

Home, or just homely?

The meaning of home for residents in aged care, from a spiritual perspective

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A few years ago, whilst visiting residents in an aged care facility, the conversation turned to “home.” Several residents felt content, saying “This is my home now,” while others expressed sadness and longed to return to their former lives. Some referred to dying and “going home to God.” Hearing these residents speak of home sparked my curiosity: what was it about that particular aged care facility that made it home for some residents, but not others? Feeling at home went deeper than being content or resigned about current living arrangements. It seemed linked to *who* they were, deep down, and their outlook on life, making me think that the meaning of home was, in fact, a spiritual concept. I was eager to explore residents’ understandings and beliefs around home, and what home actually meant for them. The only way to find out was to ask.

Introduction

The quality of aged care is a current key topic in Australian society. Facilities being “home-like” is a common selling point for aged care providers. Sadly,

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the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety¹ found that good quality care is not always the reality. Entering residential aged care is seldom a lifestyle choice. Older people may choose to downsize to retirement housing; however, increases in care needs can necessitate a move into residential aged care.² For some, the move is a gradual decision; for others, it is a consequence of an unexpected, often medical, crisis. Currently in Australia, around 15 per cent of people aged eighty years or over live in what the Australian Bureau of Statistics calls long-term “cared-accommodation.”³ Moving into residential aged care is not simply a change in physical location; it is a leaving of home, which can engender feelings of grief, loss, anxiety, stress, and increased realisation of mortality.⁴ Quality Standards for Aged Care came into effect in Australia mid-2019, and include a call for best practice for personal care that supports and optimises older people’s spiritual well-being (Standard 4 (3)(b)).⁵

Due to its subjectivity, spirituality can be difficult to define, and an authoritative definition is contested.⁶ Consequently, the way spirituality is framed by caregivers, managers, and policy-makers in aged care impacts decision-making in healthcare settings.⁷ For this study, I adopted the definition of spirituality as outlined in the National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care,⁸ acknowledging that even in these guidelines, the definition of spirituality is extensive and intricate. Spirituality in the field of ageing is described as that which nourishes a person’s inner being, giving ongoing meaning and purpose to their life.⁹ Intrinsic to all human beings,¹⁰ it is an essential dimension lying at the very core of our being, understood as relationship with God (however God or Ultimate Meaning is perceived) and relationship with others.¹¹ As such, spirituality is deeply personal, going beyond ritual or religion,¹² and is almost synonymous with meaning, which is “very much at the heart of what it is to be human.”¹³ Spiritual care, then, is essential for holistic aged care, and is given through recognising and responding to a person’s spiritual needs, supporting them to find meaning, purpose, and hope, and journeying with them as they transcend loss, grief, disability, illness, and pain.¹⁴

This paper describes a recent project looking into the meaning of home for older people in residential aged care, from a spiritual perspective,¹⁵ which aimed to deepen the understanding of factors that create and maintain a sense of home in residential aged care. Increasing awareness and knowledge in this area is vitally important to optimising quality of life and spiritual well-being for residents, and informing best practice for the provision of spiritual care in residential aged care.¹⁶

Perspectives of home in the research literature

The meaning of home for older people has been investigated primarily from physical, psychological, and sociological perspectives.¹⁷ Lorna Fox O'Mahony acknowledges that the concept of home may be thought too personal, complex, and intangible to define, yet believes research into the meaning of home is vital, due to the significance of homes as spaces with meaning.¹⁸ Anne Fleming and Angela Kydd recognise that the meaning of home is subjective, difficult to quantify, and different for each individual, yet there are commonalities in what home can mean for older people.¹⁹ A recent Australian review of the physical and social aspects of housing that foster a sense of home for older people included issues of availability, accessibility, adaptability, safety, security, social connection, and community.²⁰ Whilst Solveig Hauge and Kristin Heggen emphasise that making residential aged care facilities feel homely is important for residents' quality of life, they identify that each resident and staff member can have divergent opinions on what "homely" actually means.²¹ Dependency levels and differing generations also lead to diverse descriptions of home.²² Physical environs alone, however, do not make a place home.²³ Feeling at home is characterised by feeling "at one" with the environment one is in,²⁴ with physical surroundings influencing well-being for older people: having pleasant, well-designed, and aesthetically pleasing buildings, private rooms, nice views, accessible gardens, and a facility that accepts cultural diversity, and is small in scale and not institutional, are just a few characteristics that contribute to feeling at home in care.²⁵

