

SPACIOUSNESS

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Her presentation began with an empty pickle jar. Cynthia held it up for all the volunteers to see, as she spoke about the busyness of our lives. First, she filled the jar with beach stones, representing our largest responsibilities. Then, she added shells—another layer of responsibilities. Before adding the pebbles she asked us if the jar seemed full, and it did. But somehow those pebbles she added next found their way in between the shells and stones. We could be doing more.

We know how this works. It already feels like we can barely take a breath, and another task comes along and we take it on—because it needs doing. She asked again, “Does the jar seem full?” And yes, it was full. This woman, whose job it was to rally more hours from those of us who were already volunteering, then poured sand into the jar. I watched in horror as at least a cup of sand filtered in between the stones, shells, and pebbles. That dry, packed, pickle jar left me feeling parched and claustrophobic. There was no way I would ever allow my life to feel like that. A beach in a pickle jar is not a life.

At the very least, I thought, water could be added. Then the sand would settle and a little movement might return to the jar. At best, the contents could be poured out on a lovely day, returned to their beginnings. And with that accomplished, attention could be turned to the vastness of the ocean, the distant horizon, and the ever-changing clouds. Toes would be free to dig into the yielding sand or be cooled by the lapping waves. And the warm sun could seep into bones that had felt cold too long.

We go to the beach for its spaciousness, but it can only be appreciated if we have some inner space and inner peace we’ve retained or reclaimed over time. In the wise words of meditation teacher, Jon Kabat-Zinn: “Wherever you go, there you are.” We cannot appreciate a view, we cannot open ourselves to the world, if our minds are cluttered with thoughts and concerns that keep us from being in the moment. As spiritual teacher, Eckhart Tolle, reminds us: It is not just too much activity, but too much thinking that keeps us from appreciating our “aliveness”-- the sense that we are spacious beings.

Fortunately, spiritual leaders point us toward what we might otherwise miss. And it is this that I would like to highlight in speaking about spaciousness: It is space that we are, space that we need, and space that we use. In the Tao Te Ching this point is made beautifully: “We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable. We work with being, but non-being is what we use.”

We construct our lives with family, friends, work, and hobbies. We create a framework within which we can live. We know the suffering that comes when these are imposed rather than chosen. For the working poor it could be the three jobs that barely sustain a family, and allow little time for loved ones or for one’s self. Most of us would not willingly create a life so lacking in spaciousness. We are truly fortunate when we shape the clay into

a pot, when we have some control over the form in which we live. And we are truly fortunate when someone else isn't filling the crevices of our life with sand.

Not only is non-being what we use, it is what sustains us and what we live for. It is the space to be ourselves among loved-ones that matters. It is the laughter-filled room of friends that matters. It is the sense of satisfaction at our work that matters. It is the joy that comes from pursuing our hobbies that matters. It is the spaciousness of life we need so desperately. Without it we are miserable. Without it we feel less than human.

So why do most of us have to fight the impulse to overfill our houses and overstuff our calendars? Author and minister, Wayne Muller wonders if life's spaciousness is sometimes experienced as an emptiness that needs to be filled. He writes, "We prefer to remain in the realm of form, surrounded by things we can see and touch, things we imagine are subject to our control."

A Native American woman, by the name of Juanita, leads people on vision quests. Each person journeys into the wilderness and stays there, alone, for three days. On this pilgrimage each is listening for whatever teaching may arise in this spacious place. She has found that it is not the exterior dangers of darkness, wild animals, or cold that most people find alarming. Rather, it is the interior space—the wilderness within—that most people find frightening. What might come up and out of that space when each is alone, with no things to distract them?

In my college years I used to visit the Cambridge Zen Center with some friends. Sitting for an hour, allowing myself to be still, looking at the spaciousness that I am—this was not entirely welcome at the time. There were emotional issues I wasn't ready to deal with. And whenever I was still, they began to bubble up. In order to get to a sense of spaciousness I had to be willing to go through what I preferred to avoid. The activities and thoughts of the day covered over all of it: the emotional content I wasn't quite ready to look at, and the peace I sought.

Most of us are ambivalent about the spaciousness of our lives. We seek it out, we yearn for it, and we avoid it at all cost. Sometimes we run away when someone else wants to pour sand into the crevices of our lives, and sometimes we are the ones dumping the sand in, one handful at a time.

