

## Looking Over the Edge Together

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon  
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In 2009, I was in seminary and working full time through the summer as a hospital chaplain, when I began experiencing some odd neuromuscular symptoms.

A visit to the doctor resulted in a recommendation for further testing and the news that these symptoms could be a sign of: a. nothing at all, b. something mild, c. something moderate, d. something pretty bad, or e. something really, really bad.

I am certain many of you have had, or may be having a similar experience, and with results anywhere from a-e. This is the way of life in our incredible and fragile bodies, as awful and unfair as that sometimes is.

I will spoil my story right away to say that the answer this time around for me ended up being b. something mild – I was eventually diagnosed with a condition that translates in plain, and kind of funny English to: Irritable Muscles. (*Flex Muscle Grrrrr...*)

It might have been otherwise. One day with something else it almost certainly will be otherwise, as I quickly learned while spending that same summer as a hospital chaplain journeying with those for whom it was indeed otherwise.

Anyhow, back before I knew my problem was b. something mild, I went, all by myself, for those further tests, including an MRI. At the end of my stay in the big and clunking machine, the radiology tech came to release me from my head restraint and help me up. As I left the room, he looked deep into my eyes, shook my hand, and said, with feeling. “Good Luck.”

It was, possibly, the worst thing he could have said. At the very least, it was the worst **way** he could have said it, with such heavy sincerity.

“Oh God,” I thought. “WHAT DOES HE KNOW?”

It was a phrase mild enough to be his usual platitude, or, in my imagination, sinister enough to mean that he saw something horrible on the scan, and I was going to need all the luck I could possibly get.

Never mind that this man was trained to administer scans, not to read them. His kind words were the gust of wind that knocked over the careful pile of “don’t freak out” cards that I had constructed.

I called my best friend Karen, my seminary classmate.

“I’m freaking out,” I said.

“I’m coming over,” She replied.

She did come over, and I will always remember what she did next. Or didn’t do.

She did not say, “Oh, you’ll be fine.” She did not try to reassure me that it was nothing at all, or something mild. She did not tell me not to worry.

She said something like. “Your biggest fear may be true. It may not be true. This might be something really, really bad, or nothing at all, or anything in between. Either way, no matter what, I am here, and we will figure out how to journey through whatever comes.”

This was exactly what I needed. Someone to acknowledge the starkest possibility, and to say, even in *that* you are not alone. Even in *that* there is love – mine for you, and perhaps a greater love that will hold us both.

There are no better people in our lives than the ones who will go with us to the edge of an abyss and calmly peer with us into the dark and the deep. Who will say, yes, this is an abyss. And who will hold our hand and stay there with us while our eyes adjust to the dark and our hearts adjust to the deep.

We each are called to stand or sit at so many edges in this life, encountering the abyss of so many mysteries and so many tragedies and so many fearful hopes.

And we are, each of us, lucky to have people in our lives who will accompany us there, different people at different times and in different roles.

I invite you to think for a moment, with gratitude, of those who have journeyed with you to the edge of an abyss, who have held the space for you in which love could do its work even in the darkest and even unto the deepest of times.

*(pause)*

And I invite you to consider that we can, each of us, become those people for others, when we do the spiritual work necessary to learn how to hold space well for those around us. I invite you to consider that this may be one of our deepest callings as people of free faith – the simple act of holding space for one another and for each person we encounter as we approach the many edges of our lives.

In a recent post that made the rounds on social media, blogger Heather Plett gives her definition of what it means to “hold space” for someone, and it is a good one. She writes:

It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they’re on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control.<sup>1</sup>

Oh, so that’s all, huh? Just unconditional support and non-judgment, and a healthy dose of surrender. Ha!

It is no coincidence that “holding space” sounds like just the kind of mindset we seek to create with serious spiritual practice. Because it is not an easy feat.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tranquilmonkey.com/what-it-really-means-to-hold-space-for-someone/>

It is especially hard in a world whose abysses are deeper and darker than we are willing to imagine.

Perhaps you have walked with someone through illness, addiction, struggle without trying to fix them or impact the outcome, and you know how heart-wrenching that can be.

