

In
Awe
of the
Sacred

Harrison Owen

Note to the reader: *I am trying to make sense out of my life, the sort of thing 80 year olds do for whatever reason. I never had a life plan, and never knew where I was going until I got there. Even then, I wasn't sure. So take all of this with a grain of salt, or whatever substance. For the record, I wouldn't have missed a single moment, although there are some moments not to be repeated. What follows is more musing than exposition, and although Open Space is very much a part of the story, I have made little effort to describe the particulars. I will presume that you have "been there," or if not, I refer you to any of my several books. Better yet, open your own space. It works.*

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I hold the Sacred in awe. Not necessarily the golly-gee-whiz type of awe, complete with goose-bumps and tearing eyes, but rather the deep sense of presence and being, where everything is nothing, and silence is a thunderous explosion of unending quietude. Something like that. My fascination with the Sacred is not simply a private affair, but effectively my *raison d'être*. Sharing the sense of the Sacred, poorly or well, is what I do.

Some might think this odd on the grounds that there seems to be little utility or substance. Indeed there are precious few roles in life where sharing the Sacred is deemed reasonable. The clergy, of course, would be an obvious exception, although the contemporary view of the clergy, at least in the secular western world, leaves plenty of room for speculation. “Other worldly” and “Out of this world” are unfortunately very close together in many people’s mind. With some limitations, I share this view.

My opinion is not uninformed, as you would see from my resume. I am a Priest of the Episcopal Church, with all the proper training and credentials. In a word, I’ve been there, and I’m still there. Still a priest. And yet my feelings persist.

I agree this situation appears schizophrenic. But schizoid or not, this is where I find myself. My purpose in life is to share the Sacred, and to invite others to share that profound sense of awe. Why? Because that is a critical part of becoming human, I think. The awesome presence expands my horizons and provides me with a sense of scale and worth. When we share that experience, our common horizons blossom even as we come to appreciate our minuscule place in the Cosmos.

Where this mission came from is a mystery, and all the usual places appear blameless. It is true that from the time of a small boy I was enfolded by the church – The Episcopal Church. There were others (churches) I am sure, but that was purely hearsay to me. Each week began with a trip to The Church of the Redeemer in the company of my Mother. Our objective was the parish house and Sunday School. I don't remember the details save for the fact that each Sunday visit provided occasion to see Mister Webb. Mr. Webb was the church sexton, which seemed an exalted position. He knew everything, could go anywhere, and was always greeted by the Rector most properly: Mister Webb.

On the second day of the week, Mr. Webb, now in the guise of bus driver, would take me to school. More exactly, The Lower School of The Episcopal Academy, a wonderful place under the careful and caring eye of Miss Carpenter, the Head Mistress.

Time passed and Lower School gave way to Middle School. Had I read Dante, I would have recognized The Middle School as the eighth ring of Hell. Mr Gager, Head of School, was The Devil himself – with demonic assistance from Mr Birdsill, fifth grade master. I confess to a tongue slip which lead to a strong face slap. Somehow “Birdsill” became “Birdseed,” and school was awesomely awful.

The Upper School was scarcely better, though mercifully, my tenure was brief. Headmaster Greville Haslem summoned Mother and myself to his office and informed us that had he a G on

the grading scale, that would be my reward. In any event, he felt the Episcopal Academy had done as much as it could for me.

Next came St. Andrew's, yet another Episcopal school, a superior place of learning and living. Most significantly, I sensed the Sacred. The sensing was inchoate, having nothing to do with the religious environment, the daily chapel, the artifacts on the windows and walls. More of a sense than a certainty, a wisp in the air.

Williams College was a boring passage, but seminary, graduate school and the priesthood compensated for the hollow wastes of time. But where was the Sacred – that wisp I sensed? Each institution of my experience spoke the word often, and sometimes with reverence. But something was missing. I sensed the form, the cover, the description, the theory – but not the reality.

My engagement with the world at large, the real world beyond academe ... took me to multiple times, places and peoples. Some of it was massively exciting and some excruciatingly dull, but I did miss the wisp in the air.

