

Mind the Gap

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They say, “Clothes make the man”, and I found there was some truth to that when I worked as a hospital chaplain. If I was on during the day I usually wore a sports jacket and tie. And upon entering a unit or room, patients and sometimes staff, would assume I was either a psychologist or one of the hospital administrators. That is, until I introduced myself as the chaplain, occasionally to their quite obvious disappointment.

When I was on-call overnight I wore a jacket and clergy shirt. That’s the shirt with a white band collar of the sort just about every clergy person in movies to comic strips is depicted wearing. That choice of dress was intentional on my part because whenever I was on-call overnight, almost all the calls I’d get were to the ER which was often crowded and sometimes chaotic. In the midst of the ever changing sea of staff and patients in the ER, wearing near universally recognized clergy attire ensured there was no mistaking who I was and my role in the crowd of people.

Still, it did have its drawbacks. One time a patient jumped right up off her chair and starting running away as soon as she saw me, calling back, “No, no, no.” I can only assume she had a bad experience with clergy in the past or assumed I was coming to deliver bad news, which incidentally was the doctor’s job, not mine, although I was often present in those moments.

Now, the truth is most of the time people didn’t really care what I was wearing. They were more interested in knowing why I came to see them. Figuring if I told them I was there to assess their spiritual needs, they’d kick me out of the room, I’d simply say, “I’m here to listen.” An answer that seemed to catch more than a few off guard.

While some people didn’t have much to say, most talked a little, and some talked a lot. And it was not uncommon for people to share things they’d never said aloud before, let alone to another person. The experience made a deep impression on me, leaving me with the sense that many, if not most people, have never truly been listened to.

How could this be?

After all we live in a time when it seems just about anyone can and does share every detail of their lives on social media. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if oversharing is a competitive sport online.

However, one of the things that's glaringly obvious to me as an introvert in a world that won't stop talking, is that while all manner of talking is encouraged, listening is not. And so just because you're talking doesn't mean you're being heard, and even if you are being heard, it doesn't mean you're being listened to. And perhaps all the chatter, all the oversharing that goes on, indicates we know this on a deep level.

If you use the underground or subway in England, you will encounter signs and a pleasant, recorded voice instructing you to "Mind the Gap." The gap in this case is the open space between the train car and the station platform.

Curiously, the pithy yet politely worded warning to "Mind the Gap" has proven quite endearing, so much so that one can buy everything from signs to t-shirts, emblazoned with this message. I suspect quite a few of the people who display the message on the rear bumper of their car, water bottle, their dorm room wall have never actually seen or heard it on a train or platform in England. So what is that's so appealing?

Perhaps it's the phrasing. After all we don't use this meaning of the verb *mind* very often on this side of the pond. But I wonder if the warning's popularity is due to something else, something we feel, but can't quite articulate. It seems "Mind the Gap" points to something essential that similar warnings like, "Watch Your Step." don't.

Indeed, thinking theologically, Mind the Gap, takes on an almost prayer like quality.

Especially when we consider Mary Oliver's assertion in her poem, The Summer Day, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is."

But then...and I love this... she says, "I do know how to pay attention..." Suggesting while she may not know quite what a prayer is, she knows paying attention...that is, listening, not just talking, is a part of it. A big part of it. And listening not just with our ears, but with our whole being.

Recall she describes the grasshopper's jaws that move back and forth rather than up and down, and writes, "I know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll

through the fields....” seemingly aware that listening, paying attention, is the most basic form of love.

And then she challenges us, the reader, “Tell me, what else should I have done?”

More, she turns the question on us, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” As if to say, What will you do if not love?”

Perhaps Mind the Gap then is a prayer for an age that doesn’t know exactly what a prayer is, but senses deep down we’re missing out on something important. Which then raises the question, What is the gap that this prayer is directing us to mind or pay attention to?

Our talk oriented culture looks at gaps and sees a void to fill, a space to take over, a height, length, and depth to measure and explain, or a problem to solve.

But, consider for a moment what would music be without rests or poetry without pauses.

The gap which the prayer Mind the Gap directs our attention toward is empty, but it is not a void. It is a vessel of meaning.

Think back to our story for all ages this morning. Ivaar, having lost the love of his life to his brother, is plunged into despair. Upon learning of the reason for Ivaar’s despair, The King tries to help his friend. First he tries to fix the situation by offering his blessing on Ivaar’s proposal to any other woman he likes. Ivaar declines. Next The King tries to fix Ivaar saying, “You must take your mind off this woman.” And The King proposes sending Ivaar off to adventure, to buy him a farm, or take him on tour of the country. Still, Ivaar declines.

Finally, The King realizes what Ivaar needs is not someone to fix things, offer explanations, or advice, but someone to be with him, to mind the gap, to leave open space for Ivaar to speak of his one true love and the things that are important to him.

Mind the Gap is a beautiful prayer to carry into a conversation with a friend or loved one grieving or celebrating something or someone significant to them. It’s a simple reminder to rein in the impulse to jump in with advice or a story about yourself and just be with someone in their sorrow or joy, to bring your full attention, your love to them.

It’s also a prayer that can be used for reflection on the world around us as Oliver demonstrates in her poem. How might we Mind the Gap in relation to the planet

and other beings, including conflicts with people here and around the globe? Who or what are we not hearing or listening to in our rush to fill the void, fix a problem or people, or impose a narrative or solution on a situation? Put another way, where are we offering everything but love?

Lastly, it's a good prayer too for ourselves. When is the last time you sat down to listen to, to pay attention to, that still, small voice...not your ego voice, but that still, small voice inside. And I don't mean acknowledge it for a couple minutes, I mean really sit with it, without your cell phone or iPad in reach, without your grocery or other to-do list running in the background, just you with you for you. When is the last time you showed yourself some love?

I confess when I started sketching out this sermon a few weeks ago, I didn't know it would turn toward prayer. But here we are. And I suppose I shouldn't think it so unusual.

Our Christian neighbors have the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle Paul's instruction to pray without ceasing.

Our muslim neighbors have pray as one of the five pillars of their faith, those obligatory acts of worship, that also include the declaration of faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage.

And prayer is front and center in the religious life of our Jewish neighbors, who are presently in the midst of the High Holy Days that began with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, last week and culminate with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement in a few days.

And yes, even our Buddhist and Hindu neighbors with whom meditation is more commonly associated, also pray.

UU's pray too, of course, but a lot of us would readily admit, like Mary Oliver, we don't know exactly what a prayer is. Well, that's okay, for in the end it isn't what a prayer is that matters, its what it does. For if our prayer is to Mind the Gap, that is, to listen, to pay attention, a prayer which is far from a passive, self-indulgent exercise, then it increases the supply of love in the world.

And I'm left to wonder, "What else are we do with our one wild and precious life?"

Amen and Blessed Be