Perhaps you have held space for someone at the end of life, in the hardest kind of letting go.

Almost certainly your unconditional loving has led you to your own edges of grief and loss.

And most of us have watched our human kin act in division and hatred, and have struggled mightily to open our hearts to such a world.

“Holding space” for others and accepting “held space” for ourselves requires all the resources of the human spirit.

It requires courage, even through appropriate fear and trembling in the face of an abyss.

It requires a deep surrender to the world as it is, even as it allows the imagination of what the world may be.

It requires us to manage our own feelings of helplessness in a world of contingency and change.

My colleague the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons has developed a list of 12 humanist qualities of spiritual maturity, which we will be exploring together starting in September, and several of them resonates particularly with the desire to hold space.

1. A tolerance for intensity and ambiguity 2. The ability to be in the presence of pain without panic. 3. The serene surrender to reality.

That summer of 2009, when I briefly looked at my own abyss and found myself held by my dear friend, I spent the rest of my days learning how to hold space for others as a hospital chaplain. It was a crash course in spiritual maturity, or my own lack thereof. Panic in the presence of pain? Check! A deep discomfort with intensity and ambiguity? Check! The rigorous resistance to reality? Done and done.

My first day sitting with someone receiving a difficult diagnosis, I nearly shimmied out of my own skin. But I learned, and I learned, and I kept learning. Some from my teachers and mentors, some from my own friend, and mostly from the individuals I served, who were each, there, sitting at the edge of their own abyss, and from their loved ones, who held space for them, or did not, as they were able.

I saw the expansiveness and freedom of space held well, and I saw the claustrophobia and fear of space held poorly. Loved ones opening their arms to whatever may be. Loved ones clinging tight. Loved ones accepting hard truth. Loved ones insisting upon a miracle. All so very human. All powered by love.

Those days showed me that the power of holding space is mostly the same as the power of letting go. And they showed me that our deep love is exactly the paradox that makes letting go so very difficult.

All too often an encounter with someone who is facing an abyss brings up our own desire for certainty and control, usually because we love them and we want the power to change their situation.

Indeed, it is almost always out of our own deep love for another that we seek to take away their pain, fix their problem, or otherwise remove their agency in the facing of their abyss.

Perhaps we pretend like it isn't even there: The dark and deep? What dark and deep? I don't see any dark and deep here! You are fine! You'll be fine!

I'm sure we've all had people in our lives who take space instead of holding it, all out of the depth of their love for us. I'm sure we've each done so ourselves, out of the love for another.

But if love is unconditional, it holds us straight through the dark and the deep. And though it rarely leaves us where we were, it always loves us just exactly as we are.

Holding space, then, interprets love as deep presence to the moment at hand exactly as it is, even and especially the moments at the edge of mystery.

Holding space, we are not overeager to fill silence. Holding space, we do not rush to wipe away tears of true emotion. Holding space, we do not insist upon optimism or positive thinking, or our own perspective at all. Holding space, we may laugh in one minute and scream in the next.

Holding space, we are embodying a love that is wider and deeper than any abyss.

It may be instructive, here, to turn back to blogger Heather Brett, who gives us a suggested 8 step guide for holding space. A little structure in a blurry landscape. According to Brett, we hold space for love to do its work when we can:

1. Give people permission to trust their own wisdom and intuition.
2. Give people only as much information as they can handle.
3. Refrain from removing people's power.
4. Refrain from imposing our own ego.
5. Help people feel safe enough to try and fail.
6. Give guidance or help with humility & thoughtfulness, and only when requested
7. Create a container for complex emotions.
8. Allow people to have different experiences and make different decisions than we would.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://tranquilmonkey.com/what-it-really-means-to-hold-space-for-someone/>

These are all things we can practice. These are all things we can learn. In this way, holding space may not be simply the result of good spiritual practice, but rather its own spiritual practice.

We can seek moments to lean in to our feelings of helplessness. We can practice mindfulness in the presence of pain or fear. We can love others without attachment to the results of our love.

We can be the people who will go together to the edge. And say yes, we are here. We will be here. We can be the people who hold space for love.