



## A Sense of Place

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Lately, I have been dreaming about houses. I know that it sounds a bit strange, but my dreams are very vivid. I walk through these houses, looking at the rooms—the furniture, the wallpaper, the windows—but mostly I am experiencing, feeling these houses. Some are large houses with many rooms; some are houses filled with light and air; some are very old and complicated houses with winding staircases. In my dreams, I'm not sure why I am walking through these houses but I know that I am trying to understand them in some intangible way. I'm sure that a dream psychologist could have a field day with me—I have no idea what these dreams mean, but I do know that the dreams are comforting and interesting and strangely peaceful.

In January, I walked into Mr. Austin and Ms. Matouk's house for a small faculty gathering, and although I had been in the house several times before, it felt different. When I told them that their house felt different—more settled, lived in, I couldn't quite explain it. They both looked at me in a puzzled way. More people arrived, and the conversation moved on. But I sat down and tried to locate what I felt. The house still looked brand new—it was absolutely spotless; nothing was out of place; it was, in fact, in perfect order. But it felt as though things had happened in it—that people had been living there, that stories had begun to accumulate about moments in the house, that connections were being made, that the house was developing its own character, its own stories, a spirit, a life.

Writers love to use houses as symbolic representations in their novels. Think about *Wuthering Heights* and the way that Heathcliff and Catherine inhabit this house—both when they are alive and when they are ghosts. Or *Pemberley* in *Pride and Prejudice* and its synonymous owner, Mr. Darcy...or the haunting 124 in *Beloved*. Perhaps the most beautiful novel about a house though is E.M. Forster's *Howards End*.

Throughout the novel, Forster's heroine, Margaret Schlegel, searches for ways to connect with other people. An independent woman taking care of her younger sister and brother since their parents' deaths, she lives in London in a rented apartment which her family had been living in for many years. A strange, almost mystical woman, Mrs.

Wilcox, enters her life early in the novel, but it is not until the very end of the novel that Margaret understands fully what Mrs. Wilcox has given her. Mrs. Wilcox's family has owned a beautiful old country house called "Howards End" for many generations. She is the final family member, however, to feel connected to the house. Her husband and children—who are far more interested in money, cars, business, and material possessions—do not feel any attachment to the house except as an investment. Forster writes: "To them Howards End was a house: they could not know that to Mrs. Wilcox it had been a spirit." Margaret and her sister, after a complicated separation, reunite at the end of the novel at Howards End. The house and its beautiful natural surroundings make it possible for them to understand each other again. Margaret says, "This place has wonderful powers. . .It kills what is dreadful and makes what is beautiful live. . .Yes, the house has a surer life than we. . ." In a poignant way, Forster makes us see that a house can have powers, that a house can indeed have a life and a spirit of its own which can make things happen within its walls as well as in its surrounding landscape, that a house—by its very construction—can determine a family's life and relationships.

My grandfather bought a summer house—which we call Rosehill—in Canada in 1935. Just as Howards End is a character in Forster's novel, we all even talk about Rosehill as if it is a living entity, a member of the family. It is a big, rustic beach house on a beautiful beach on Lake Erie. The house has one main room—the living room with a big stone fireplace—three porches, a kitchen, and seven bedrooms. The design of the house itself determines what happens there and defines its purpose: a place where many members of a family and extended family can sleep, relax, enjoy the lake breezes, tumble down to the beach for swimming or bonfires, play cards, tell stories and talk late into the night. There are plenty of beds (some rooms have as many as five beds) but not necessarily a lot of privacy—the walls are thin, there are no locks on any doors, you always have at least one roommate, and you must pass through the living room to get anywhere. From the time that I was a little girl until today, Rosehill means family to me—grandparents, cousins, sisters, nephews, nieces, brothers-in-law—in

essence, multiple generations mixing with each other. I can still see my grandfather sitting in his big armchair trying to sweep me into his lap as I run by in my wet bathing suit and sandy feet. I look at my children with their cousins and quickly see myself sitting on the same scratchy straw rug in the living room surrounded by my cousins. I believe that my grandfather had this vision when he bought the house almost 70 years ago.

Summer houses—such as Howards End and Rosehill—evoke certain feelings because they often stay the same. They at once show the distance, the length of time, the aging of people and the passing of generations as well as connect us seamlessly with the past so that the two become almost indistinguishable. When I enter Rosehill, I can retrieve my childhood instantly—the smells, the furniture, the memories are vivid. In her senior exhibition paper on *Howards End*, Hollis Callaway beautifully captured the significance of the country house: "Hope is found in the country house because it is a natural place of connection; it is a remedy to the fragmented lifestyle of the city. For Mr. Wilcox, Howards End is simply a possession. He does not understand that unlike the city the country house is alive with humanity."

Mr. Roach and I wanted to give our children a place to grow up in and to return to as well, so we bought another house in Canada. Although they participate in the spirit of Rosehill each summer, we have also begun to collect stories and memories in our own house. With each summer, with each Thanksgiving or long weekend we spend in our house, with each new visitor, we connect more with each other and with the house. In many ways, it is a reciprocal relationship: we breathe life into the house and it in return sustains our lives and breathes life into us.

Of course, it is not just summer houses that are significant in our lives. At St. Andrew's, Mr. Roach and I have lived in two apartments together and three different houses as a family. We started our family in the house where the Changs live now so our memories of that house are particularly vivid. Earlier this year, Mr. Chang, as he was playing with his own children in his house, recalled the many baseball and football games played, surprisingly, in the dining room with Matthew in the same house when Matthew was a young boy, and Mr. Chang

taught here after he graduated from college.

