

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
June 7, 2009

Leaving Space

by Donne Hayden

Years ago I came across this advice from a Buddhist teacher on how to gain new perspective: “Go outside and sit under a tree,” he said, “and watch the space *between* the leaves.” I tried it. It was difficult; the space between leaves is filled with light that shifts and changes with their movement, even on a still day, so what I looked at kept changing. But afterward, I understood leaves and my own perception in a different way.

Artists understand that form is determined and delineated by the space *around* it. Dozens of art shows, art books, art articles, and artworks have “space between” somewhere in the title. An art gallery in Colorado called “Spaces Between Trees” holds an annual event in which artwork is literally hung in the spaces between trees in the forest crowding around the village of Nederland. According to its PR material, the galleries’ philosophy is to make viewers aware of “interstitial spaces” - referring to interstices, those small gaps between closely spaced things, which are, according to the art gallery

When you see the poem on the page, Galvin has set the word “apart” apart—it is alone on a line with space around it. The poet then describes the process of prying “big stones from a knoll of frost-cracked granite,” and then of laying the “angular, irregular” stones.

I learned to stagger the seams and fit the
random stones by trying different combinations, as if the
wall were a puzzle with one ideal order that doesn't make
a picture, and whose puzzle-parts weigh fifty pounds each,
so it hurts to change your mind.

They never really fit
till you tear them down and build them back in order, with
mortar to hold them apart.

Each stone is rigid and inflexible, “unforgiving” we might call it; try stacking them together, hard surface on hard surface and they won't stay together long. Allowing some space between stones, however, space filled in by the more flexible and “forgiving” sand or mortar, keeps the irregular stones far enough apart so that each one's idiosyncrasies can exist without grinding against another's. The key in keeping the stones *together* is keeping them far enough apart, leaving space between them.

There is a lesson for us here, of course, about leaving space.

I am led to an image of a church congregation as a stone wall: irregular stones or souls, stacked together in community. “Forget your perfect offering,” sang poet Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in.”¹ One of the most certain markers of transcendent experiences, i.e., encounters with the Divine, is *brokenness*.² When we are well and truly broken, that’s when many of us are able to encounter God. Our very cracks and imperfections leave space for the Light to enter us. In the congregation-as-stone-wall, love makes a very nice mortar, flexible, forgiving and transparent enough to let the Light through the cracks around and in us. Dogma, on the other hand, is like plaster over the outside of a stone wall; it makes the wall *appear* uniform; underneath, however, all those individual souls still seek space for their irregularities. Plaster covers over the spaces between, and it doesn’t permit Light to shine through, even if the mortar is Love.

It is human nature to focus on solid and still objects rather than the invisible molecules of air whirling around them; it is our nature to listen to sound rather than silence (except Quakers). Unfortunately, we treat beliefs as though they too can be solid, labeled and categorized. The fact that I am as guilty of this as anyone was called to my attention at the most recent Quaker Service & Spirituality

¹ Leonard Cohen lyrics to “Anthem.”

² Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *The Fingerprints of God*.

group meeting. The subject of the Wilmington Yearly Meeting questions and our responses to them came up and I was holding forth on the range of beliefs among Quakers,” I said, “Some are *here* [motioning to right] and some are *here* [motioning left].” Michelle Bertaux, who is uncomfortable with labels, said, “Well, I’m not *in* any of those places—I’m in the spaces between.”

I like that. It means, for one thing, that there *is* space between labels; spaces that avoid labels.

In our Meetings and congregations especially, we need to *see* differently, with “truly spiritual eyes,” and to give each other the kind of space apparent in the words of early Quaker Isaac Pennington. He alludes to a passage in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, which was sort of a “traveling minute” for a group of Jewish Christians returning to Rome after years of exile. In Paul’s letter to the *gentile* Christians in Rome, he advises these early church folks not to argue about practices related to beliefs, specifically about food or drink. (The Jewish Christians would still have observed Jewish purity laws, not eating pork, etc.). Paul offers the following advice to both groups:

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God,” . . . “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” . . . “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding . . .”³

³ Romans 14; verses not in this order in the text.

Sixteen hundred years later, Isaac Penington notes with approval that early Friends seem to have understood Paul's admonition to focus not on differences but on "mutual upbuilding." He writes,

. . . how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account, and not to quarrel with one another about their different practices (Rom 14:4).

How would our lives change if we trained ourselves to look at the spaces between objects? How would our congregations change if we valued the numinous regions *around and between* our own and others' spiritual beliefs?

Among the seven billion of us on the planet now, each human being is unique. No matter how similar we might appear, like all the leaves on a particular oak tree, or all the oak leaves on all the oak trees in the world, not one of us is *exactly* the same as any other. (Considering the diversity of creation makes me dizzy. Why humans assume that the Creator desires conformity is a mystery to me.) Like the "mosaic" arrangement of leaves on a branch, "each leaf fitting into the space between neighboring leaves

and the branch on which they are borne without overlapping,”⁴ like the cushioning buffer of mortar in a stone wall, like the silence between words and musical notes, our spiritual lives benefit from allowing space between our idiosyncrasies and the idiosyncrasies of others. So that we don’t over-shadow each other, stand in each other’s Light, garble the message we’ve been given in music or thought, or break each other with our rigidity, we need forgiving, flexible space between us.

May such a loving space be around and between us at Cincinnati Friends Meeting.

⁴ From the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: “The arrangement of the leaves on the stem and branches (see *Phyllotaxy*, below) is such as to prevent the upper leaves shading the lower, and the shape of the leaf serves towards the same end - the disposition of leaves on a branch or stem is often seen to form a ‘mosaic,’ each leaf fitting into the space between neighbouring leaves and the branch on which they are borne without overlapping.” *Love to Know* website, <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Leaf>