

To Bless the Space Between Us

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September 10, 2017

The streams of consciousness that flow between us transcend linear time. They originate from a place deep within us, and they fill the space around us with observations, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions, which in turn create an energetic flow of vibrations between ourselves and the world around us. Into this space we exude who we are in the moment, as unfinished, evolving, imperfect, insightful, confused, loving, raging, imaginative, grieving, rejoicing, hurting, fearful, hopeful human beings... all searching for life's meaning and just trying to survive.

Some would call this space, in which we dwell and engage life, as sacred space, transformative space, the holy ground of possibility. For it is here, in the present moment where potential enlightenment can breed awareness of self and others, where distrust and hatred can be met with renewed respect and love, where failure and brokenness can be transformed into growth and wholeness through the human alchemist's mind and heart. Sacred space—that place where we receive each other on holy ground.

I would like to share with you a story from my younger days that speaks to the nature of this auric field in which we walk and breathe. When I was 21, I had the privilege of studying in Germany in an Ecumenical Institute for theology majors. As part of this amazing program we went to Rome to do internships in different departments at the Vatican (I was assigned to the Commission on the Bible which was a fabulous research library.) While we were there, we lived in the Piazza Navona with an Order of Dutch Nuns. Prior to our arrival, our Professor contacted the good sisters to ask them to locate a wheelchair for me.

I have struggled my entire life with knee, ankle and foot issues, and after extensive knee surgery my freshman year in college, I developed a staph infection while in a hip to toe cast. It destroyed my kneecap and joint and required more surgery throughout my college years. In the end, walking would always be difficult and painful, climbing stairs was a major challenge, and

more often than not, I needed the assistance of a cane or crutches. A suitable knee replacement would be 37 years in the future. Still, it didn't stop me from living my life.

Back in Europe, I knew that the cobblestone sidewalks and uneven surfaces of Rome, along with stairs and hills, were not going to be tenable for me. Hence, the good sisters secured the only wheelchair they could find.

It looked like it came out of the movie, "Heidi." It had a high caned back with big wooden wheels and a commode underneath. (I'm not sure which was worse, walking or riding in that multi-purpose vehicle!) Still, I was grateful to have it.

Now, an even more important piece of information you need to know is that I considered myself to be a young feminist radical Catholic theologian-in-training who disdained the hierarchical aspect of the Church, who never understood why I was supposed to believe that it was the one true faith, who abhorred the infallibility of the Pope, who had serious issues with Pope Paul's *Humanae Vitae*, and who advocated the ordination of women...knowing full well that I would never see it happen in my lifetime. I suppose you could say that I had some issues with the tradition that had nurtured me.

SO, it was with great alarm that I received the news from the good sisters that they had secured tickets for us to attend the weekly public audience with Pope Paul VI on the last Wednesday of our tenure in Rome. An audience hall that seated 5,000 people had recently been built, and it was usually difficult to get tickets to the weekly affair. The nuns were so excited to give us this gift, and they considered this to be the icing on the *spiritual cake* of our experience at the Vatican.

I went to my Professor pleading every excuse I could think of not to attend this event, and he played the God card on me. "*You doth protest too much!*" he said. "*Perhaps God really wants you to be there.*" Not one to pass-up a good debate, I challenged his definition of God, but that didn't win me a reprieve.

The day arrived and one of the male students in our group, a Lutheran from Wisconsin, wheeled me over to the auditorium. When we arrived, the Swiss guards separated us from our group and brought us down a long sloping hallway. The door at the bottom opened at the foot of the stage. We were led about a third of the way into the room, and a chair was secured for my chauffeur to sit next to me. The room quickly filled to capacity, with pilgrims from all around the world, and I was the only person there in a wheelchair...and I could walk.

The Pope and his entourage of priests entered, and he was quite elderly at that point, looking like the weight of his responsibilities had taken their toll on his body. Yet, he stood and spoke with a strength and clarity and passion that seemed to belie his years. He also spoke in five different languages...and as hard as this was to believe, I was impressed.

I had entered that room determined to be outraged by his speech, not looking forward to the usual prayers that had lost their visceral effect on me, and ready to be bored. I was bringing all my assumptions and disagreements and yearnings and anger and self-righteousness to that space. And slowly, this 21-year-old-know-it-all began to soften around the edges. **He was not what I had expected**—he was not larger than life. His words felt insightful and sincere. He, of course, did not discuss the contentious issues with which I still disagreed, but he brought something else to that space that I wasn't expecting. He brought a soulful connection to the people who were there and made it feel more like an intimate setting. There was no pompousness, no arrogance, just an older man with a microphone and a meaningful message who happened to be the Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church. But that is not the end of this story.