Each time we have moved, our children are traumatized, resisting the change and begging us to stay where we are. It took Zachary two years before he settled into our current house; he often lamented our move, saying, "But I loved our old brown house—why did we have to move?" You see, children intuitively understand the importance of place, of memories, of connections. After five years in our current house, we are finally beginning to connect with it fully. It is a house with many stories. A few years ago, Lili Pell Whitmer—who is the daughter of the first headmaster and who spoke here on Founders' Day in December—came to visit us. She wanted more than anything to meet Hadley, another daughter of a headmaster. She quickly engaged her in a wonderful series of stories about the house and what it was like for her to grow up here as Dr. Pell's daughter. She showed her where the II Form boys used to sleep on the third floor and told her about the girls who spent the night at their house when they came for a dance here and about the family from London who lived with them for a year during World War II. Despite their age difference and the fact that they had never met each other before, Hadley and Mrs. Whitmer connected fully and understood each other on a fundamental level.

St. Andrew's itself, although not a summer house or even a house, is a place that in many ways does not change, that celebrates many generations living together at once, that offers a remedy to the fragmented lifestyle of the city, that has its own traditions, its own stories, its own spirit. And it will occupy a very specific place in your memories. Along with the people—your teachers and friends—you will have distinct memories of the rooms in this school which are particularly meaningful to you: a classroom, the tennis courts, a certain teacher's house or apartment, the art studio, the T-dock, a dorm room, the theater, a favorite tree or trail in the woods, the baseball field. People leave, but you will always be able to return to this place, these places which hold meaning for you, which evoke memories of connection. Seniors, I suspect that you have already begun to look at the school a little differently, that you are treasuring moments with your friends and that you are going to your favorite places on campus as well. The wonderful thing about a school is that the buildings remain, and like Howards End, it is a place that "has wonderful powers." It is, also like Howards End, a place that tries to "kill what is dreadful and make what is beautiful live." And because of all of you and the generations of students and teachers before you, it has a lasting, a more certain life than we as individuals.

You will all have enduring connections to

St. Andrew's and those connections will be revived every time you see a classmate or a former teacher, coach or advisor or when you meet another alum for the first time, but I bet that the strongest feelings of connections will occur when you return to this campus, when you wander through Founders' Hall, when you eat on the front lawn during one of your reunions, when you bring your children back to interview, when you row again on the pond as Bill Brownlee '44 did a few weeks ago with Greg Doyle '87. There is an essential quality of this school that has not changed since its beginning in 1929; the founders and the first architect had a clear vision of what they wanted this school to be, what they wanted to happen within the buildings and on the pond and the surrounding lawns, fields and woods. They knew that they were giving birth to something unique and enduring; they hoped that their shared vision and understanding of education, equality and humanity could be created and sustained within these walls and within this beautiful landscape.

Last June, David Smith '96, who had returned for his 5th reunion, kept saying, "I love this place. I just love this place. It is so good to be back. But what I find most surprising is that the place in the school I think about the most is the chapel. I used to complain every week about required chapel while I was a student here. But now when I think about St. Andrew's, I think about the chapel. I have dreams about returning and giving a chapel talk." David has stopped by St. Andrew's a couple times this year, and each time I see him, I have told him that I am holding him to his promise to come back and speak in chapel. So the places that may resonate with you later may be unexpected, may surprise you. For when you return to visit, no matter how many people you know, you will always know this place. And because you have helped make this place what it is, it will always know you, welcome you, be open to you.

It is not by accident, I think, that many alums yearn to return to St. Andrew's to teach and that there are more and more alums who are choosing to get married here—often to another St. Andrew's alum. Gretchen Bensinger and Callen Hurtt, both Class of 1990, reconnected first at their 5th reunion, but because of various reasons, did not pursue a relationship. They both returned for their 10th reunion, hoping that the other would also be here. Indeed, St. Andrew's worked its magic and they are getting married at St. Andrew's in June. Gretchen just wrote me the following, ironically after I had already completed writing this chapel talk:

*Returning to St. Andrew's for reunions and visits, I am immediately*

*transported—not simply to my many vivid memories of being a teenager—but also to a culture and a home that seems very much alive and important to me in the present. When I return to campus, I feel embraced—by the lush, gentle surroundings, and by my former teachers, many of whom are still here and who are so happy to talk and visit. Coming back to this place, I immediately become, once again, a part of the palpable culture of St. Andrew's.*

*When my father and I drove into the St. Andrew's driveway on a recent visit, the very curve of the road triggered within me the powerful emotion of "returning to school." A knot of excitement, nervousness and anticipation took hold in my stomach—just as it did every time I returned from a long weekend or vacation over ten years ago! Callen and I both talk about the "butterflies" that come back even now when we drive down the driveway. We both know it's because this is such a powerful, special place for each of us.*

*Looking across the athletic fields, walking down to the T-dock, peering into an English classroom, stopping by the chapel. . . being in these places puts me back into the community that I still sense so strongly. I relive the experiences that nurtured, challenged and influenced me as a young person. After being away for many years, I sense even more keenly how important and precious those moments were. I understand what a true community St. Andrew's is. Physically and spiritually, my visits—"back to school"—bring back all the power of this amazing place."*

St. Andrew's, I hope, has become for you and will continue to be throughout your lifetime a special house that has provided you all with connections, stories, an enduring spirit, with—in the words of Jill Ker Conway—magic. She writes:

*If we are lucky, the places and people that can give our lives an aura of magic potential enter our experience at the right moment to sustain our dreams. One generation can give another that sustenance not so much by what they say as by how they live and how they include one within the life pattern they've created.*

*Invariably, the magic is rooted in place—the college lecture room, the concert hall, the perfect baroque church, the ruined temple where some teacher's words became alive, not theory but lived experience, part of ourselves. Often, as Yeats taught us, the magic is in a special house and its inhabitants.*