

THE SACRED SPACE BETWEEN US

WHILE ESTABLISHING AN OFFICE for my financial company, we lived on Maui—heaven on earth—for a few years. We enrolled our kids in the local Steiner Waldorf school and joined a small local church. We were consistent churchgoers, and both Amy and I became Sunday school teachers. Maybe it was our commitment to the community and volunteering that made for such a lovely, connected experience. Or maybe it was the loving community that accepted us and embraced us because we showed up. Either way, the connection and feeling of belonging was meaningful for my family.

PAUL SUTHERLAND is a Professor at Nelson Mandela University and Chairman of Utopia Foundation & STEPi, which works to create a world where every child and every adult can go to bed feeling happy, well fed, safe, and optimistic about tomorrow.



One morning I got a call at my office. Amy was hemorrhaging at 26 weeks of pregnancy, and the paramedics were taking her to the local hospital. Within an hour, we were being transferred by air ambulance to Oahu, where Amy would ultimately spend eight weeks in intensive care. From the ambulance, I called some school friends to pick up our little boys from school, asking if they could watch them until my in-laws flew in from Michigan. “No problem! Our son loves sleepovers,” was their reply.

The first full day in the hospital, the pastor of the church called me. She asked about Amy and if she could do anything to help. I told her my parents-in-law were flying out to watch the boys, and a family from school was caring for them until my in-laws arrived. I asked how she knew we were now on Oahu, and she said a parishioner saw us at the local hospital. Of course, the pastor said we would be in their prayers.

When Amy was stable enough for me to return to Maui, I thanked my in-laws for taking care of the kids, but when I mentioned cooking, my mother-in-law stopped me and said, “We didn’t have to cook much.” She smiled. “Nearly every day, the Waldorf families and your church brought us dinners, baked bread, deserts, salads.” Our school parents and church group seemed instinctively wired to scan for people in need. They knew we “mainlanders” had few roots on the island. They helped us because we showed up.

Some people would not like that Maui church because of its all-inclusive stance of welcoming everyone. Others wouldn’t even consider going because they consider all Christians to be hypocrites, bigots, and/or

anti-LGBTQ. Many others would rather sleep in, go to the beach, or take a walk than go to any church. But I think people who don't have a church are missing something important. The church not only accepted us "mainlanders;" they fed my kids. They also, I imagine, would accept and provide food for those that normally sleep in, go to the beach, or take a walk. They just have to show up.

After living on Maui, we moved to various places around the world. We joined a few dozen people in a Quaker meeting house, as well as a few thousand people under a Zambian church tent. The Quakers never mentioned that I just sat in silence. In Zambia, no one seemed to care that I did not sing, sway, or get enraptured by the holy spirit—and none of them asked me to define God, religion, or my own beliefs, or tested me on scripture. Local parishioners just seemed happy we were there, sharing the experience of connection. Wherever we have lived, we have joined some form of church, and acceptance seemed to be there, too.

I often think about how I might broaden this acceptance and connection that I cherish and that I try to champion. How do I get to see each person as my "partner in life?" I'm sure that connection is not about looking for the otherness that we are told now defines people, families, school groups, tribes, sports teams, and religious groups. Sure, it can be easy to connect people against a negative, a threat, either real or perceived. What I am looking for is the positive connection. I also think that connection is not in us. It is *between* us: the + in 1+1.

The way to get beyond seeing the otherness and open ourselves to this real connection is to embrace the ugly in our own inconsistencies; to learn to laugh at our personal hypocrisies; to realize that we all constantly rationalize our own indifference, laziness, and bigotries: "I have met the hypocrite,

and it is me." Knowing and lovingly accepting our own "humanness" allows us to accept others as we accept ourselves. And from recognizing that one simple truth, we can move forward to realize another: Thinking something is not doing something. Thinking we are virtuous or accepting or colorblind builds no houses—nor does it feed anybody, nor cure loneliness. Our actions are what define us. We connect by showing up—to find that we share so many threads to bind us together in relationships and connections. We see the similarities and build on them.

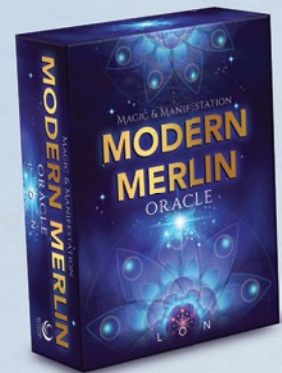
I think it really helps to join some sort of church, sangha, or meeting house. I also love the wisdom of the Muslim scholar Ibn Arabi:

Do not praise your own faith exclusively so that you disbelieve all the rest. If you do this you will miss much good. Nay, you will miss the whole truth of the matter. God, the Omniscient and the Omnipresent, cannot be confined to any one creed, for He says in the Quran, wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah. Everybody praises what he knows. His God is his own creature, and in praising it, he praises himself. Which he would not do if he were just, for his dislike is based on ignorance.

So, I invite you to try a new church and explore what you have in common. Maybe try the 10 closest churches to you just for the fun, adventure, and exploration of it. Sit next to the family with noisy kids shifting around in the seats or playing tic-tac-toe on the donation envelopes. Feel the love and acceptance of just sharing a space. Maybe you will be sitting next to my family. **S+H**

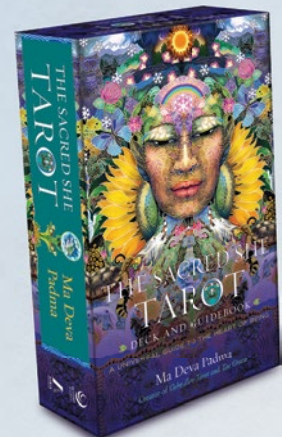
Paul would love to hear your church, sangha, or meeting house stories. Contact him at paul@paulhsutherland.com.

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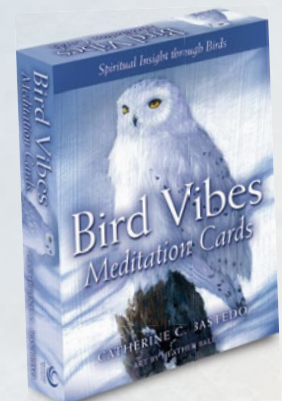
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