



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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Going Home

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

Antonio decided it was time to go home. He had been working in this country for twenty years. He was tired of carrying the vacuum cleaner on his back for eight hours every night as he cleaned office buildings.

At first it was just fatigue. Then the coughing started and seldom stopped. His chest X-ray showed chronic scarring. A lung specialist diagnosed chronic lung inflammation, likely from his years as a miner. There was no definitive treatment for him; he would only get worse. We put him on the list for a lung transplant.

After three years on the transplant list, he still hadn't been offered any hope of new lungs. The cough was now constant. It was impossible to work. He wanted to visit his family in Mexico for Christmas. He hadn't been home since he first left. In fact, he couldn't go home because for many years he didn't have his "papers." Without "papers" he wouldn't have been able to return to the U.S.

But he really wanted to go home, back to his home state of Guerrero where he had worked in the silver mines for twenty years before coming here. He wanted to go back to the charming colonial city of Taxco where the tourists come to buy bracelets and necklaces made from the silver Antonio had mined and refined.

By now he was on 24-hour oxygen. The airlines wouldn't let him fly without doctor's orders. He brought the papers to the clinic, but there was a problem. He could fly only if he was using less than four liters of oxygen per minute. In case of a loss of cabin pressure, he would not be getting enough air. He told me he often had to turn his portable oxygen machine up to at least six liters to be able to breathe comfortably.

I hesitated but signed the papers anyway. I checked the box confirming that he was using less than four liters. I told him to sit still on the plane and not to talk but to set his oxygen to a comfortable level. It was unlikely that the flight crew would actually monitor the settings on his machine.

He was going home, and he was the happiest I'd ever seen him in the ten years he had been coming to the clinic.

What is it about going home? Truth be told, I didn't pay a lot of attention in tenth grade English class. I found it boring – all that talk about metaphors and symbols. But a few things have stuck with me, including the title of Thomas Wolfe's classic novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*.

Over the years, when life has gotten complicated, I've often wondered what it would be like to go home, back to that small town in Texas where I grew up. I've imagined returning to a place where I felt secure and had my whole life in front of me. I wondered what it would be like to start over and make different, if not better, decisions. Who hasn't had this thought?

And as I see it, that is what Wolfe was implying, that we would like to go home but we can't. We can't go home again because everything has changed. The place has changed. The times have changed. We have changed. There is no home to go back to. It's a sobering thought and, I suppose, a mature thought. It's an adult, grown-up thought. We shouldn't dream about what we can't do. We should make the most of where we are

right here and right now. And yet, there is always that longing to go home again.

But maybe we don't think of home in the right way. Perhaps home is not that small town but somewhere else, somewhere that we have up until now only been able to glimpse fleetingly. Here C. S. Lewis comes to mind. A quote often attributed to him is, "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending."

So maybe we can go home again. It's just that it's a different home. Again, Lewis helps us imagine this new home. In a letter to a friend who was anticipating her own death, Lewis wrote several months before his own passing: "Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind."

As we grow, as we mature spiritually, the idea of the home to which we will return changes. Hopefully, the image of that home comes into focus and we can know at last where we will be when we are home. As Saint Augustine writes in his autobiographical work *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

Antonio made it home. His sister called to let me know that he had landed safely in Mexico City. He got off the plane and went into the men's room. And that is where they found his body.

Why did he die? Was his oxygen level too low? Did he develop a blood clot because I told him to sit still on the plane? I don't know; I'll never know. I like to think that he had forced himself to live just long enough to make it home.

And he did. He could have lived a few more weeks here or died in Mexico. I know he made the right decision. And though I've wrestled with it, I believe that my decision was the right one, as well.

Yes, we can go home. We can, by the grace of God, go home again.