

Doorkeepers in Time
Advent Reflections, 2007

December 2, 2007
Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reflection: “*The Doorkeeper*”

Polly Welch

I imagine that most of us occasionally have a Sunday morning when it is a struggle to get ourselves and, possibly children, out of the house and to the church on time. I find myself out of breath if not momentarily exhausted, wondering how I will make that transition into a contemplative setting. As adults we have experience preparing ourselves, crossing the threshold and making the spatial transition from profane to sacred. We have learned, sometimes quite naturally and sometimes with help, to quiet ourselves. But it is not so easy for our children. You may have sat next to one, maybe even one of mine, squirming and How do our children learn to be peaceful in body and mind so they can be in community, respecting others’ space, and being open to the mystery that some people call God?

Two years ago when the RE committee was envisioning how we might shape our children’s Sunday experience a little differently, I visited the Spirit Play classroom at the Milton FP church, a similar age group to the class I had worked with here. I was surprised to see six-, seven-, and eight-year olds sitting quietly in a circle watching and listening intently to the teacher telling a story. Almost no wiggling and fiddling. No interruptions. No chatting and giggling. What was Milton doing differently? What were these kids eating for breakfast?

It is the power and grace of Spirit Play.

The doorway marks the place where one begins to get ready to join the community. So Spirit Play classrooms have a doorkeeper. The doorkeeper has many organizational tasks, but the most important role is that of helping the children transition across the threshold of the classroom.

Imagine 12 children having been sung out of the sanctuary, some running the length of the parish house hallway, and up a flight of stairs. Their natural inclination is to carry that energy into the room, setting a tone for everyone that is hard to change once the class has started. The doorkeeper helps each child, as she or he gets to the door, get ready to go into the room.

“Hi Peter. You are the first one here. It looks like you have been running really fast. That was exciting but now it is time to get ready.”

“Good morning, Melissa. Take your time. We have all the time we need. It looks like you are ready to go in. The storyteller will help you find a place in the circle that is just right for you.”

“Hello, Robin. You look like you might be feeling a little out of sorts today. Maybe you need a moment to feel ready before you go into the room. You can sit here with me until you are ready.”

We, as the teachers, are constantly searching for how to reach each child in a way that helps them center. Often times it does not happen quite as simply as I just described. When the noisy energy is not left at the door we practice as a group. Once they are seated in the circle the storyteller may say: “I’d like each of you to close your eyes for a moment. Think of something very quiet — a place, a creature, a time, a moment ... and hold that picture in your mind and enjoy how it feels. Let yourself be quiet with your picture. And when you feel very quiet, you may open your eyes.”

I wonder

Reflection: “*Shining Shoes*”

Bill Dwyer

As the years pass and memories dim, I still look back with some clarity and fondness to the early 1950s and growing up in my family’s house in Boston, only a golf putt away from the Brookline border. In fact, had it not been for an earlier land swap between Brookline and Boston, I could stand before you this morning as a lifelong resident of Brookline — but that’s another story.

As a child, Sunday was clearly the most important day of the week, because that was the day my family — three generations worth — went to church. Short of hospitalization or total absence of breathe, there was no excuse for missing church on Sunday. Preparation for attending the service began on Saturday evening when I collected all of the shoes to be worn the next day, carried them to the basement, and polished them to an exacting standard that the military would be proud of. However, it was not the military I was concerned with, it was my beloved father’s discerning eye that I wanted to please. Receiving his approval for my hard work was all that really mattered. Of course, if he let me watch the Jackie Gleason Show before going to bed, all was right with the world. Although money always seemed to be in short supply in our house, my siblings and I managed to have play clothes, school clothes, and church clothes, none of which were ever to be mixed. Heavily starched white shirts with ties and well-creased dress pants were mandatory for we church-going kids. Jeans, sneakers, and sport shirts were strictly forbidden. Attending church was never to be confused with a day at the beach or a hike in the woods, and such attire would have been subject to the wrath of what I then considered to be God’s enforcers on Earth: the Sisters of Notre Dame, who with their stern demeanors would seemingly glide on ball bearings up and down the aisles, seeking out children who either did not meet the dress code or who were found not sitting ram-rod straight with full attention to the hour-long Sunday service (and this wasn’t a children’s service).

Now, I'm happy to report after all these years that there were elements of the service that I really liked: music (even in Latin), incense, light coming through the stained glass windows, and the mystical atmosphere that the service fostered. Something special was going on, although I wasn't quite yet able to articulate what that was. Also, I liked the thought that I was sitting in the same church pews where my grandparents and great grandparents once sat.

