

Holding the Space

November 16, 2014

One of the people dearest to me in the world is experiencing a rather deep disappointment, and I can't do anything about it. I have to sit on my hands and do nothing. For a problem solver, a solution finder, a fixer like me, this is practically impossible.

The plan he had, a plan we were both sure would come to fruition -- just didn't. That was Plan A, and there was no Plan B, because Plan A was so obviously a winner. Except it wasn't.

Not only is my dear one struggling with feelings of rejection, disappointment, and a kind of grief, but he's simultaneously dealing with the shocking notion that he doesn't know what to do next. I want to help, of course, but I can't, at least not in the way that being helpful normally feels to me.

I want my friend to dust himself off and start imagining a new future. I want him to start to take action, and I want to "be there" for him every step of the way.

If it were *my* disappointment, that's what I'd do. I'd probably ignore my troubling emotions and tell myself things like "Everything happens for a reason," "When one door closes another opens," or one of my favorites -- "God has something better in store for me." Because I'm really good at *not* feeling those pesky, uncomfortable feelings. I can dismiss those babies faster than anyone. I'm the fastest gun in the west when it comes to boxing up discomfort and tidying it away.

Doing always seemed to me the solution to the problem of *being*, when being felt unpleasant. I probably learned this at my mother's knee, God bless her. Growing up in my house the kids weren't allowed to be angry, sad, or anxious. My mother always demanded an explanation for bad moods or hurt feelings, and then usually told us we were being too sensitive. Followed by platitudes like "Every thing happens for a reason," "When one door closes another opens," or my favorite -- "God had something better in store for you."

These platitudes weren't meant to make us feel better, by the way, which I now understand in hindsight. They were to hustle us out of sadness or other difficult emotions that my mother herself didn't quite know how to deal with.

In actuality, the problem of my friend's disappointment is that it's uncomfortable -- for *me*. Like people who aren't comfortable with silence or lulls in the conversation, always jumping in to fill it with the sound of their own voices, I found myself repeating those platitudes to him one evening, and for a moment I stepped outside of myself and I could see how he was really looking at me. He just looked so sad. And I wasn't honoring that by trying to hurry him out of that sadness and into action.

He just needed to be sad. And I needed to just shut up and let him be sad.

There's a phrase in the New Age lexicon I've never understood until now. It goes, "I'll hold the space for you." I never got that. It seemed one of those quasi-spiritual clichés that are generally meaningless but sound so enlightened.

I found it so off-putting because by saying it, I thought I came across as superior to whoever I was saying it to: whoever was exploring some inner landscape. But now I think I get the meaning behind it.

I think when I say, "I'll hold the space for you," what I'm really saying is, "I'll hold myself back and give *you* space. I'll hold myself back, and let you carry on feeling what you're feeling without demanding that you start feeling better because I'm uncomfortable."

I thought it meant that *I'm* doing something great for *you*, but now I understand that it means I'm shutting the heck up and not inserting myself into whatever emotional process you're going through right now.

That's hard work. That's not doing *for* someone else, that's accepting that the best thing I can do is get out of the way. The best thing I can do is *not* doing what I think someone else needs. It means just shutting up.

So I sit with my friend and force myself to pipe down. In the meantime he works through the various stages of his feelings, and in that process he is able to set things right in his own mind, and in the quiet that follows, his Plan B can emerge naturally.

You'd think I'd have figured this out before now.

I teach a mediumship development course and one thing I keep hammering home to those students is to *wait*. When a psychic impression comes in or a spirit message comes in, wait. Just one beat. Because if you do, the magic is in the space that follows.

I'll give you an example. In my class, which is a teleseminar, we do what's called a Known Spirit exercise. One of the students says the name of a spirit person they know, and then all the other students takes a turn at delivering a message or offering evidence or other identifying characteristics. In the last class, my student Karen was sharing her impressions about the woman in spirit, and she said, "I see bare feet in the grass, so I think she liked to be barefoot." Before the other student could comment, I asked Karen to wait, not to rush into an interpretation, because when you see something like this it might be a literal message (she was always walking barefoot) or it may evoke another idea, feeling, or emotional response in *you*. And you're only going to know if something is to be taken literally, or is meant to lead you someplace different, more personal or meaningful, if you wait.

I recommend when a student gets an impression like this -- something which doesn't fit into the regular kind of descriptors like age, hair color, big nose -- that they probe it a little. Give an impression like that a little push, and then wait. I asked Karen to push back on that symbol a bit, and wait to see what happened next. She said, "I see bare feet in the grass and that makes me feel like she was kind of a hippy or a free-spirit." The student was able to validate that nuance more so than simply liking to go shoeless.

Push back a little and wait. Don't rush to define it. Be receptive; let the impression define itself.

If we can ask ourselves to wait before responding or reacting, real magic can happen. I was offering spiritual counseling to a young couple who have been my clients for years. Like many people, they play out a lot of their relationship in Facebook. They argue on FB, quote love songs to each other, and have a very public exchange about their feelings. When they came to see me to tell me they were going to separate, I couldn't quite believe it.

I asked them to consider that maybe they hadn't run out of love for each other, but maybe had a difficulty communicating with each other. So we went through an exercise where the husband spoke first. He began to talk about his feelings of inadequacy, and as he continued he became increasingly upset, until he was crying. I could see his wife constantly wanting to jump in. I had to ask her to wait several times, because she kept trying to console him. As both of us sat back and watch Tom describe his feelings, then show us his feelings, we also saw that he talked himself right down to what was truly the cause of his upset: he was remembering how he felt as a child, which was helpless as his older brother died from a drug overdose and his parents went nearly insane with grief. By the time he was done talking, he himself told us that he wasn't really mad or upset or out of love with his wife, he was experiencing a temporary regression to childhood.

All of this came out because we -- his wife and I -- held ourselves back. When we wait; when we can require ourselves to just be quiet for one extra beat... all sorts of information comes in. Magic happens. People find their way, without us showing them. We understand better, as answers arise from the deeper part of our mind, and not the problem-solving nature of the conscious mind.

Just for this week, try waiting just for one extra beat, one extra tick of the clock. "Hold the space" for someone you know, or even for yourself.

Before you console: wait.

Before you give your opinion: wait.

Before you answer: wait.

See what happens. I bet it's magic.

Amen.