Places can become enriched with meaning.²⁶ Home can be a place of identity through family life and traditions, and meaning around possessions can influence a person's sense of self.²⁷ Home can be a symbol of an older person's freedom and independence, a place where they can do what they want, make choices regarding roles and activities, choose who enters their space, and have a sense of privacy, security, permanence, and stability.²⁸ Home can be a country of origin, and is greatly influenced by culture.²⁹ A substantial part of the meaning of home, found throughout the literature, is that home is about belonging, and positive family relationships.

What appears to be missing in the research literature is an exploration of the meaning of home from a spiritual perspective, to find what nourishes an older person's inner being, providing ongoing meaning in their life. As people become older, physical factors give way to spiritual when making a space home,³⁰ and although older people have recognised an environment is homely if it supports their spiritual expression and social interaction, the depth of

meaning held around home has been scarcely researched.³¹ Simply describing the qualities of home is not enough: the meaning of home is deeper than a list of qualities, stronger than a description. It is found in the realm of the spiritual.

If we are to create meaningfully home-like places for those living in residential aged care, we need to find out what home actually means, for them. This study, therefore, sought to answer the question: What does home mean for older people living in residential aged care, from a spiritual perspective?

The research

The study was framed conceptually by Elizabeth MacKinlay's model of spirituality and ageing.³² Pioneering the study of ageing and spirituality for over two decades, MacKinlay's model is based on extensive research and is highly regarded internationally. Grounded on the premise that all humans are biological, psychological, social, emotional and spiritual beings, MacKinlay's model describes how spirituality is brought about in human lives through relationships, creativity and the natural environment, the arts, and religion.

In order to draw out experiences and meanings around home, I conducted individual, in-depth interviews with ten older people living in residential aged care, ranging in age from seventy-two to ninety-eight years (see notes for details of research process).³³ Interviews began with general questions about age, length of time living in aged care, and reasons for entering care. Aiming to capture the essence of what home meant for participants, they were asked where they felt most deeply at home; what home meant to them; whether they felt at home in residential aged care; what contributes to feeling at home in care; whether their meaning of home had changed over time, whether they had a spiritual home, and if they had a sense of an eternal home.

Findings

Two major themes emerged around the meaning of home for the older people in this study: home meant connection through *meaningful relationships* and *meaningful connection to place*. Both themes were supported by six subthemes that deepened the understanding of home for participants. Loss of meaningful relationships and connections was woven through all themes and subthemes.

None of the participants called residential aged care "home," despite recognising it would be their final residence, and irrespective of how long they had lived there. However, most participants thought residential aged care could be homely: "You can make it more homely, I agree with that, but you can't make

it a home, so don't try" (Mary). For the majority of participants, their meaning of home had not changed over time, and if it had, it was deeper now: "It's more in-depth, if you get my drift" (Phil). (Pseudonyms used throughout.)

Theme 1: Meaningful relationships

In line with current literature, the study highlighted the importance of nurturing relationships for creating a sense of home. For all participants, the meaning of home directly related to meaningful relationships in their lives, both in the past and the present. Deeper than acquaintance or familiarity, the relationships were those which held meaning for the participants and were not necessarily dependent on *who* they had a relationship with, but the *quality* and *depth* of that relationship. Relationship is one of the significant ways in which spirituality and meaning is mediated for older people,³⁴ as we are defined as persons through the relationships that we have with others, and others have with us.³⁵

1.1: Essential relationship needs

For a relationship to be meaningful and contribute to a sense of home, it needs to hold qualities of love, trust, respect and reciprocity, belonging and acceptance, and being known for who you are. Love is the essence of home: if there wasn't love, it wasn't home:

Allan: Home? A place where you feel marvellous and you feel like you're loved very much . . . where you're *dearly* loved by your mother, and father. And until you get that, well, you really haven't got a home. It doesn't matter what you say, you haven't got a home.