The Chinese pictograph for the word "busy" is comprised of the character for "heart" and the character for "killing." When busyness comes to rule and define us, we become numb, almost lifeless. Father Richard Rohr recounts a conversation he had with a Nicaraguan man. Rohr, feeling overly busy, asked the man if he had time. The Nicaraguan's response was, "I have the rest of my life." And he smiled. Who among us would have that response? What might it take to cultivate that sense of spaciousness?

There is the clutter on our calendars, but also, and more importantly, the clutter in our minds. Some very busy people have learned how to access the inner space they need to stay in touch with their aliveness. Some, far less busy with activities, have overly active

minds, continually churning out old regrets and new concerns. The peace we seek comes with a shift of awareness, usually arising from the pregnant pauses of meditation and prayer, moments when we touch the vastness that is our source and sustenance.

As Richard Rohr opines, “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into a new way of thinking.” I take that to mean we can develop a spiritual practice and begin to experience our lives as spacious. We can carve out small moments in the day when we pause, when we become still, when we know the vastness of who we are. As Psalm 31 intones, “God has set our feet in a spacious place.” We are spacious beings.

Muslims practice five-times prayer. In the course of the day they pause for spaciousness five times. A yearning for God could be described as a yearning for the spaciousness that we are. Included in the Muslim Call To Prayer is the line: “prayer is better than sleep.” Anyone who has developed a spiritual practice of contemplative prayer or meditation knows this to be true. One translation of the biblical phrase, “to pray,” is “to come to rest.” There is a space-holding energy we discovered in wakeful rest.

Perhaps, held in this practice of five-times prayer is a key to what we need. Spiritual practices have evolved naturally over time, with individuals and groups noticing positive affects like peace, spaciousness, and unity—and then sharing what they learned and giving it a form. Pausing five times a day to open up a little space could become a natural and spontaneous part of our lives as well.

Below the level of our daily concerns is a vastness we discover when we are still. With a little creativity we can, about five times a day, pause and be still. It could be upon waking, to remain seated at the edge of the bed for an extra minute or two. It could be when you are standing in line at the checkout. It could be when you are waiting for your child. It could be in the pause after you finish tying your shoes. It could be at a red light, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests.

Every moment we are forced to pause, we can choose to make spacious. Every red light is a chance to live into a new way of thinking. What begins to shift in us if we greet a red light as a “spiritual friend?” It may be one of the few chances in a day when we must become still. We can sit there and notice the smells, sights, and sounds of that moment. Inner peace is most likely to be found in those instances we previously experienced with frustration or oblivion. What had been restrictive can become that longed-for opening.

There are times when we need a red light to help us, and other times when we are aware of the space we need. Like a painter, we must occasionally step back from the canvas of our lives to gain perspective. Extended focus on detail, without taking in the bigger picture, leads us astray. With a bit of space, we discover we are expending energy in the wrong way or with the wrong emphasis, and return to the canvas renewed in our focus. In the course of a day’s painting I imagine taking a few steps back--about five times. As artists in the daily creation we call living, taking a few steps back is necessary as well.

We must assume there is some value in pausing, for it to become part of our lives. We must believe space is what we need and an integral part of who we are, for it to become part of our lives. Suggesting we pause is not intended as another duty or another responsibility. I am not advocating for more stones or shells or pebbles—and certainly not more sand. I am suggesting saying “yes” to the space, holding the space as precious, and knowing it holds something we need. And maybe it’s dumping the whole jar out on the beach once in a while—and remembering how truly vast life is.

The fruits of living spaciously are both simple and dramatic. As the Trappist Monk, Thomas Keating notes, with spiritual practice you will become more present, more flexible, and more forgiving. You will become more honest and comfortable in your own being. Think of Buddha and Jesus. They may be exemplars of spiritual practice and the embrace of spaciousness, but their message is that this is our birthright as well. It’s up to us whether or not we pause. And the pause could be just long enough to notice the perfect snowflake, a child’s laughter, or the scent of a lilac. Or we can be thinking about something else in that moment, and it is lost to us as we are lost in thought.

We come together today, in this space, with the potential of becoming more spacious. We know how quickly daily demands and concerns can crowd out what we hold to be most dear: the space to love, to delight, to rest, and to behold. May today be the day we begin a fuller embrace our stillness and aliveness. May today be the day we begin to live more spaciously and graciously. May today be the day we begin to live into the vastness of who we are.