Meanwhile, there was that challenge of trying to sit erect and motionless like the big people, especially if I was to earn the approval of my parents. You see, if I played my cards right — that is a figure of speech: card playing was not tolerated in church — and not only had the proper demeanor, which included not engaging in fisticuffs during the service with my brothers, my parents would take us to the Howard Johnson's restaurant, which once stood on Memorial Drive in Cambridge, for a pistachio ice cream cone. Although I'm certain that my parents assured me that there would be a heavenly award for my good behavior, I must confess that it was the temporal reward that really motivated me. In retrospect, life seemed much simpler then and life was good — especially when one wore well-shined shoes to church and could be rewarded with a pistachio ice cream cone.

Meditation:

Rev. Martha Niebanck

We stand at a threshold in time, as we enter a cathedral of spirit. In the way of the poet William Safford I ask:

Starting here, what do you want to remember? The color of the light? The scent of old wood? The softened sounds of outdoors? A sense of this gathered community?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world than the breathing respect (for this moment) that you carry wherever you go right now?

When you turn around starting here, lift this new glimpse of the holy that you find: carry into evening all that you want from this day.

This moment on the threshold of time with seeing, hearing, and sensing, keep it for life.

What great gift can anyone give you greater than NOW, starting here right in this room, when you turn and step into the cathedral of you spirit.

William Stafford, adapted.

Reflection: “*Preparing for Saiho-Ji (Moss Temple)*”

Gerry Leader

A number of years ago, in the middle of August, I found myself sitting, cross legged, barefoot on a polished hardwood floor in a Buddhist pagoda in Kyoto, Japan with 20 or so other tourists, most of whom were Japanese. It must have been at least 120 degrees.

With the humidity, I had saturated every piece of my clothing with perspiration. I labored to be quiet and motionless. I sat there for at least forty-five minutes, each minute more excruciating than the previous one. The silence was periodically broken by a chanting Zen priest. My mind was racing: a cacophony of thoughts, the essence of which was: how could I leave without being disrespectful or annoying others.

I had come to see Saiho-Ji , translated as Moss Temple, an UNESCO World Heritage Site, a garden with over 120 varieties of moss created sometime between 700-800 A.D., and refurbished in 1330.

Unlike the other Kyoto gardens I had visited, admission to Saiho-Ji appeared organized to frustrate only the most determined visitor. I was required to apply for admission, by mail, months in advance. The entrance was unmarked and difficult to find, and it abutted a noisy, crowded high way, belching noxious automobile fumes. Upon entering, I was startled by an enveloping silence and peace and ushered into the pagoda which stood between the gate and the moss garden.

It was there, where I was about to expire, well past the time I thought I could stand up and walk, where my mind and body finally gave up. My muscles relaxed and my psychic chatter dissipated. Sweaty, unfulfilled, and disappointed, I could feel my buttocks reluctantly yield to the hardwood floor. I became present. Perhaps it was coincidence, but I believe it was planned: my yielding to the moment and being present, coincided with a Buddhist priest beckoning us into the moss garden. This was my fourth Kyoto garden in a week's time, but this time I didn't just witness its beauty, which had been my exclusive reward from the other three. I experienced Saiho-Ji differently. Rather than the garden being an object to be inspected, I was captured by it, and became part of the garden. Saiho-Ji has lived in me since then. Its earthy fragrance, contemplative silence, tactile moistness, and visual images, now over 20-years old, are as sensorially vivid as the day I walked its paths and sat in its teahouses. I believe the secret was in the preparation. My somewhat tortured encaptualization in the pagoda had a purpose: to ready me for Saiho-Ji, to bring me present. I could then, and only then, follow the reverential footsteps of the priests who have nurtured the moss for over 1000 years. I was being prepared to become, and now I am, a steward of earth's delicate and fragile beauty entrusted to my care.

Reflection: "Building a Door in Time"

Rev. Martha Niebanck

Are you ready? Have you found that silence that waits for you here at the center of a Sunday morning in church? What sort of personal preparation has signaled that this place, this time is different from all the other times and places in your living?

Like Bill Dwyer, did begin your preparations last night?

Was there a doorkeeper like Polly to help you enter well?

Did you walk to church holding the hand of someone you love?

Or are you, like Gerry, in a difficult struggle to find your place in this garden in time?

More than a decade ago when I was preparing for ministry, my supervising minister Ken Read Brown and I would walk together from the Parish House to the Meeting House every Sunday morning. One morning, as we crossed Hingham's Main Street, he must have noticed my gathered forehead and narrowed eyes — the signal that I was mentally fidgeting with the details of the service. He asked, mid-stride: "What is the purpose of worship? What are we doing here? What are we on the way to?"