In the way of many deep things, my expanding awareness of the Sacred arrived with scarcely a tremble. Snuck up on me, as it were... appearing in the common place with no warning.

I had agreed to convene a 3rd Symposium on Organization Transformation at a time when my life was so chaotic and confused that I totally forgot my promise. The gathering was set for July, and I was sitting on my terrace in April with my first outdoor Martini. Contentment... Rudely interrupted by the realization that I had committed to organize a gathering for a

largish number of people in early July – and I had given not a thought.

My first sip was followed by a second... along with the remembrance that two years previously, when I had organized a similar gathering, it had taken a whole year of meetings, conferences and phone calls. Exhausting, and worse yet, the best parts were the coffee breaks – which of course I had no part in organizing. I finished the Martini and poured another.

Whether it was the spirit of the gin or the softness of the day, I have no idea, but three images came unbidden. First, a circle of people, secondly, a bulletin board, and lastly, a village market place complete with sellers and buyers in abundance. In the moment, I knew my meeting was “planned.” I finished my drink.

Several months later in Monterey, California – seventy odd people sat in a circle. “Odd” refers both the inexactitude of the number and the nature of the people. In an hour or so, we filled a wall with pieces of paper inscribed with our issues/questions. Swarm like, we approached the wall (our bulletin board) to choose our sessions and establish the time and place of meeting (by the pool, at the bar, on the lawn). In about two hours, we created a four day symposium with rich agenda. Never giving a second thought, we went to work.

Four days later, we gathered again in a circle and people shared their feelings about our days together. Nothing like reports... just how it had been for us. As it happened, our number had grown. Strangers from a meeting down the hall dropped by, and some joined our circle.

When the time came, one of these people, a Vietnam Vet, spoke through his tears. “I came home,” he said, “and nobody wanted to see me... until the last several days. Now I feel like I really have come home. Thank you.”

He was home and we were present; his words were accepted with silence. What else could you do? Rational analysis, proper meeting decorum, expected behavior... all flew away. Call it what you like, but for me it was very simply an awesome moment of the Sacred. Definition unknown and impossible.

For the next three or four years this strange happening happened again, once a year. The only differences were that the groups got larger and the time to organize diminished. Somewhere along the line, I named “it” – Open Space. People gathered in a circle, created a bulletin board, opened a market place – The Sacred manifest.

This presence was not marked by special signs and wonders, or the normal ecclesiastical accouterments. But you knew it was a very unique time and place, and the “practice” of opening of space spread almost un-noticed and unobtrusively around the world.

In Capetown, South Africa, shortly after Nelson Mandela was released from his island prison, a massively diverse group of people, found themselves in a circle – ANC, Afrikaners, Cape Coloreds, proper Brits, folks from the townships... For eight hours they addressed the issues that united and divided them, and at the

end they were once more in a circle. Sharing their feeling for the day, they surprised each other with smiles and tears – strangers, and often sworn enemies, felt almost intimate. Then silence – commanded by no one – grew all by itself. In the silence a single drum beat quietly. This was Africa you know. Silence once again – deep, unbroken, awesome silence. And at the right time a single voice said with clarity, “We are the New South Africa. We have a lot of work to do.” Sacred, I think.

Rome. The seat of Empire, the Eternal City – and witness to many strange encounters. Fifty Palestinians and Israelis met at a palatial estate, guests of the government of Italy. Their common issue: Peace in the Middle East – but these were not peace-nics. Precisely the opposite. As one participant said to another, “This is very strange. We are in business to kill each other.” True. Many participants were high ranking members of the security forces of their respective nations.

They began in a circle, and the next two days found them spread out in small groups across the estate. The issues discussed were the usual, in addition to many more, known only to the participants. Heated, intense, emotional; the discussion pounded forward in Arabic and Hebrew, with other languages thrown in as needed.

On the third day they once again found their places in a circle. One could no longer tell the difference between Israeli and

Palestinian by their position in the circle or who they sat beside. Everybody shared a common exhaustion but they shared more....

