Opinion



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by Jocelyn A. Sideco

View Author Profile
jocelyn@ingoodcompany.net.co

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Much happens in the space between. Where I end and you begin. Where day ends and night begins. Where we end and God begins.

I grew up blocks away from the sun setting in San Francisco. The space between 39th Avenue and the ocean seemed both endless and here, right here. I was in it, being brought into it, and lodged in its stillness. I was away from it, eternally longing for it, and never consumed in it.

Celtic spirituality would name this space between a "thin place," where earth and heaven meet. The Celts believed that time was not linear, but spiral. This place was not just beyond time, but beyond space and actually re-forming space.

Thin places for me have been real places where I have felt God's presence more intensely — sunsets along the Northern California coast, trails along the Camino de Santiago, 3014 St. Thomas Street in New Orleans. Thin places have also been moments — daily around 3:30 a.m., my first, second and third sips of my freshly brewed coffee, when I hear the phrase "let us pray," when I hear the silence, or when I see the laughter emerging from my daughter's face. Thin places create a home for the space between us, this mystery, to envelop us.



A former Celtic monastery and Benedictine abbey on the island of Iona in the U.K. that was restored is now used by the ecumenical Iona Community, pictured in May 2017 (Wikimedia Commons/August Schwerdfeger)

The space between us is inherently communal although we speak of the experience using mostly the dissonant sounds of "I." My family enjoyed a week of prayer, reflection and community with the Iona Community the summer of 2013. Pilgrims from around the globe often resonated with the founder's observation. George MacLeod referred to Iona as a "thin place as where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual." I sought quiet, solace, stillness within a community of faith-seekers who, like any good sunset, beautifully lived into the dream of its becoming each and every day. The community was composed of different individuals each day, yet the same community of voices, intentions, desires are present time and time again. In a thin place, much can happen without seeming like anything has changed. In fact, it is in the changing that the space between gets its character, defines its contours, gets its elusive character.

Thin places can also be times in our year — this week begins an elusive time for us. As the days shorten and darkness begins to set earlier, we celebrate Halloween, All Saints Day, All Souls Day and Día de los Muertos. (I suppose I could take a detour and talk about all my favorite saints. But I won't. Let me be clear: I love many, and my favorites are Bernadette Soubirous, Ignatius of Loyola, and now Óscar Romero).

The space between life and death seems imminent, mysterious and oddly seductive. Let me be more exact: The space between nothingness and birth and the space between breathing and death feels extremely thin, maybe too dark for some, maybe too fragile for others. Life is not the opposite of death, birth is. Life is all of it, especially the spaces where I end and you begin.

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I love how we mark time, as it were, awkward as our historical roots have adapted these moments to be. (Talk about thinly veiled — many adult Halloween costumes these days include barely covered body parts that leave nothing to the imagination!) We trust that all these holy women and men have gone before us, and we seek their counsel. But the shadow sides to that grace lead us to uncertainty and fear — on one hand, we play with death; on the other, we pray with and for the dead.

Thank God we try to be playful about our terror! Let's be direct and face our fear head on. Let's dress up as ghosts to give one another a "real" experience of the unknown that helps to cultivate ears that hear the Gospel invitation to "be not afraid." Then we soberly consider those in our lives that have yet to feel peace, acceptance, love, and we pray for the healing of their souls.

Halloween-All Souls. The hyphen, the space between us, the thin place, the "where God can be most encountered" space, life and the grace of All Saints and all holy women and men. Yes. All of this is the celebration of Día de los Muertos where we celebrate for a "day" the part of life that is most mysterious and sacred, death.

Let us take a moment to find the calm, the peace, the trust in this lifetime for the mystery of God's grace to unfold, be re-told, and be re-lived.

[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a retreat leader, spiritual director and innovative minister who specializes in mission-centered ministry. Visit her online ecumenical ministry, In Good Company, at ingoodcompany.net.co or email her

at jocelyn@ingoodcompany.net.co.]