

Thin Places

Sermon given at
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
March 17, 2024

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It seems like everyone has a favorite childhood memory or memories. Even those of you here today, still in childhood, I'm sure can think of a favorite memory you have. One of my favorite childhood memories is of going fishing with my father on Long Island Sound. As soon as it was warm enough to put the boat in water in late spring until it was time to pull it out and store it away for the winter in mid-autumn, my father spent at least one day a week fishing out on the Sound.

I didn't go with him every time, but I went often, which doesn't seem especially unusual to most people until they learn that I never have and still don't enjoy fishing....I don't even eat seafood! For all the times I went out fishing with my father, the number of times I actually fished isn't much more than the number of fingers on my two hands. Still, those times out on the Sound are among my most cherished memories.

While my father and sometimes one of his friends, a neighbor or my sister were all fishing, I would walk out onto the bow of the boat and sit, my legs dangling over the water below, chin resting on the rail. There I would gaze out over the vast expanse of water dappled with shimmering sunlight and toward the horizon where sky and sea disappeared into one another. It seemed I too would disappear, but rather than frightening, the experience was one of a deep, inexplicable aliveness and sense of peace. I didn't understand or know what to call these and similar experiences I had on and away from those sunny days on Long Island Sound. I mostly assumed I was weird, but knew on some other level that they were transformative experiences.

It wasn't until I began spiritual direction with a Buddhist just before entering seminary that I discovered...

- a. I wasn't weird...
- b. Experiences like these have been described by people of all walks of life, across every culture and within every religion for thousands of years and ...
- c. There's names for these types of experiences....including a rather curious one, thin places.

The late Harvard theologian, Peter Gomes, wrote, "There is in Celtic mythology the notion of 'thin places' in the universe where the visible and the invisible world come into their closet proximity." And which provide, for those who encounter

them, Gomes says, “the clearest communication between the temporal and the eternal.” Author, teacher and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, describes thin places as, “...transparent places or moments, set apart by the quality of the sunlight in them, or the shadows, or the silence, or the sounds...”

Although the term “thin places” is most closely associated with the spiritual tradition of the ancient Celts and later Celtic Christians, our story for all ages reveals, the idea of thin places, where and how they’re found and experienced exists across traditions, transcending differences in theological and cultural orientation and practice.

People from around the world, past and present, have written of encountering thin places in nature...at bodies of water as vast as the ocean or as narrow as a New England stream. The pond I live on and where I canoe, has proven a thin place in my experience, a place I can go feel a deep sense of kinship with various forms of life...or a deep awareness of my connection with all that has come before and will follow my own brief human life. Thin places can also be found along rolling hills and atop great mountains, in valleys or across expansive fields, in the deep blue sky of day and the star filled black of night.

In addition to natural settings, thin places are often associated with locations steeped in history...ancient ruins or cities around the globe. Locations long regarded as sacred sites, sacred land, or structures important to or erected by adherents of various world religions are frequently experienced as thin.

I discovered, perhaps not unexpectedly Rome, with its long history and sheer number of magnificent edifices both secular and sacred to be especially thin. Less expected, was my experience of Warsaw, Poland as a thin place. Leveled during the Nazi occupation, the city’s old town center and royal castle were rebuilt in the second half of the 20th C. to their historic appearance. Walking around the city I was consumed both by a profound sense of life’s impermanence and the power of human resiliency.

Thin places don’t all look alike, nor is a particular place experienced as thin by every person. Indeed thin places are recognizable more by the experience they engender than by the physicality and all the attendant sensory data of a specific location. Barbara Brown Taylor notes thin places, regardless of physical location, have in common a, “...luminosity, the way they light an opening between this world and another...it works to make you more aware of the thin veil between apparent reality and deeper reality. It works to pull aside the veil for just a moment, so you can see through.”

This certainly rings true in my experience of thin places whether I’ve encountered them on the water, in the woods or meandering through the streets of an ancient

city. But not all thin places are beautiful or easy places to encounter. Indeed, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Thin places aren’t always lovely places, and they’re not only outdoors. Hospital rooms can be thin places. So can emergency rooms and jail cells.” And, as Peter Gomes, notes, “Perhaps the ultimate of these thin places in the human condition are the experiences people are likely to have as they encounter suffering, joy, and mystery.”