At this stage of life, experiencing love from staff deepened Bernadette's sense of home:

Bernadette: Home means love, and family, respect...love is a kind of a respectful relationship . . . The general rule here is that you feel loved, you feel respected. And I don't feel, now that I'm ninety-eight, that I'm a silly old humbug at all.

Being able to trust those around you, particularly when you are dependent on them for care needs, was vital: "No-one's going to hurt anyone [here] . . . It's a very big thing" (Phil). Reciprocity with carers was also important: "They are kind to me, and I am kind to them" (Janet). Some participants felt at home through being valued and known deeply for who they were, which is related to

belonging and having a sense of identity. Mary emphasised that home is where you *know* you belong.

1.2: *Home is in the past*

An unexpected finding, not encountered in the literature, was that the majority of participants identified “home” as their childhood home, and this meaning had not changed over time, even for those who had created their own households in adulthood.

Mary: Home is where you came from. Got your parents, and, as I say, it's got the family...from the day I was born until I left it...Home is where my mother and my father lived, and it's where I originated from. And it was the basis of my life.

Interestingly, those who stated that home meant the home of their childhood also indicated their homelife had been very positive. Each time Mary reminisced about her childhood, she sat back, closed her eyes, and spoke with a blissful smile on her face. Allan felt loved and happy as a child growing up, and emphasised that his deep, loving relationship with his parents, particularly his mother, is what gave home meaning.

The link between home and relationships in childhood was equally demonstrated through Cora's specific observation of how the *absence* of deep connection with her mother meant she *did not* connect home with her childhood:

Cora: What people think of home when they were quite small, doesn't stand out for me. I had a rather odd mother who wasn't, did not show affection to me . . . So, that part of home doesn't, doesn't . . . Perhaps that's why when you get to have nice contentment with things, that they mean extra.

For Cora, not being accepted and loved for who she was as a child, by her mother, deeply influenced her meaning of home. This finding suggests that childhood experiences and relationships may have a profound impact on the meaning of home for the whole course of one's life.

1.3: *Relationship with family*

Many participants were able to quickly identify that their family was an important part of home for them, both in the past and whilst living in residential

aged care. Bernadette saw family, in its myriad permutations, as integral to the meaning of home:

Bernadette: I think my nearest thing is that a home's got to be made, and it's made virtually with some kind of family, whether it's parent family, or whatever, there's so many different kinds of family these days...to make for the happiness that is needed in a home.

Several participants mentioned that their relationship with their mother was still important for their meaning of home now. Allan warmly described how love flowed out of his mother to all around her, and he still felt the love of his parents: "They're pretty close, they're there in their own way, you know." Allan's strong connection with his parents was spiritual, from the core of his life, and still held meaning for him now.

1.4: Relationships with friends

Recognising the loss of long-term friends due to their stage of life, meaningful relationships with other residents were identified as extremely important to feeling at home in residential care. Several participants articulated that meaningful activities and good food facilitated developing new friendships, particularly for finding people who were "on the same wavelength" (Mary).

Meaningful activities are vital for creating and sustaining a sense of home.

Cora: you gradually find people. . . that you have something in common with . . . you find people that you enjoy talking to, enjoy playing dominoes with . . . you know that there's so-and-so . . . that you can have a chat to, and you're pleased to see because you haven't seen them for a few days and so on.

Bernadette valued the gardening club, as it was an opportunity for her to contribute and be with others. She was not just *doing* the activity to fill in time: she chose to *be* there.

Bernadette: Even at ninety-eight, I joined the Garden Club . . . I'm in the wheelchair but the girl who runs it, she's very good, she always has a job for me, she's very organised. So I'll sit around, it might be planting or picking or even undoing

the manure [bags] . . . And I don't think I join those things
as a distraction from the rest of the things.

Every participant mentioned food, and every participant felt that the quality of food could be much better. The importance of delicious food goes beyond nutrition or enjoyment: good food is vital for the creation and maintenance of meaningful relationships, and to a sense of home.

Janet: Life actually in a way revolves around food. If you can, you don't just go to the meals for the meals, you go so you can chat to somebody . . . But if the food turns you off, you don't [go].

Mary agreed, "It's important, a meal . . . More than just for food. It's the social life that goes with it."

