Sensing the trappings of immanence, we aspire to step outside, to transgress our boundaries and transition to a new sense of home, one that can be framed only within our attunement to strangeness, otherness, alterity, and the call of the wild. The sojourner lives for this sense of home. Others merely vacation there. Some cannot step there at all. "Hearts of summer held in trust / so tender young and green / left on shelves collecting dust / not knowing what they mean."

In more extreme forms, someone may experience a radical loss of equilibrium, or suffer significant disorientation with respect to their life situation. In these cases, people seem to "fall out of their life" or fall out of their normal *place* in life. In contrast to this, we might refer, as Gadamer does in his writings on health,² to the life in which a general feeling of well-being negates the question of health and carries us forward on the firm ground of a "hidden harmony" or "protected composure."³ When we are "at-home" in the concealment of our good health, when we are functioning "in our element," Gadamer finds that "we are open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises" and in our forgetfulness of ourselves, we "scarcely notice the demands and strains which are put on us." "This is what health is."⁴ This is also for him the paradigmatic sense of being-at-home.⁵ If for Gadamer home and health are a reflection of "internal balance and equilibrium" and every loss of equilibrium promotes "the search for a new point of stability," nevertheless, it should come as no

² See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health* (Stanford Univ. Press: 1996)

³ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-81.

surprise that he would hold that "in the vast technical structure of our civilization, we are all patients," all a little out of balance, that is. As Gadamer explains,

Our personal existence is clearly something which is everywhere denied and yet it is also something which is always involved in the attempt to regain that balance which we need for ourselves, for our lived environment, and for the feeling of being at home in the world. (p. 81)

For Gadamer, the effort to regain our balance and equilibrium "permanently confronts us" with the "concrete task" of having to "(continually sustain) our own internal balance within a larger social whole, which requires both cooperation and participation" (p.81). It also involves a capacity to listen, to be open to the realization that "the other may not only have a right but may actually be right, may understand something better than we do" (p.82).

This draws me to Thoreau's insight regarding the essential connection between "homelife" and "sojourning". Thoreau's postmodern sensibility lies in his sense of the importance of exposing ourselves to wilderness and maximizing our opportunities for disorientation. His message was a call to vigilance, to "living deliberately," to thinking about the situations we have created for ourselves, and questioning the point of our societal structures, especially the social and intellectual conformities. He was urging us to seek out the unfamiliar in all we take for granted, to embrace the "setting of surprise" as a site of wonder. But here again we encounter a search for balance, between home/comfort and wild/estrangement. We hear Thoreau's call to question conformity, but we should hear it as a call to self-fashioning that seeks after new ways of relating to others, to ourselves, and our surroundings, as refinements in our attunement to the shifting fields of human experience.⁶ In our embrace of this project, we cannot avoid experiencing an unsettled tension between the call of the wild and the seductive cautions of deliberation, attunement and domestication. Still, as Nietzsche reminds us in *The Gay Science*,

In the end we are always rewarded for our good will, our patience, fairmindedness, and gentleness with what is strange; gradually, it sheds its veil and turns out to be a new and indescribable beauty. That is its *thanks* for our hospitality. (§334)

This Path is For Your Steps Alone

There is in Grateful Dead folklore no stronger metaphor than the role of "the bus" as a catalyst to the ongoing dialectic of arrival and departure. Arrival and departure serve in this regard as existential articulations of a spiritual frontier of

⁶ Cf. Bennett (1995), chapters two and three.

deterritorialization. The nature of this frontier is central to understanding the underlying motif of the concept of home expressed in so much of the Grateful Dead's music. In her attempt to frame a concept of home suited to the age of the refugee, Edith Wyschogrod has remarked on how "the sense of moving on as expressing life's transitoriness, [the sense] of settled life as a point of departure rather than a locus of stability, the feeling of inexhaustible space, creates a new nomadic conception of home . . . [called] deterritorialization."⁷

Spontaneous musical exploration came to personify this movement of deterritorialization in the space and jams of Grateful Dead song and dance. The improvisational nature of these encounters often hinged on an interplay of structured and unstructured explorations around the "home note" of a song, a "theme" note which served as both the launching pad and homing beacon for our "tonic trips" in "space." Space and jams became the signature measure of "the band beyond description," and often drew the song and listener into a dynamic, tension-filled interplay of ambiguity and attunement. Caught in the flow of a rapturous trip, we might not even be aware of our transitive departure from the familiar structures of home until that moment we sense we're about to land back on the home note. In between, we might hardly notice ourselves in transit. Perhaps through the tension inherent in the tonic chord we might begin to experience a sense of "return," but even then we might find we had returned to a different sense of 'home' from whence we departed.⁸

But as Nietzsche remarked early in his career, the uncanniness we experience at the heart of our return is merely an instantiation of the growth we have undergone along the way. And while the music might seem to be our principle mode of transit for this experience of animated suspension, in the end, as Nietzsche saw clearly, the path we are traveling is for our steps alone. In a classic essay on the merit of serving life, he remarks that "no one can build for you the bridge upon which you alone must cross the stream of life, no one but you alone." "There is," he adds, "one single path in this world which no one but you can travel. Where does it lead? Do not ask. Just take it."⁹

"And if you go / no one may follow
That path is for / your steps alone."

There is of course the possibility "you'll find direction / around some corner / where it's been waitin' to meet you," and along the way, you may also find you are transformed in your very relationship to the trip. As in: "Gone are the days we stopped to decide / Where we should go / We just ride." But is it really possible to let go in this way and still retain a sense of home? As Iris Young asks, "Is it possible to retain an idea of home as supporting the individual subjectivity of the person, where the subject is understood as fluid, partial,

⁷ Edith Wyschogrod, "Dwellers, Migrants, Nomads: Home in the Age of the Refugee," in *The Longing For Home*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 188.

⁸ Cf. John Hollander, "It All Depends," in *Home*, ed. Arlen Mack (NYU Press: 1993), p. 37.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Observations*, (Stanford: 1995) pp. 173-74.

shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others?"¹⁰ My experiences tell me the Grateful Dead performed numerous songs and musical explorations capturing the spirit of this possibility. They conveyed a sense of the uncanniness of home by infusing an evocative emotional *dynamis* into facets of their performances. When emotional and musical nuances fused with a lyrical sense of home, the impact could speak volumes in a flash of insight. By embracing the uncanny in songs of home, the Grateful Dead could perform a string of songs and musical explorations capable of cutting deep into the space of our lives to open new homepaths "for our steps alone." And if we wax nostalgic for the feel of this embrace, it's probably just "a far-gone melody / sung many years ago" to remind us of the many worlds we've come since we first left home.

¹⁰ Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices*, (Princeton: 1997), p. 141.