The Pope had finished speaking and stood to bless the gathered assembly. Before the blessing, however, an African delegation went onto the stage so they could have a private audience with him when he was finished with us peons, the rest of us. The Pope then blessed all the attendees by section. First the right, then the middle, and then the left...where I was sitting with my chauffeur.

The Pope looked down at me for what seemed like the longest moment of my life, and I was terrified. No one uttered a sound, and the only thing I could hear was the pounding of my heart. You see, all I could think of was that he knew that I could walk and I felt profoundly guilty, as if I was somehow lying to the Pope, and I felt totally unworthy of his attention. Then, much to my horror, he started walking down the stairs toward me. There were no railings, and he was frail, and one of his priests ran down and stopped him about half way so he wouldn't fall.

While he was struggling to walk down the stairs, my Lutheran chauffeur leaned over and whispered into my ear, "Get up and walk! The crowd will go wild!" Now, I knew for **certain** that I had just bought a ticket straight to hell because I wanted to kill the kid next to me!

Pope Paul got near enough for me to see his beautiful blue eyes. It felt to me that they had seen much suffering in their days, and at the same time there was a loving kindness and a wisdom and an unconditional acceptance reflected in them that I will never forget.

The crowd of 5,000 people remained silent as he lovingly spoke to me in Italian. Under normal circumstances I would have been able to understand him, but at that moment he could have spoken English and I would not have understood a single word!

The Pope then reached into a pocket of his robe and brought out a brown velour packet with his papal seal embossed on the outside which he had his priest bring down to me. [My mother's friends rubbed off most of it.] (I later discovered its contents to be a mother-of-pearl rosary with his papal seal and Oberammergau cross in gold leaf. The nuns told me that it was probably meant for the head of the African delegation.)

Anyway, I **hope** that I said thank you, but I honestly don't remember my response. Then came the most important part of the story. Very, very, slowly, and never taking his eyes off of mine, Pope Paul VI blessed me. What is most poignant about this story is not-so-much that he blessed me, but that he really blessed the space between us.

This was not about theological debates and hierarchical prescribed dogma, it was not about power and Divine authority, it was not about gender superiority or any of the isms that oftentimes separate us one from another. It was not about a young woman struggling to walk life's path both literally and figuratively. It was about the only thing that will ever penetrate all the different barriers that come between us, and the only thing that will ever bring healing into our lives. It was about compassionate unconditional love and respect—love and respect offered freely from one human being to another. And I was forever humbled.

In that moment I came to realize that it is not what we wear on our lapel that matters most, but what we wear in our hearts. For me, I no longer needed the strictures of an institutional church, but rather I needed to learn to live the most important teaching anyone could ever receive...what it actually means to bless the space between us.

The sacred space that surrounds us, that flows through us is filled with potentiality. Yet, we sometimes automatically tend to pollute that space through a word - a reaction - a tone of voice - a withdrawal - a look - a criticism - a judgment. We unconsciously pour out our hurts and frustrations, and the space becomes uncomfortable - and when the space is uncomfortable - we react to the discomfort - and the uncomfortableness expands - and our energy transforms into fear or anger - and we shout - and we say things we oftentimes regret. We flood our space with pain and turn it into a battlefield of emotion where there are no winners. No one really gets heard, and no one really sees the other.

Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, would say that human relationships should be thought of *as the encounter of "I" and "Thou."* That is not always easy, though. I wonder how often all of us interact and treat the space between us as less than sacred? Your spouse does something annoying and you whip off a sarcastic response. [Guilty as charged.] A group of people decide to slowly cross in front of you just when the light turns green and you can't help but glare at them. Bad people! [Guilty.] A person with a different political viewpoint says something that supports your definition of stupidity. (There is NO "I" and "Thou" there! Just "I" and "Crazy!") **Blessing the space between us takes thoughtful intention, it requires a suspension of judgment by**

embracing the most fundamental aspect of our humanity...the inherent worth and dignity of every person. What makes it humbling is the fact that it is often contrary to what our critical mind would otherwise have us do.

French novelist Marcel Proust stated that the *voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes*. When we allow ourselves to suspend judgment toward ourselves and the other person, perhaps we will be better able to listen with an open heart and learn to perceive situations differently with an open mind. Rumi, the Persian poet, musician and mystic said, *Beyond right thinking and beyond wrong thinking there is a field. I will meet you in this field*.

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Sacred space—that place where we receive each other on holy ground.

To bless the space between us, we need look no further than the eyes of the human soul. Whether they are blue or brown, green or hazel, or some other intriguing color, they are mirrors of our true essence longing to be held in love and acceptance. Despite our unique differences and despite our diverse theological and political ideologies, may we ever strive to meet each other in that space of loving kindness and compassionate non-judgment that blesses us all.

AMEN and BLESSED BE