An Olive Branch, cut from the estate's grove, was introduced as a Talking Stick, the Native American tradition guaranteeing each person the right to speak, and to all others, the duty to listen. The rules are very simple. The Talking Stick is passed around the circle. If you hold it, you may speak, and if you don't, you will be silent. In either case you do so with respect.

For the next two and one half hours the Talking Stick made its way around the circle. People spoke through tears and laughter. And sometimes they simply held the stick in silence. Which is where we ended: Silence.

Sometime later I received a note from a senior Israeli official. She wrote: "The visual memory etched in my mind: smiling people, embracing, even kissing, a certain sense of intimacy in the "Open Space." I pray that we will be able to safeguard this initial start, and succeed in imparting it to more and more people."

Subsequent history will confirm that the problems of the Middle East were not solved during those days. However, that time still stands in the memories of all present as a totally awesome moment. The presence of the Sacred.

Monterey, Capetown, Rome...around the world. Thirty years, 400,000 iterations (more or less), 146 countries, millions of people. And the curious thing is that for most people Open Space is weird, impossible, and largely unknown. But isn't that the way of The Sacred?

It is tempting to suggest that somehow we, or even I, created this pathway to the Sacred. But if so that would be a strange creation indeed, if only because we have noticed over the years that the less we did, the more powerful the moment. You might call this a non-creation.

Actually, “non-creation,” or perhaps non-event – are rather apt ways of describing Open Space. Unless the facilitator is particularly verbose, the whole event is effectively initiated in fifteen to twenty minutes. That would be the time from the moment the facilitator said, *Welcome to Open Space* until the first participant announces their issues. That time seems scarcely enough for a greeting, let alone any detailed explanation of the process. Yet even with large groups (3000+) it is more than sufficient. And we never take any questions – at least I don’t. Non-creation, for sure.

The bald facts are that complex, multi-day gatherings, involving hundreds of issues and thousands of people come together in a brief moment – all without advance agenda or training. I suppose you could consider this miraculous in itself, but the simple truth is that after an initial shock, everything feels surprisingly natural.

Truthfully, before everything starts there is a strangeness in the air, a discomforture. Sitting in a circle is aberrant behavior for most meetings. Decidedly NOT natural, or so we have been taught. We anticipate orderly rows of chairs, or a large table. But an empty circle of chairs? And yet after an initial moment of surprise, the group, whatever its size, appears quite at home. Of course,

children play in circles, coffee is usually drunk in circles, friends gather in circles, families are thought of as circles, even political systems are irregular circles (“loops”). All of which seems quite natural.

Circles are natural – but they can also be disorienting for some people. There is no front or back, top or bottom, a right side or wrong side. It is all endlessly one piece, without beginning or end. It is hard to know exactly where you are. Not a clue. More concerning is the fact that there is nothing in the circle. Everybody is facing nothing – except each other.

Salvation arrives with the appearance of a single person, usually called a “facilitator.” In the majority of cases, the facilitator is unknown and has never been seen before. What he or she says adds little clarity to the situation. Something about Five Principles which are mostly grammatically incorrect and communicate little more than a simple statement of the obvious... And one more thing. A Question.

The precise nature of The Question varies with the situation, the area of concern which brought everybody together (“Finding Peace in the Middle East?”). But it is just that... A Question. No answer. Not even the suggestion of an answer. Nothing.

How can Nothing lead to the Sacred?

Several years ago in the early fall, I was moving slowly down the middle of the lake I live on in Maine. All the summer folks had gone, and there wasn't another boat on the water. Young geese were engaged in practice flights overhead, and loon couples dove earnestly and endlessly in search of That fish. I savored the chilly breeze in my face... and suddenly a thought... more like a blazing statement...

It's the Question, Stupid.

My life, our lives – appear consumed with an endless search for The Answer. From Kindergarten through Graduate school, on into our working lives, we prize – The Answer. We reward whomsoever seems to have it. Then we memorize, internalize, consumerize, commercialize ... so that we will be among the chosen few who can provide it to all those other poor souls! Consultants, I think is the name. Or if you are really good – Expert Consultant.

