

The Veil Between

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Nov. 1, 2020

Growing up my mother often brought my sister and me to New York City. We loved and eagerly anticipated these trips! We found ourselves surrounded by towering buildings, both modern and aged. We ran between window displays of huge department stores – admiring the mannequins donned in jewels and stylish attire. We completely immersed ourselves in the dense crowds, caught up in the hustle and bustle of city life. And yet the memory that stands out the most is that of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Every year we climbed the stone stairs into the magnificent building, steeple and spires jutting into the sky. We stepped inside and were immediately surrounded by stone statues of the saints, the ceiling towering above us. Every trip, I walked directly to the rows of tea candles, kneeling before both the unlit candles and those burning with the flames of another’s prayer. I slipped a dollar into the offering box and lit my candle. I lit my candle and prayed my own prayer to my own holy, and in those moments felt a sacred connection with the spiritual realm. A profound connection with my holy.

Years later, I roamed the halls of a museum, I never remember which one. And while perusing the artwork, I stumbled across Picasso’s painting “Woman with Bangs.” There, in that silent space, everyone around me slipped away as I engaged with the painted woman, a face I saw lined with pain, eyes unfocused, staring blankly ahead of her. She reminded me of someone I loved deeply. In connecting with that painting, I felt that same profound connection to my holy as I did kneeling in front of a row of tea candles. I was caught entirely off-guard, not looking for anything but simply stumbling upon a deep connection with my sacred.

These places – these moments of profound connection with my holy – were, for me, my “thin places,” both sought out and unexpected. This term – this idea of “thin place” – comes from Celtic mythology, and refers to a place where the divine and the mundane connect in a sacred way – where the boundary

between the two collapses and there is but a thin veil between the two realms.¹ Thin spaces are when we feel connected to our holy in a powerful way. Our Time for All Ages lifted up the importance of “thin space” in the Celtic pagan celebration of Samhain in which there is a thin divide between the human world and the spirit world, especially prominent this time of year.

Thin places, in the Celtic tradition, are unique, not necessarily in beauty, but because they connect us with our true selves, our core, unmasking any façade, stripping away anything superficial. Thin spaces connect us deeply with our own understanding of our soul and our own understanding of our holy. They are places where we become transformed, leaving behind the false self. Where we are able to see ourselves and our surroundings in a fresh, unique, sacred way.²

Many different places can be a thin place – it depends on the eyes of the beholder. Whether a towering cathedral or a winding path through the woods or a time to sit with one’s favorite musical album. And we find our thin places in various ways – through prayer, meditation, movement. Author Eric Weiner writes, “Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter.”³ These are places and experiences that for whatever reason bring us closer to our holy – whatever our holy may be. This sacred place for an experience of awe.

This is a space in the in-between, separating two realms, the holy and the mundane. But there are many sacred veils, many in-betweens worthy of exploration. There is a veil between “health and illness,” “body and spirit,” “human and divine,” sunset and dusk, as our poem highlighted.⁴ So many in-

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/mar/22/this-column-change-your-life-heaven-earth>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

³ Ibid

⁴ “Stirred by the Spirit” By Tess Baumberger

betweens, so many thin veils or “film membranes.”⁵ The in between. That space between what was and what could be. That space separating two realms that could never quite become one.

We are in trying times, times where the veil between the sacred and the mundane may not feel porous and threadbare but stiff and thick, perhaps no longer a veil at all. We may feel further from our holy, perhaps due to fear or anxiety. We may feel immobilized in this dense space between what was and what can be. For we are in the midst of a known past with an unknown future, living in anticipation of what is soon to come. As we approach an important election, we also continue to face increasing pandemic deaths and another police shooting of a black body. We are in a crucial liminal space of before and after, a space that will determine the future of our country and the future of our world, that space between what was and what could be. This is an emotionally dense space to be in – we need find the thin amid what seems to be so dense. We need chisel away that barrier until we find that porous veil. Can we use this time to connect with our true selves, to use all of those emotions being elicited to connect with our soul, our inner being. I wonder, how can we find the sacred in the midst of uncertainty and fear? By connecting with those we love. By finding reasons to laugh. By finding those things that connect us to our holy – those places and those activities – those sacred places where the veil becomes porous again. Perhaps silence. Mediation. Prayer. A nature walk. This is healing. These practices, this connecting with thin space, this honoring and embracing true self, this is healing.

There is this idea that thin spaces are a part of the human condition – that we can most fully connect with thin places when we engage deeply with our own feelings. When we encounter suffering or joy or anxiety. To some theologians, this thin place of connecting with our own feelings is the ultimate thin place. We can connect with that thin place and reside with that porous veil when we deeply engage with whatever we may be feeling at any time – by living into that. By stripping away any facades and

⁵ “Stirred by the Spirit” By Tess Baumberger

connecting with our true selves. Through suffering, through joy, through mystery. By engaging with our emotions we create and invite thin places.⁶ Many of us may be feeling some sort of anticipation. Let us pause and sit with that.