Food is a vital part of life: it sustains our bodies as it nurtures our relationships. In all cultures and all religions, food plays an important role in the celebration of life, in meaningful rituals, in stimulating memories, and in bringing people together in meaningful ways. To make residential aged care homely, good food is essential.

1.5: Relationship with staff

All participants spoke spontaneously and positively about their carers, giving a clear message that care personnel are incredibly important to helping residents feel at home. "We have such good carers . . . they're just beautiful people. And there's just something about them . . . I'd say the carers have quite a bit to do with the feeling of the place" (Bernadette). How staff go about their daily work, and their personal qualities, have a significant impact on the well-being of the older people for whom they care, not just physically and psychosocially, but spiritually.

Cora: It's the...staff, particularly, I find very caring, very good . . . I admire the way they can stay cheerful under all circumstances! But they are so observant, so careful, they know what is happening everywhere. But they are friendly and positive and willing to have a laugh. To me that's important.

There was "something more" about good carers: they were not just doing a job, their care came from the heart, positively influencing participants' sense of home.

Interestingly Phil and Bernadette both felt most at home in residential aged care when they had the opportunity to be alone.

Bernadette: When do I feel more at home than at any other time? . . .
Sometimes, not always, when things are nice and quiet,
and I have no visitors . . . I do like my own company
sometimes.

Carers' presence distinctly indicates that "this is not one's own home."³⁶
Phil felt most deeply at home when this reminder was not there.

1.6: Relationship with God

The study identified that being able to practise one's faith (if desired), having one's beliefs respected, and having pastoral carers who listened and did not push their points of view, were all deeply valued, and contributed to feeling at home. Having opportunities to live out her faith in an authentic way helped Bernadette feel at home, and having pastoral carers to talk with, who listened deeply, made Sheila feel loved and accepted:

Sheila: She comes in and we sit down and we have a chat and we
have a little talk and it makes you feel so much better . . .
it's the goodness inside them. That's what it is. They've
got a holiness in themselves. I'm not religious . . . [but] I
can still see it.

This deep, life-giving connection is spiritual. When we experience the spiritual, these moments are sacred moments, intimate and important, meaningful and precious. These moments cannot be measured, or brought about by cognition or effort. They are precious moments, only able to be described with the language of the spiritual. We enter sacred space when a meaningful connection is made with another, when a deep sense of reverence, awe, and respect are present.³⁷

Theme 2: Meaningful connection to place

Interwoven with meaningful relationships are meaningful connections to place, where meanings have been embedded into a space, creating a place of significance.

2.1: Home is a specific physical space

For some participants, home was a specific place they had lived in it for a length of time, with people they loved, living the way they wanted, accumulating

meaningful memories and possessions. For these participants, home was a specific space with meaning,³⁸ a familiar place which provided a sense of connection and continuity,³⁹ and these connections ran deep. Allan spoke about his adult home with pride: “Home? My own home . . . nothing replaced your own home. We built it as kids, we started it up from the ground up, built it right up.”

2.2: Home is connection with environment

A feeling of home was present for participants when they could connect with the natural environment around them. Cora felt most deeply at home “out in the garden!” Having their own space that was private, and being able to choose who entered their space, gave several participants a sense of safety and security. David appreciated what was on offer:

David: What you’ve got here is your own room, your bathroom, you got your dining area out there . . . everyone’s got their own TV, and so you do your own thing. The big thing, you’ve got a balcony.

Cora’s room felt like home as it contained her personal belongings: “It’s got things that, from the past, I can remember why I’ve got that and who gave me things.” Familiar belongings which had attached meanings provided comfort and a way of preserving identity.⁴⁰

2.3: Home is autonomy and independence

Being free to do whatever one wants, whenever, and with whom, contributes to a sense of home. The findings of this study highlighted the narrowing of autonomy and independence for these older people that occurred on entry to residential aged care. The awareness that, as humans, we are all interdependent was realised by several participants. Bernadette described the inevitable loss of independence in residential aged care:

Bernadette: You do lose your independence, you can’t help but lose your independence . . . Because you’re old and because of the system . . . I don’t mean things are taken away from you exactly, but you’re not able to make right decisions that you may have been able to make ten years before.

It was poignant to hear Bernadette say, “I think, when you’re older, you like to know that you haven’t lost everything.”

