

Personal space: Uncommon intimacy

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I didn't just violate her personal space; I obliterated it with one public and very embarrassing collision.

More about that in a moment, but first let me tell you about something I saw on TV recently. I saw a program about the magnetic field that surrounds the earth. The only visible evidence of this field are the Aurorae Borealis and Australis, the Northern and Southern Lights.

This magnetic field deflects the solar wind, which is made up of dangerous, charged particles from our sun. Our magnetic planet sheds these particles, letting them slide harmlessly past us and allowing us to bask in the warmth of the sun without being destroyed by it. The earth, it seems, needs a certain amount of personal space. We like the sun, but our survival depends on keeping it at a distance.

Okay, back to what I was telling you about violating someone's personal space. It happened in a restaurant. I stepped around a pillar and right into the path of a woman. She was part of an important looking entourage of suited persons, all making their way out of the restaurant, all talking on mobile phones or finishing off conversations from their business lunch. She looked to be in her 30s, was attractive and dressed like a professional. Dignified blue suit, expensive briefcase, hair up, skirt to the knees, hose, black pumps.

I had my head down as I stepped out from behind the pillar, so I never saw the collision coming. We ran right into each other. For a brief instant, my body was pressed against the body of a woman I did not know. I got a whiff of a soapy, clean smell as her hair splashed across my face. I felt the pressure of her breasts full against my chest. It was so unbelievably inappropriate that we were both speechless.

Well, I was speechless. She said one word.

"No."

Not a long, drawn out “Noooo,” like the villain shouts in the movies when he’s getting his payback at the end. Just a short, desperate syllable that burst from her subconscious mind in the moment of our collision, rather like a free association exercise. We could almost have been in a therapy session:

I’m going to press a strange man against your body. Just say the first thing that comes to mind.

It's interesting how much one word can reveal when your guard is down. She didn't say it like a command. She didn't say it in an angry way. Her voice was high-pitched and pleading, afraid almost. The sound of the voice didn't fit the "suit," but I bet it fits the woman inside the suit, whoever she was.

We were both embarrassed and uncomfortable. We didn't exchange names—only hurried apologies. Then we went our separate ways.

This is the reality of intimacy. We have a personal space, and we choose carefully whom we let inside. And when people come into this space, it can be scary. Sometimes the shock of it brings the voice of a child out of you, revealing secrets and making you blush with shame.

We crave the light and warmth of intimacy, but intimacy is also very dangerous and frightening. We sense that too much of it will destroy a protective layer that we keep around our hearts, a field of isolation that surrounds us and gives us at least the illusion of safety. To bask in the warmth of intimacy without being hurt by it is our goal.

My own spiritual tradition calls for rather uncommon levels of intimacy, which frightens people, including me. I’m talking about real Christianity here, not the hyped and marketed Disneyland stuff you see on television and, frankly, in many churches.

Real Christianity involves getting together with a handful of pilgrims and becoming intimate. It means braving the possibility of communion. It means letting people into your personal space. And, by the way, these are exactly the sort of people who may hear something desperate and child-like in your voice and be experienced enough at listening to know exactly what it means.

They will see your blue suit and your briefcase and the front that you put forward to fool the world. They will move in close, maybe even a little too close, and when you speak they will hear you all the way down to the bottom of your soul. Maybe they will hear more than you want them to hear.

You will be loved if you can stand it. Loved for your blue suit and your girlish voice. And they will show you something of themselves in return, both their weaknesses and their strengths. Together you will be the *ekklesia*, which is the New Testament word for church. It means the ones who are called out to live in uncommon and radical ways. Those called to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with each other and with God. The real Church.

Or maybe you're not up for this. Maybe this sounds disturbing, like someone bumping into you in a restaurant.

I understand.

Hey, that's why Disneyland Christianity exists. Because we are so very afraid of the real thing. You can sit in the back of some huge church, totally anonymous, wearing your blue suit and clinging to your briefcase. No one will bother you. No one will get close. You can watch the action taking place up on the stage, keeping your distance and guarding yourself from all the things that frighten you.