



To Be a Healing Place

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I am blessed with wonderful friends, friends who laugh at my jokes, who bring me good soup, who hold me accountable, who cry with me when I am sad. When a private heartache hit several months back, these friendships served as safe havens, as their company offered a space to heal, helping me to remember who I am as I began to live into a new reality.

Those of us who have enjoyed the shelter of such relationships understand that the best compliment we offer another is to say: “You are a refuge, a safe place. You are a port in the storm, a haven. A place of rest.” We may even recognize how these relationships reveal God to us, a God whose loving care is described as a haven and in spatial and structural terms of protection and respite, as well: that is, as a shelter, a refuge, a hid-

ing place (Psalms 46, 62, 91), and as a place where the heavily burdened will find rest (Matthew 11:28).

For those of us who seek to be this kind of shelter, who desire to offer our presence as a safe place for another, we know the need to be ready. We recognize that the next phone call, text message, or knock on the door may bring news of a friend’s frightening biopsy, struggling marriage, creeping



addiction, unexpected loss or some other aching need for healing.

In his beloved book, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, the late Irish poet and theologian John O'Donohue encourages us to bless one another and to name the sacred in our midst, with special attention to those tender, fraught places where healing is needed.¹ With his inspiration, I offer three blessings — a blessing of delight, of candor and of memory — for potential use and to accompany those of us who seek to be a healing place for others.

THE BLESSING OF DELIGHT

Delight is a beautiful blessing we offer one another when we share our joyful recognition of another's uniqueness, particular experience, dignity and worth. A powerful New Testament model of one who blesses with delight is Elizabeth, the knowing older cousin of Mary (see Luke 1:39-56). We are told that upon discovering her pregnancy, Mary departed "in haste" to the sanctuary of her cousin's home, where we can imagine that this young, pregnant, unwed woman longed to feel welcome and safe.² Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth's proclaims "in a loud cry" her delight and reverence:

Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ... For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled (Luke 1:42-45).

We can imagine Elizabeth, the loving cousin, who is now both elder and peer in pregnancy, as well as prophetic witness for Mary in this moment, saying: "It is good to have you show up at my door. Your pain and messiness, along with your excitement and your confusion, are all welcome here. You are safe. I am honored to receive you."

We see in this scene how the blessing of delight bears fruit, bringing confidence and joy. In the text, Elizabeth's reception immediately prompts Mary to sing her glorious Magnificat ("My soul proclaims ... my spirit rejoices ..."). But this is also how any of us who are received with such profound joy, affirmation and delight might be

prompted to (perhaps metaphorically) sing: "I am blessed and good. I am part of a long line of ancestors, beloved in God's sight. The future looks brighter. God is so good."³

This encounter might be imagined as a sacred bumping of bellies, apt among pregnant friends, or a joyful embrace between those who share the life-changing news of a new job, or a successful recovery, or the culmination of a difficult discernment process. As with Mary and Elizabeth, when the mystery of you meets the mystery of me, life is stirred within and between us. We will see what new song and new life will emerge.

I know the power of being received in a way that proclaims and celebrates my own value and dignifies the mystery within, by one who knows how to be with me in my pregnant moments, and whose reception prompts me to break into song. You too may know what it means to receive the

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blessing of such a gift, perhaps through a compliment from a trusted source that boosted your confidence at a key moment, and prompted you to see, celebrate and claim your gifts. Whether in the form of an enthusiastic greeting, an animated text message, or some other communication, whenever we articulate our genuine delight in another, we do nothing less than amplify God's loving and affirming voice, such as Jesus heard at crucial times throughout his ministry: "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). The blessing of delight makes room for all this.

THE BLESSING OF CANDOR

Candor is the quality of being open, honest and frank. We offer the blessing of candor when we are lovingly generous in our honesty, when we judiciously share from our perspective and experience, and when we offer the possibility of hope. Our model here can be the resurrected Jesus who,

in love and without restraint, reveals his own wounds to a shocked Thomas, and then invites Thomas to touch them, for his own reassurance. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side” (John 20:27).

We might easily overlook the implications and significance of this moment and the deep wisdom and generosity of spirit that it reveals. Notice that Jesus allows Thomas the opportunity not only to touch his wounds, but even to place his hands within them. This offers a perspective that only direct contact, intimate trust and hard-won, personal experience can bring.

I am reminded again, in this context, of my own pregnancy experience, and the words and actions of my own beloved, experienced older cousin. Before the birth of my first child, she candidly showed me her stretch marks, saying, “No one else is going to tell you this, but I will. This is going to hurt. You will be overwhelmed. But then, you will heal.” I recall, too, upon receiving the news of a child’s fateful diagnosis, a wise clinician who looked me squarely in the eye and said, “We know something about this here. I don’t know how this will end for you, or where this will lead, but you are here, taking an important first step. And that is good.” We can likely all imagine such a clinician or family member or trusted friend, one who offered the unrestrained truth and said some version of: “I’m not going to lie to you. This is going to be hard. But then you will heal ... And that is good ...”