I share with you a story told by Rev. Anne Boyle. Rev. Anne began her exploration of “thin places” in West Virginia, working on a farm, kneeling amidst the dirt and vegetables. In the company of other graduate students, Rev. Anne reflected on her own “thin place,” which to her was a familiar wrap-around porch and all the regular, mundane things she associated with it. The sounds of the soft wood being walked upon. The coffee sipped on the chairs on its surface. The sweet taste of honey she associated with this memory. While on the farm, she intentionally meditated every morning, focusing her mind on this place. Her morning reflection became her ritual. As part of this ritual, every morning she asked her surroundings, “Can I rest in this place?” and every morning, her surroundings responded with a resounding, “Yes!” This ritual of question and response allowed her a readiness to “receive the world,” not to look for thin places but to notice them – there is a difference. 20 years later she still begins her day in the presence of that which brings her “light and tranquility,” every day asking, “Will you be my thin place? My sacred place?”⁷

I wonder of the awe of this simple practice. I wonder of inviting thin place to happen instead of going on a hunt for it. I wonder about inviting thin place into our lives, each morning, each day. I wonder how setting the day with this intention to interact with thin places can guide our souls through whatever dense space we may encounter. I wonder how we could use this experience as healing. These “thin places.” To Rev. Anne, it was a wrap-around porch. To me, it was the simple beauty of a painting. These things connected us to our holy. What is it to you?

⁶ Peter Gomes quote from May 2020 *Soul Matters* Packet

⁷ <https://www.ruminatemagazine.com/blogs/ruminate-blog/finding-thin-places>

There is thin space in the human condition – such as finding thin place amidst the suffering, or thin place amidst the unknown. In inviting it into our lives no matter what we are experiencing – welcoming with open arms this veil between two realms. This space which gives us a better understanding of our own, true selves – for in no other space is there a deeper connection between oneself and the holy, the two entities who know us best at our core. By inviting these thin places into our lives, even when that veil feels more like a wall, even when we feel we have to chip away pain and fear, the potential for that connection is always present. We can engage with the holy in unprecedented times. Every morning, we can sit on the ground with a cup of coffee, and ask the world, “Will you be my thin place? My sacred place?” We can interact with nature or the splendors of a city. We can bring to ourselves those spiritual practices that connect us with that porous veil – prayer or meditation or silence or movement. We are in a tense, fearful, anxiety provoking space. A space that connects what was with what could be. We are living each day wondering about those potential events – living in that space that may be filled with anticipation, anxiety, anger. Perhaps we can engage with and accept those feelings – whatever they may be – opening up our ability to interact with our thin place. That acknowledging our own truths brings us closer to our true selves – that self we and our holy know so well. We can wake up and ask, “Will you be my thin place? My sacred place?”⁸⁸ We can begin each day with the intention to interact with the holy – to be in connection with that special “thin place.”

Every time I think of the holy I think of profound love. We heard the words earlier in our service “That love is now and forever. The only answer to everything and everyone in every moment.”⁹ Love is the answer. Love connects us with all that is holy. Love persists no matter what the future may hold. Love holds us together as a sacred community, a community that earlier each mouthed the phrase “This is

⁸⁸ <https://www.ruminatemagazine.com/blogs/ruminate-blog/finding-thin-places>

⁹ “Sacred Unknowing” by Amy Carol Webb

loving and being loved.”¹⁰ This is a sacred community and the love we practice together brings us to a collective thin space; we offer each other support when those veils do not feel very porous but instead dense; we can encourage each other to connect with our thin spaces. We can offer each other unconditional love.

We always exist in a liminal period between past and future. Sometimes this is more pronounced than others. We are in a period together where this space is very pronounced, where many folks hold deep concern for all that is ahead of us. And yet we can each find a thin place to connect with our holy and our true selves and love. We can each set our days with an intention to be open to the thin places. To heal. We can each travel to a place that brings us peace and closer to our own divine, whatever that may be. While we are in a place that may seem separate from the holy we can connect with our holy in even more profound ways – living into our true feelings, accepting them, loving them. “Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter.”¹¹

I look forward to the next time I have the opportunity to kneel in front of those rows of lit and unlit tea-lights, offering a prayer to my holy and feel that space between two realms delicately slip away. I also eagerly anticipate the next time I stumble upon a thin space, perhaps on an afternoon walk. That opportunity to experience the holy in the most intimate of settings – separated only by a thin veil.

I invite us now into a practice of movement, a practice that elicits a thin place for many; that creates that porous veil between ourselves and the holy.

¹⁰ “Litany for Becoming” by enfleshed

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>