I'm not sure what I said or what he said, but I do remember that just as we arrived at the vestibule of the Meetinghouse we agreed with each other that our work, as leaders, was *to make a space in time* — to make a space for a consciousness to exist between stimulus and response. We agreed that this is a "luxury enterprise" in a culture that values "thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs." (Thomas Kelly, *The Light Within*) We remembered together that meeting the expectations of the dominant culture is what the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, called a "pervasive form of contemporary violence." Merton reminded us both in that vestibule moment that "the very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act (we) can perform, and often it is quite beyond (our) power."

I mentally stand in that vestibule of time whenever I begin a meeting, light a chalice, lead a space that I define as worship. I have come to believe that anytime human beings make a transition — that is, when we consciously put ourselves at a doorway of time, we are choosing to enter "liminal" space — a holy space in time where something new can happen, where something previously hidden might be revealed.

For some of us the building of the space in time for rest is enough — especially in a culture that is high on speed and drunk on power. But know that, like Gerry Leader tells us, with the proper preparation it possible that all of our views and mental maps might shift forever.

The writer Annie Dillard suggests that what we are doing here today, taking time for worship, taking time to build a space of consciousness, is *dangerous*, that we are not "sufficiently sensible of conditions." She writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a work of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*)

My hope for our children who enter the Spirit Play classroom with the help of a doorkeeper is that they learn the art of preparation in a way that they reliably know how to make a space for awe, for astonishment, for wonder, for curiosity, for joy. We are

handing the chemistry set that will teach them how to get themselves ready for surprise. The capacity that they are learning in their experiments at the doorway to their classroom will last a lifetime.

Advent is a ritual time for getting our whole selves ready for surprise, ready for joy. **I wonder how we shall begin.**

In my mother's house, Advent was a time for cleaning. My job was to polish the hall mirror — a three-foot rectangle with beveled edges; it was stationed on the wall near the front door. I had to practice my mother's particular religion of household mysteries in that polishing.

My mother didn't believe in *Windex*.

My mother believed in *Glasswax*— an Eisenhower-era product, it came in a pink can and the thick pink liquid that poured slowly onto a rag and smelled very strong. It took a few minutes before it was dry and ready to be polished off with a paper towel and lots of elbow grease. Like Gerry Leader aching and sweating in the act of sitting meditation, I did real work while precariously poised on a step ladder — work that engaged my muscles and all of my senses.

The smell of *Glasswax* was the signal to our family that we were about to have guests enter our home. When I think back on that time, in the mirror of my memory I can see the faces of the little girl I was with my mother. I see my smile and my mother's content satisfaction that the entrance to our home was ready.

I remember the entrance of guests only vaguely — gusts of cold, brightly wrapped packages, hugs with my cheek pressed against rough woolen coats.

What I remember most distinctly is the shimmer of rainbow light off the beveled edge of the mirror as it radiated the lights from our Christmas tree. That beauty caused me to catch my breath in the midst of the chaos of a house full of guests. It still does.

What are your rituals of preparation? How are you getting ready for surprise?

A friend of mine gets up a little early during Advent. She writes in a journal by candlelight. Listen to a moment she describes:

“On one particular candlelit morning I looked up to see my daughter entering the room. She froze and pointed toward the window. “Look at that!” she called out. I froze with a moment of dread and turned to where she was pointing. Outside the window the world was awash in pink. The sun was rising and the light it was (radiating) had turned the whole world pink. We both stared out the window in silence as the pink light began to fade and the sun rose higher. She then turned to me and asked, “Will it do that again tomorrow?” I had to hug her and tell her that

everyday it is different; we never know what color the world will be from day to day.” (Diane Elliot, personal communication)

How are you getting ready to witness this day’s unique color?

I invite you to use this time of Advent to polish the mirror of your vestibule. Take the time to build a doorway in time that connects you with the **angels of your past**. Make an effort to remember how they helped you to prepare for being amazed, to remember how to get ready for wondering, to remember how to make yourself a container for joy.

“Wouldn’t we be ecstatic if we could take those angels shopping, or trim the tree or have them hold our hands and dance through our houses decorating?”
(Ann Weems, “Angel-Filled Advent”)

The poet Derek Walcott offers us an Advent aspiration:

*The time will come
When, with elation,
You will greet yourself arriving
At your own door, in your own mirror,
And each will smile at the other’s welcome,
And say, Sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was yourself.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
Peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.*