The blessing of candor shows us that knowledge can be powerful and lead to healing, and that we can trust and be entrusted with honesty, vulnerability and truth. It may also be uncomfortable, in its offering or reception. Yet, when offered lovingly, it respects the integrity of each, and the ability of both parties to handle whatever is shared. In my own life, the blessing of candor has opened a door to growth, as when a colleague helped me see where additional learning was necessary for a new role I had accepted. The blessing of candor, in the form of a frank conversation, has led me to collect more data, and to advocate for needs that I did not recognize. The blessing of candor has come in the form of feedback that helped me understand how my behavior was hurtful to another. When offered with generosity and respect for the dignity of all, and received in

a spirit of trust, the blessing of candor has often made way for transformation.

THE BLESSING OF MEMORY

We offer the blessing of memory when we remember and honor the story of another. Often with this blessing, too, comes the discovery of a shared story. This blessing is especially important when we are overwhelmed or have lost our way. We experience this blessing when we hear a loving friend say: “I know you and I see you. Let me remind you of what you have been through, what you have endured.” Or, it may come with a hope-filled offer: “Let’s unpack this story a bit and reweave the loose ends. A new story may be ready to emerge.”

Our model for one who blesses with memory is again the resurrected Jesus, as he accompanies grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke

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24:13-35). “What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?” Jesus asks, as yet unrecognized. As they tell their story of grief and heartache and mysterious happenings, Jesus listens knowing there is much more to their story. We can imagine Jesus saying some version of: “OK. Let’s walk through this again ...,” as he helps them hear, see and interpret their own story in a new way. And as he does so, the disciples found that their hearts burned, a sign that transformation had begun.

For us as for these disciples, healing can begin with shared stories. Just as Jesus blesses the couple on the road with his invitation to share, a skilled couple’s counselor knows that the best way to warm the chill of a struggling marriage is to bless the couple with memory, to ask each to recount the story of how they met, fell in love, or what memories they share and cherish. Hope is stirred and healing can begin in the process of sharing



and hearing precious memories: “I remember this ... I remember you.”

In my own life, as a beloved friend began his brave climb out of an addiction, I often reminded him of his larger story, and the hallmarks of health and happiness for him: what it was like to walk on the beach, to prepare a good meal, to play a fun game of cards, to freely, honestly give and receive love. When life later handed him an ominous diagnosis, again I would simply say, “I remember you. I’ve witnessed your recovery. You can do this hard thing. I trust your wisdom. And I know there is more to your mysterious beautiful story than this pain, this suffering of today.”

The blessing of memory lands us in hope. We bless each other as we share our own memories of solidarity, survival, possibility, success or even triumph much like a resilient elder may remind us, “We’ve been here before. This is a pattern that our ancestors knew well.” Layer upon layer, we can be assured that your story and God’s story are one and the same, and so it is one of renewed life and the triumph of love, in the end.⁴ Our own stories of living, dying, rising and glory are stories no less mysterious, powerful and beautiful than that of Jesus’ own transformation.

WHERE GOD DWELLS

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord ...” (Psalm 84).

Faithful friendship is a sturdy shelter, we read in the book of Sirach (6:14). On my best days, I want to offer my delight, my affirming greeting and my house as Elizabeth did, as a safe place, a sanctuary. I want to offer my steady presence, shared experience, candor, trust and tender remembering, as Jesus did, to help others heal and connect their story with the larger story of resurrection and new life of which we are all a part. I suspect you want to do this, too.

But even on our best days, our hearts and our minds, our doorways and our inboxes can feel too full. The need for healing refuge is so great, and there is often more than the shelter of one heart can hold. So rather than holding it alone, let’s do this together, striving for the joyous welcome and reassurance of Elizabeth, and with the loving accompaniment of Jesus in mind. Let’s invite God in to find a home in our hearts, minds, homes and company, to move in and through and to dwell among us. We can put the Holy Spirit to work,

shoring up the structure to be sturdy and lovely.

Someone needs the gift of your blessing today — perhaps someone you are mentoring, a discouraged friend, or an emerging leader who cannot yet see how amazing they are. Delight in them. Tell them how gifted and full of possibilities they are. Offer them a sharing of your own hard-won experience and help them to remember their own wisdom. Help them see the sacred within themselves and in their story. Do so with respect and reverence, perhaps also sharing a perspective or a bigger picture for them to reflect upon — one that offers the possibility of renewal or something altogether new. Someone needs all of this today. Remembering the example of Elizabeth and the example of Jesus, let us together offer shelter and blessings of delight, candor and memory. In both giving and receiving such sanctuary, let’s both offer and say to one another: “Welcome” or “I’m on my way over.”

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NOTES

1. John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). For health care leaders who regularly lead reflections, consider adding this beautiful resource to your bookshelf.
2. Mary and Elizabeth’s encounter has been depicted by many, including the artist Brother Mickey McGrath. His colorful work, *The Windsock Visitation*, graces the entrance to the monastery of the Visitation Sisters of Minneapolis and includes foundress St. Jane de Chantal’s words, “This is the place of our delight and rest.”
3. I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing Mary’s glorious *Magnificat*.
4. The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas’ cross with its multiple layers offers us a helpful visual here. Its simple form gives us a symbol of profound solidarity: layer upon layer, mercy upon mercy. We can imagine the cross of our lives laid upon the crosses of others, all gently held upon the base that is the cross of Christ.

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