2.4: Home is what you make it

For some participants, home could be made, through having a positive attitude, accepting changing circumstances, appreciating what is available, and adjusting to changes in personal abilities. "You can still feel it's home if you are comfortable . . . with what's available . . . [I am] very content with the home I make" (Cora). Being able to accept and adjust to different circumstances can give older people the ability to feel at home wherever they are.

2.5: Spiritual home

When a place is particularly special, with a deep connection, meanings can be so precious that the place becomes a spiritual home. Two participants, who both said they were not religious, overtly named a specific place that was so meaningful for them, they called it their spiritual home. Both were able to articulate the deep connection they had with these places, naming the connection as spiritual, and explicitly describing what made it so. Phil's spiritual home was the farm he loved: "I lived up there for twenty years, and that's my home. And, well, that's the start and the end of home, up there, spiritual home."

2.6: Eternal home

Only those professing an active Christian faith talked of eternal home as a place they believed in, and expected to see.

Bernadette: Eternal home is still for me the same as I believed when I was small: it's heaven . . . I am expecting, hopefully . . . to be accepted into another life called heaven, where . . . I'm going to have a wonderful relationship with God.

These participants held an assurance and peace that an eternal home was *there*, and equated to a deep relationship with an all-loving God. None of the participants, including those of faith, talked about "going home to God".

Conclusion

Finding out what home means for older people living in residential aged care is essential for providing holistic care for residents. Although none of these participants called residential aged care their home, they did recognise it could be homely, and meaning of home was found in *meaningful relationships* and *meaningful connections to place*. The findings resonate with MacKinlay's spirituality and ageing model,⁴¹ with meaning of home primarily mediated for these older people through meaningful relationships and connection to

place/environment. If, as defined above, spirituality is that which nourishes a person's being, is deeply personal, gives ongoing meaning in life, and is found through relationships, then these findings show that home is a fundamentally spiritual concept, relating intimately to connectedness with ourselves, others, and the world.⁴²

Several recommendations arose from this study, most notably that assumptions cannot be made around what home means for residents in aged care: timely and meaningful spiritual assessments are needed, both on entry to residential aged care and over time, to find out what makes a resident feel at home. Aged care providers must value their good carers, ensuring they have time in their duties to form meaningful relationships with residents, and organisations must recognise that providing good quality food and facilitating meaningful activities in residential aged care are more significant than just meeting nutritional needs or filling in time.

This paper has outlined the findings of a study into the meaning of home for a group of older people living in residential aged care, from a spiritual perspective. Finding the meaning of home that is held deep within each individual is essential for creating a sense of home in residential aged care. Although residential aged care is not home, it can be homely, and homeliness is created and maintained through relationships and connections, which characterise the essence of spiritual care.

Endnotes

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- 32 MacKinlay, *The Spiritual Dimension*, 113.
- 33 I chose a qualitative methodology, using a phenomenological method, to gain insight into the essence of participants’ lived experiences regarding home, informed by a hermeneutical approach to interpreting these experiences. Purposive sampling was used. Recognising the vulnerability of the participants, ethics approval was gained from Charles Sturt University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through advertising on resident noticeboards. Screening by the facility’s pastoral

care coordinator confirmed participants met the inclusion criteria of: living in residential aged care; aged seventy or above; able to understand and speak English; cognitively competent; willing and able to take part in an in-depth interview; and signing consent. The participants (four male, six female) were aged from seventy-two to ninety-eight years, a range of twenty-six years. Length of time living in the facility ranged from one to ten years, with an average of four years. All participants were Anglo-Celtic Australians, reflecting the social demographic of the facility. The primary data consisted of digital audio recordings of the interviews and subsequent (de-identified) transcriptions. Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken using the qualitative data analysis application, NVivo12, to organise themes and subthemes. To enhance the trustworthiness of analysis, my supervisor independently checked the data analysis and emerging themes. Limitations of the study included findings not being generalisable to other settings, as there was no firm basis for comparison with older people who live independently; the data was gathered in one residential aged care facility, situated in a major Australian city; as a cross sectional study, this study provided a “snapshot” at one point in time; and the study was limited to Anglo-Celtic participants.

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