However, in the process we miss the best part. We are so obsessed with getting the answer that we forget the question. Even worse, we forget the *value* of the question, which is pretty much reduced to zero, an obvious sign of ignorance, sloth, and indolence.

Of course, there are some answers that are very useful and practical – they fit with practical questions. Such question/answer pairings make every day life much easier, and to be in the dark is really a drag. Such pairs need not be simple and just for the simple

minded. For example, if your everyday life takes place in the realm of Quantum Mechanics, the pertinent questions and answers become quite esoteric, at least as most of the world might see it.

There is, however, a sort of question that defines all questions. We might call it, The Ultimate Question - a question so deep and provocative that it can never be answered. If your life is limited to finding answers, and measured by the answers you find, such a question seems almost absurd. Should it actually exist it would be fearful.

When no answer is possible, we are left with the question, which can be frustrating, non-productive and definitely nervous-making. However, some find this situation a sacred opportunity for “sitting the question.” This odd phrase comes from the Quaker tradition, best known for its capacity for silence, prudence and frugality. *Sitting the Question* is pretty much as the words imply – Don’t do anything, figure anything, postulate anything – just be there wrapped in the mystery of Question. The effects can be marvelous: calming, deepening, enhanced awareness of the awesome mystery of silence. The Sacred.

It is not for nothing, I think, that the word *Question* begins with *Quest*. It is a search, an openness, an emptiness, – and most profoundly – an invitation to a journey. But a journey of a special sort, one in which the bounds are without limit, and we are invited to find our fullness.

Questions create space. Answers limit and confine. To be *sitting the question* is to be infinitely challenged with unending

possibility. Endlessly invited to become fully what we are....
Awesome indeed!

Open Space doesn't do anything. It is not a method, procedure or process. It is pure invitation, and there is nothing there. It is all question with not an answer in sight. A marvelous vacuum sucking us into a future that we could hardly imagine.

I guess that sounds a little inglorious and not the proper thing to do. But being "sucked in" is the story of my life. Before I ever really had the chance to resist, I was right in the middle of it. The power of the question, the quest – is that kind of powerful. And to be perfectly honest, the surprise is needed and wonderful. If I'd ever really had a chance to think about all the wonderful things I've encountered and done, I'm absolutely certain I would not have gone there – wherever there was.

But once you are in the middle... then what? You find yourself in that startling condition where all signals are off, and no plan has been made. Totally exhilarating. And maybe absolutely terrifying. That's life at the edge, and perhaps life at its best.

However, when signals fade, and plans are unmade, a few principles can help. You may recognize them as the Principles of Open Space, but as you could have guessed, the differences between Open Space and life are minimal, in my view.

Open Space is merely an intentional, and perhaps intenser, manner of living. My friend, Chris Corrigan, calls Open Space (Technology) "the training wheels of life." Like the first bike ride for a child, a little support and stability is helpful, and of course

practice helps. However, no matter the stage or level of experience, basic principles always apply. There are Five Principles.

Whoever comes are the right people – The first principle tells you about the people you will meet, and reminds you not to worry about the vast majority you will never see. One of our constant fixations is the “right” people. We worry that the right people will attend our meeting, that right person offers him or herself to us as a life partner, that our parties are populated by the right people... We worry so much that we end up overlooking the people who come. And the truth is they are the right people because they cared enough to come. As for all the rest? They may be perfectly wonderful, but the simple fact is they did not care enough to come. At the end of the day, useful things get done by people who care to do them. What, how, and when remains to be seen. But they are there. They care.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have – Grammatically scrambled, for sure. The point, however, is simple and clear. Stuff happens. And once that occurs, there is not a bloody thing that you, or anybody else, can do about it. It’s done! Rather blunt, but it does save a lot of time worrying about the “could-have beens, should-have-beens, might-have beens.” What is – IS. It may be terrible or wonderful, dead end or filled with possibility, but we will never know as long as our heads are filled with remorse and regret. Get on with it! What happened may be unexpected and troublesome. BUT there will be opportunities that

we might never have found – and will never find if we bury our heads in disappointment.

