



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York



Curriculum Development Project

The Forces that Draw Us Home

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Abstract

In this project, students are asked to consider the social, psychological, and potentially sacred or spiritual dimensions of the concept of “home,” in both prehistoric times and the present day. The project was designed for use with a class of fairly advanced 8th grade students at a public middle school in Virginia.

The assignment aligns with a course unit on the earliest Neolithic settlements. It includes a reading from Bill Bryson’s book *At Home* in which he explores why early Neolithic people chose to settle and then abandon the Scottish village of Skara Brae -- and in the process tackles the underlying question of why nomadic human communities originally settled in geographic places. Along with their study of prehistoric settlements, students will collaborate on a Google Presentation by uploading and describing photos from their own lives that represent the idea of “home.” In doing so, students are asked to consider the concept of “sacred space” (which may or may not be explicitly religious) in their own homes, neighborhoods, and lives, and explore how those spaces can make a place feel like home.

Learning Activities

Students’ work on the meanings of “home” will unfold in five distinct stages, involving a range of different media (texts, music, photography), different historic periods, and different forms of collaboration.

1) Introductory Readings

The class period before beginning the unit, give students the choice of reading one of the following brief articles, to get them thinking about the meanings of “home.”

1. [Creating a Sanctuary for Spiritual Energy](#), by Jewel Fraser, in the *New York Times*
2. [The Adults Who Suffer Extreme Homesickness](#), by Tom Heyden, from the *BBC*

2) In-Class Warm Up

Make the five songs listed in the warm up assignment below (or others dealing with the subject of home) available to your students, along with printed lyrics, and have them analyze one song's vision of home in light of their understanding of Paleolithic man.

3) Five Neolithic Settlements

Divide students into five groups and assign each group one of the following Neolithic/Bronze Age sites: **Skara Brae**, **Catalhoyuk**, **Jericho**, **Aleppo**, and **Stonehenge**.

Students should conduct research independently to answer question #1 in the “What is Home?” assignment below, by determining where their site is located and identifying its defining characteristics. (Note: you can modify this assignment for lower ability levels by providing articles or text-book selections for each site, rather than requiring students to conduct research.)

4) Group Discussion of Settlements

Students should then complete the rest of the “What is Home?” assignment below (questions 2 through 5) in small groups. After allowing time for this, have some groups share their answers with the entire class.

Answering question #5 will require students to read an excerpt from [Bill Bryson's book *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*](#) (pp. 36-47 on Skara Brae and the development of Neolithic agriculture), and listen to a brief [discussion of the book on npr.org](#).

5) Research/Reflection on the Meanings of Home Today

Students then will work together in small groups to define and share their own understandings of “home.” They will use Google Drive (or another file management system or presentation software) to create a group presentation with title slides for key terms like (for example) **Safety**, **Shelter**, **Family**, **Food**, **Creativity**, **Community**, and **Sacred Space**.

Students will use photos or other images of their own homes and neighborhoods to document each of these characteristics of home life, or at-home-ness. Brief explanatory captions (potentially including quotes from Bryson's *At Home*, research sources on the five Neolithic settlements, or song lyrics from the warm-up activity) may be used to draw connections between students' own experiences and broader understandings of “home.”

Each group can then present their findings/reflections to the entire class (or share them with the instructor if time constraints don't allow for in-class presentations).

(Note, for discussion of a somewhat similar student project on the sacred / secular meanings of home see Mark Graham's essay “The Fringe of Nirvana: Aesthetic Places and the Art Classroom,” in [Gruenewald and Smith's *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*](#).)

Warm-Up Assignment

Download one of the five songs (“Midnight Train to Georgia,” “New York’s Not My Home,” “Homeward Bound,” “Sweet Home Alabama,” or “Rivers”) from the *At Home* folder and read the lyrics as you listen. Then, answer the following questions:

1) Which song did you choose?

2) What view do/does the singer/singers take toward the idea of his/her/their home?
What are some lyrics that tell you this?

3) If a hunter-gatherer asked the performer “What is home?” how do you think he or she would answer them?

Group Assignment: What is “Home”?

One thing that makes humans unique is our desire, even when it’s illogical or impractical, to make a home. For much of our history humans, like most other species, were largely nomadic. Around 10,000 BCE there was a radical shift in that pattern as we began to build settlements like those listed below. For years it was assumed that the discovery of agriculture allowed that settlement, but given data drawn from archaeological discoveries at sites like Catalhoyuk, anthropologists have begun to question this assertion.

Conduct research on the early Neolithic/Bronze Age settlement/site of Catalhoyuk, Skara Brae, Jericho, Aleppo, or Stonehenge and address the following questions with regard to the site your group has been assigned.

1)

Name of Site	Location	Defining Characteristics

2) What features of this site address the unit question, “What does it mean to be human?” Explain your answers.

3) In your archaeological analysis and given our class discussion, if not agricultural reasons, what were the features of the settlement that might have attracted people to it? Explain your answers.

4) What about this site might have given people a sense of home as we have defined it in our earlier discussion? Explain each.

Before answering question #5, read the assigned excerpt from [*Bill Bryson's book At Home*](#), and listen to a [discussion of the book on npr.org](#).

5) How does Bill Bryson answer the question, "If not for agricultural reasons, what were the features of settlements that might have attracted people?"

Group Project: What is “Home” to You?

In answering this question, you should consider YOUR OWN personal conception of the idea of “home,” and how you and your family live these elements of your life at home. Consider the following elements of human life and at-home-ness in your answer: **Safety, Shelter, Family, Food, Creativity, Community,** and **Sacred Space**. Keep in mind that “sacred space” may or may not be related to religious beliefs or practices – it may simply be a place of peace and quiet, or centered-ness and connection.

After discussing these elements of at-home-ness with your group, go through your own home and/or neighborhood, and take pictures of the rooms, locations, features, and items (historians call this “material culture”) that represent each element of at-home-ness for you, your family, and your culture/community. For example, if you are Jewish the importance of food might (or might not) be reflected by a photo of kosher items in your pantry.

Then your group will create and share a Google Presentation (making sure you include the names of each member of your group) with one title slide each for the elements of human life listed above (there should be one slide labeled **Safety**, one labeled **Shelter**, etc.) Add your pictures to slides inside the presentation, along with a caption explaining why you chose each picture, its connection to this particular aspect of human life, and perhaps its connection to the Neolithic settlements, song lyrics, and other understandings of “home” we have explored in this unit.

Finally, you will share this presentation with your fellow students and your teacher.