During the same trip I visited Warsaw, I also traveled to Auschwitz, the Nazi extermination camp. I found Auschwitz to be a thin place. I think I was somewhat disturbed by this, although it wasn’t completely unexpected, as I had read that other people had experienced it as thin too.

It poured the day I was there, the rain forming puddles on the gravel roads and paths within the small compound. It was July but the rain was cold, soaking and chilling everything and everyone it fell upon. I could not help but liken the rain to tears...tears of God, the heavens, the Universe, perhaps. I can’t say for sure, but tears nonetheless, being shed for both the acts of horror and humanity that occurred there.

I don’t think those tears stop when the rain ceases to fall.

I can’t quite explain what I mean by that. That’s how it is sometimes with thin places. It isn’t always clear what the experience has shown you or what you’re to do with the experience. Thin places affect us by bypassing our understanding. A point made in Thomas Aquinas’ poem, “What Does Light Talk About?”,

“When you recognize her beauty,
the eye applauds, the heart stands in an ovation,

and the tongue when she is near
is on its best behavior,

it speaks more like light.

What does light talk about?
I asked a plant that once,

It said, "I am not sure,
but it makes me
grow.”

We may not be able to capture or explain the meaning or the experience of them, but thin places help us grow. They give us a glimpse of a deeper reality than we’re typically aware of in day to day life...a deeper reality variously named or

conceptualized, often as God, or for Barbara Brown Taylor “the Really Real” or “Most Real” and for our Unitarian forbear, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Oversoul.

However one conceptualizes it afterward, what is particularly notable is, as Emerson writes, “Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.” The sense of having experienced something out of the ordinary is undeniable in thin places.

Some describe a sense of timelessness, a strong sense of connection to the past. Others a sudden gut level insight, awareness, or affirmation of some truth or concept only previously engaged or accepted intellectually. Still others talk of feeling a profound sense of peace, and as I’ve often experienced, a deeply restorative sense of the vastness of the universe, my own smallness in relation to it, and yet at the same time a sense of ineffable intimacy with all.

Perhaps the most significant way in which encountering thin places helps us grow or experience transformation is by helping us become, in the words of the Christian minister and blogger Mark Roberts, “less thick.” That is, they help us become more aware of and open to our place in the universe, aware and accepting of both our potential and limitations as individuals and human beings.

I consider thin places as those experiences or moments that help “right size” my understanding of self in relationship to the vastness and mystery of existence. Every encounter, every experience of thinness, be it alone on a hillside, walking along ancient roads, or talking with a person in a hospital bed, my office or around the dinner table, teaches me humility, releases me from the burden of delusions of control, and reminds me that I and my life are inextricably linked to the scenery before my eyes, the ground beneath my feet, and people around me, like waves upon the sea, distinct but never separate.

Even if you had never heard the term thin places before today, I’ve listened to many people, including some of you speak of or describe encounters of thin places, places or moments, both joyful and sad, in which you felt connected to a deeper reality, times in which you conversed with Light, heard what the Aboriginal people call Great Spirit’s voice, or sensed, as Emerson, “a deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.”

As Unitarian Universalists we recognize that in the face of such experiences, how or what language we use to conceptualize this experience is a matter of personal theology. A right and responsibility we affirm and honor in our tradition. Equally important is our promise to one another to seek, encourage and support spiritual

growth for our own benefit as well as for the benefit of our community within and outside these walls.

With this in mind, I invite you in the days and weeks ahead to reflect upon your own experience of thin places and ways in which you have grown from the experience. In fact, I'm going to take it a step further and ask that each of you share with one other person at fellowship hour, an experience you've had of thin places and how that experience has impacted you or helped you grow. If you find yourself struggling to articulate the experience, take good heart, in matters such as these, our words are only, as is often said in the Eastern religions, "a finger pointing toward the moon."

Let us now depart then to explore and share the wild terrain of memory, to revisit the sea or ascend mountains, meander down ancient paths, recall a great temple or rocky ruins, hold hands with a loved one long gone or turn our thoughts toward people, places, or events more recent. And in so doing may we be reminded of places where Light spoke to us, times when we felt less thick and able to see... if but for a moment...behind the veil, a deeper reality, places where there "is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens"...places known in Celtic spirituality as....thin places.

May it be so
Amen and Blessed Be