Whenever it starts is the right time – The amount of energy devoted to worrying about “starting on time” would easily power a major city. And it is totally wasted. TRUTH! **Nothing ever started on time.** “Time,” of course, is what your clock tells you – and as we all know meetings (for example) are scheduled to start at a precise time. However. They never do. Never have. Never will. They start when they start. Which of course is the “right time,” as defined by the right people: Those who are there and care to be there. Caring creates time, meaningful time. Anything else is a waste of time.

Wherever it happens is the right place – The Sacred can and does appear anywhere at any time. And with that manifestation comes the confirmation that “this is the right place.” For most of the history of Open Space Technology, we missed this principle. Our events were held in venues, and we assumed that the venue was somehow critical to what happened. In fact the reverse was true – what happened was critical to the venue and made it special. The deeper learning in all of this for me is that everything is Sacred. Or that the distinction often made between the Sacred and the profane is not all that helpful. There are obviously times and places that we find less than awesome, but no matter our tastes and feelings, any place can be the right place, and all places can be right for some.

When it is Over, it is over – This is a simple way of acknowledging a universal fact. Everything has a beginning, middle, and end. And at the end – that’s it.

Ending is something that we find difficult. Little endings, such as the close of a day, the end of a vacation, or job may engender a certain sadness. But big endings are more consequential. The Big Ending, Death, seems the antithesis of everything we hold dear. Not surprisingly we avoid even thinking or talking about it until there is no alternative – and then it comes as a surprise. Understandable for sure, but strange. Death is the only certainty in life. Indeed, beginnings and endings, life and death, are constant, inseparable polarities. You can’t have one without the other.

Ending is clearing space for new possibilities. Painful to be sure, particularly when attachments are strong. But with endings come new beginnings, and the passage from one to the other is awesome – inevitably a moment when the Sacred is present.

And a single Law... The Law of Two Feet – This is a law only in the sense that if not observed, meaningful life, perhaps life itself, will cease. The law states: *If at any time you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing – use your two feet.* Move to a place you care to be. A place that has heart and meaning for you.

Conventional wisdom sees such a law as rude and outrageous, supporting the idea that we should only do what we care to do. And of course, if everybody did that, there would be

chaos and worse. Unfortunately for the conventional view, everybody appears to observe the law, if only covertly.

To see the point, remember the last time you were in a totally boring, useless meeting. The speaker droned on and on and on.... Where were you? Perhaps out the window with a happy bird, enjoying next summer's vacation, working a project you really cared about? And of course, if the speaker drones long enough, the room becomes close enough – eyelids become heavy, the head droops, and deep breathing and snores may follow. Would it not have been better for all concerned to stand quietly, and place one foot ahead of the other?

The example is common and silly, but the thrust of the law goes to the heart of meaningful human life. We really come alive, when we follow our passion in a responsible manner. Everything else is merely treading water, waiting for the show to start – often ending with blaming others for our lost opportunities.

To be sure, there are opportunities denied by fate or the malicious acts of others, but the old truism is true, I think. When one door closes another will open. And in any case we'll never know until we try to walk through. It begins with a single step and carries forward with two feet.

Risk? Absolutely, but following our passion in a responsible manner does require a calculation of risk, usually done with some questions. What's the worst that can happen? What are the alternatives? No questions, however, can eliminate the risk. Sooner or later we must take that step...or not. And the consequences will be ours.

The good people of the State of New Hampshire (USA) may be given to over statement, but I can't help but agree with them. Their motto: *Live Free or Die*. Honestly, I don't think you really have a choice. When life is constrained to small spaces it almost inevitably dies. Or perhaps even worse – such a life is not worth living. The *Law of Two Feet* is the heart and soul of Open Space, and more profoundly, of life itself. When we fear or forget to use our two feet, life becomes a motionless husk. Stuck. Dead.

The Law of Two Feet enables our Quest. It opens the way to the heart of The Question. On the surface it might appear we are only satisfying our desires, pleasing ourselves. In fact we are approaching the cutting edge of life and the awesome presence of the Sacred.