

MONK IN THE WORLD GUEST POST SERIES

## Monk in the World Guest Post: Peggy Acott

I am delighted to share another beautiful submission for the Monk in the World guest post series from the community. Read on for Peggy Acott's reflection on holding space.

“ *How do I live as a monk in the world?*”

This reminded me of a recent writing prompt by Krista Tippett of On Being, that came to me by way of Jeffrey Davis and Tracking Wonder's Quest2017 – #yourtruecalling:

*What is your vocation, your sense of callings as a human being at this point in your life, both in and beyond job and title?*

My initial response to Krista Tippett's question was that of a storyteller, which I am in a few different ways. But, what kept whispering in the periphery of my thoughts then, and more emphatically as I contemplated how I try to make my way as a monk in the world were the words “holding space.”

There is a mindfulness and careful, sharp sense of presence that is required to holding a space. It is something I realize I practice and have consciously tried to cultivate, but that the deliberateness often follows behind a more intuitive recognition.

I emailed a Quaker friend of mine and asked her if “holding space” could be considered a vocation. She replied, “I would say yes.”

I think about how often, and for how long in my life friends have sought me out to share confidences and heart-concerns. They trusted me to hold space for them.

I think about the years I worked as a dinner waiter at a neighborhood Italian restaurant (actually, one of my favorite jobs), and the importance I placed on welcoming the diners to my tables and trying to provide an enjoyable experience along with the nourishment of a good meal. It was a type of holding space.

I remember when I worked at a group home for pregnant teenagers, and volunteered as a birth coach to some of the girls. Getting the phone call in the middle of the night and driving to the hospital to be there as they traveled that amazing and powerful liminal journey through labor and delivery. I held space for them. They gave me their trust.

More recently I think about the weddings and memorials I have officiated as a Life-Cycle Celebrant; of how people have come up to me, complimenting me on how well I “held space” for the ceremony and those attending. It was the confirmation of that, at the very first wedding I ever officiated, that showed me that something very real existed there for me.

I wonder at the job I held for more than two decades, the bulk of which involved getting needed supplies and support to a variety of school and community gardens. I often considered it Right Livelihood. I would like to think I was able to help others hold their spaces – gardens that can be as sacred as they are common, for they feed both body and soul.

I have interviewed numerous makers – craftspeople and artisans – told their stories in print. I have been called specifically a “good listener.” To me, that means I have done a good job of holding space for the person’s story.

Even as a fiction writer, I feel my task is to hold space for the book’s characters; to tell their story, or let them tell their own. I’m not always sure how that works, but it feels like a type of holding space. Poetry is definitely a holding space activity. Writing, period, is an act of holding space.

I have for the last several years been a part of more than one writing group. It is a careful and compassionate practice of holding space for each other’s words.

But, so much of this is about holding space for others; how do I, in turn, hold space for myself, especially in a time seemingly fraught with threat and uncertainty?

For me, holding space carries with it the Buddhist act of being present in the moment. Being present, then, is a way of being held in the physical space you inhabit. Beloved family and friends hold space for me; I also am one who seeks out places of natural beauty when I need “holding.” I am reminded of that most exquisite poem by Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things,” and return to its wisdom often:

*“For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”*

It isn’t necessary to travel far to find such solace; I can find that grace in the presence of the small chickadees and juncos that come to visit my bird feeders.

It makes me think of the teaching of St. Ignatius, who, from the beginning (in the sixteenth century) instructed his Jesuits to “go out and find God in all things.”

An element of holding space is often a quiet connection to the Divine – I think this is true regardless of a person’s denomination or faith – for there is the divinity of all of creation, regardless of the belief of its source.

The photograph to the right hangs in my kitchen, near the stove and tucked in next to the spice racks. It came from a magazine, and it is one of my favorite possessions. I look upon it as a pictorial embodiment of who to try to be in the world.



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