

Life Space

Space, according to the New Oxford English Dictionary, means “a continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied.” I find something tantalizing and liberating about the word “expanse” in that definition. I don’t usually think of my space in those terms. Do you? The second definition reads: “the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move.” Along with time, space is the medium of our existence, but how aware are we of its importance?

Paradoxically the concept of space contains both the sense of freedom and the sense of enclosure. Space is usually defined within boundaries: walls, buildings, fences, borders. Contemplating the boundlessness of outer space, we feel diminished, insignificant, awed, even terrified. Clearly there is a direct connection between our experience of space and our well-being. I would like to explore this experience on three levels: physical, emotional and spiritual.

Starting with the physical, I look around my study and see what, for me at least, is the biggest hindrance to well-being in my physical space: clutter. Piles of papers, files and books not only impede my path across the room, but trigger inner reproaches of ineptitude, slovenliness and sloth. I believe that we come pre-programmed with an individual clutter tolerance level (and I count myself as fortunate that my husband’s threshold is lower than mine, which guarantees periodic clean sweeps in our home), but I think that a clearing session triggers a sense of relief in all of us.

How frequent and how radical these sessions are will vary, but we all need them. Perfectionist procrastinators like me will probably find the most motivation to clean up their work area when they are trying to put off attacking another project. The I-have-to-clear-my-desk-before-I-can-start-working phenomenon is well-known. I figure there’s no point in beating myself up about it if that’s what it takes to get the job done. As soon as I realize that I am losing energy as a result of clutter, I make it a priority to spend some time clearing up. There are two basic strategies to eliminating clutter: throw it away or organize it. The mantra “when in doubt, throw it out” can help packrats, as can the tangible sense of relief when a stack of magazines or a bag of clothes leaves the house. Setting up systems to store and file things takes time, but is a valuable investment in longer term clutter control and overall efficiency.

We can also influence our experience of our physical space by consciously putting reminders of what we cherish into plain view — photos, pictures, flowers, mementos. The same applies to our other senses — music we love, tempting arrangements of fruit, a silk pillow in a cozy chair, a fragrant bouquet. Rituals such as lighting candles for dinner or decorating the table can tremendously influence our mood. These are all tangible ways for us to cultivate our capacity for self-nurture.

Emotional space, at least in our interactions with others, is all about boundaries as reflected in words like “trespass” (in its archaic meaning used in the Lord’s Prayer) and “transgress.” In order to recognize when my boundaries have been crossed and be able to guard them actively, I need to be clear within myself about where they are. Dealing with a toddler is one sure way of finding out how clear you are about your

boundaries. A toddler will detect a lack of conviction in seconds. The feedback from adults we live or work with may not be so direct, but their “trespasses against us” are usually the ones that bother us most, so learning to protect our borders with them is essential.

First you must recognize your needs. If, for example, you feel overwhelmed by the attention demands from your family when you get home from work, then perhaps you need to give yourself a few minutes of quiet time to shift gears before you enter your home. If you are offended by something that someone has said to you, don't expect them to realize it. Clear, assertive statements such as “It irritates me when you interrupt me because I lose my train of thought” or “What you just said hurt my feelings” take courage because we fear being impolite. Conversely, unclear, coded and manipulative remarks are sometimes veiled under a guise of politeness. It is unrealistic to expect others to automatically know our needs and respect our boundaries. We alone must patrol our emotional borders, clearly and constructively, without launching a counter-invasion.

The quality of my inner emotional space is largely determined by my attitude and self-talk. Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” What I say to myself on the inside of my head is more powerful than anything that anyone else does to me. Many studies have demonstrated a direct connection between negative thinking and illness, both physical and psychological. How do we clear this space? Letting go, forgiveness, deciding to put a different frame on reality are all powerful techniques, but where do we get the strength to carry them out? I believe that our spiritual dimension is our most powerful resource and the place where we can find the freedom and expansiveness of the dictionary definition, a divine boundlessness that is not terrifying but nurturing.

Every meditation technique including prayer is based on emptying ourselves of all else but the chosen focus of our attention, e.g. certain words, an image or our breathing. This practice takes us out of our everyday awareness and distractedness and opens us to the divine. Here paradoxes abound. We empty ourselves in order to be filled. We suspend our individuality in order to experience being part of a larger whole. By surrendering our will to a greater power we achieve complete freedom. By stepping out of time, we step into the eternal now of pure being. We all know this experience even if we have never engaged in any spiritual practice. Philosophers, poets and psychologists have coined terms to try to capture it: peak experience, flow, ecstasy. But it defies labels. Meister Eckhart, the 14th century mystic wrote: “here is joy so hearty, such inconceivably great joy that no one can ever tell it.”

This overwhelming sense of aliveness, connectedness, peace, love and joy is a gift bestowed on us when we are open to it, when we make space for it. Is there enough space in your life?