

The Space Between Us

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In my family when we raise a toast, we share the words my grandfather taught us:

“Here’s tae us. Wha’s like us? Gie few and they’re a’ deed!” And then we laugh and nod our heads nostalgically. Translation of this Scottish blessing goes: *“Here’s to us. Who is like us? Damn few and they’re all dead!”* I grew up clinking glasses with these words, back when my glass was still full of Kool-Aid. The grownups, including my beloved grandfather when he was still with us, filled theirs with something much stronger.

My family and I have always felt quite smug in blessing one another this way. It was like an inside joke that bound us together in spite of everything that tore us apart. Nobody else knew the toast; nobody else even understood it. This was our toast – handed down by the patriarch of our clan. That none of us, including dear departed grandfather, had a drop of Scottish blood in our veins seemed to matter not at all. In fact, I believe none of us actually knew where the twisted words came from, or how they became part of our family story. They were just what we said together to reduce the space between us.

Some years ago, however, my brother brought home his young, lovely bride, Fiona, who not only had a couple of grandfathers who were 100% Scottish, but she also had a couple of grandmothers who were 100% Scottish. In fact, she was 100% Scottish. So, when we celebrated her arrival in our typical exclusionary, in-family way by raising our glasses and using language which reminded the new outsider that she was indeed an outsider, when we shouted our toast:

“Here’s tae us. Wha’s like us? Gie few and they’re a’ deed,” my new sister-in-law not only said every word with us, and with a better accent I may add, she continued the toast after we had stopped with the missing piece we never knew we had been missing. Fiona ended the blessing with *“Mair’s the pity.” “More is the pity.”* And with her benediction, by adding her missing piece to our complicated family puzzle, she brought a bond of love. She removed the space between us.

There is no distance, no separation in spiritual space. A blessing removes the isolation and division we feel between each other, as though the very idea of a blessing was designed for the traveler who was far from home. As if we, at home, are reaching out to meet the one we bless, the one who is coming home, and yet may still be a long way off. A blessing reaches out to those we love and cannot help, because they can only help themselves. A blessing reaches out to join them on the journey. It is gracious invitation to meet in spiritual space: a space that holds no distance, no isolation, no separation

The poet Rumi describes this meeting place, this spiritual space. He writes:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing, there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other" do not make any sense.

Imagine the journey to that meeting place, a place beyond the ideas of wrongdoing or right doing, or even “each other.” It has got to be a rough road to that meeting place. Imagine, when you need a blessing, even when a heartfelt, open-armed blessing is offered, it has got to be pretty hard to get up off the couch, stop watching TV, put on your shoes, go to the door, take the first step over the threshold outside, and greet Love face to face. It has to be pretty hard to get up off the couch to accept a blessing, to close the space between us.

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a thoroughly unpleasant mama's boy named Jacob. Truth be told, he was a sniveling liar and a cheat, and yet the inscrutable authors of *The Bible* chose to make him our hero; one of the three big forefathers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Go figure.

So anyway, this guy Jacob is heading through the wilderness toward his brother Esau. He's going to Esau to apologize for a spectacularly cheap trick of sibling rivalry which robbed Esau of his inheritance. Basically Jacob stole a lot of stuff from Esau, and now, after many years,

Jacob wants to say he is sorry. But he isn't finding this journey easy. Jacob and his very large caravan of livestock, family and servants were travelling a long way through the wilderness to meet Esau, and the day before the big reunion, the caravan came to a river that had to be crossed to get to the meeting place. Now, you have to understand, Jacob is having a rough time on this journey. He is really scared, I mean he really messed with Esau and Esau is a big, hairy guy and has every right to be very angry. Frankly, Jacob is afraid his big brother might beat him to a pulp. So, Jacob does the prudent thing. He decides to set up camp for the night before crossing the river.

The next day, long before the sun is even up, he sends flocks of livestock ahead, across the river as gifts to appease his brother's wrath. Then, because he is still of questionable moral fiber, Jacob sends his wives and eleven sons across the river to meet his brother Esau and kind of pave the way – you know, make nice. But Jacob, coward that he is, stays put, all alone, back on the other side of the river, having trouble... maybe getting off the couch, afraid to close the space between himself and his brother.

And this is where things get creepy. At this point in the story *The Bible* simply says “Jacob then wrestled with a man until day break.”

Wait a minute. What man? Where did he come from?

Some say the man was a demon who lived at the river's ford, but most people say the man was an angel. Whatever the case, Jacob and this “*man*” started wrestling, and the “*man*” was getting the upper hand, he was winning. He even injured Jacob, twisted his hip. But Jacob tenaciously fought on in spite of his injury.

Eventually, as the night wore on, Jacob began to get the upper hand, and then, as the sun began to rise, the “*man*” said, “Let me go because dawn is breaking.” Jacob, finally showing some backbone and self-awareness said, “I'm not going to let you go unless you bless me,” for Jacob

was sorely in need of a blessing. The man blessed him. He said, “Your name is no longer Jacob, but Israel for you have some serious power,” and then the man disappeared – *poof* – gone.

And then you know what happened? Jacob/Israel, quit his lying and cheating. Transformed by the blessing, he laid down his sword and shield, he waded across the river and walked toward his brother. And what did Esau do? Did he rage? Did he turn his back? No, he ran to Jacob, and they embraced and they wept, and the salt of their tears began to heal the long open wounds of separation.

Who can bless? Everyone. Who can accept a blessing? Everyone. Who is a blessing? Everyone.

When someone is kind to you, you feel understood and seen. A blessing. Simple. Whether or not you even hear the words of Love echoing for you throughout that meeting place, that spiritual space, you are blessed. Reach below your surface, down to a deeper source within you, go beyond your present frontiers, beyond isolation and separation. Wave your wand; cast a spell, if you will, to heal broken relationships, to find the missing pieces, and to discover beauty and connection. When we accept a blessing in the spirit with which it was intended, we can begin to understand how deeply we are connected to each other’s souls.

As surely as we belong to the earth, as surely as we belong to the universe, we belong together. We join here, in this sanctuary, to be reminded of this Truth. We belong together, we belong to each other. We gather in this sanctuary of memory, caring and hope, to reconnect, to transcend the isolated self, to know ourselves, to be at home, here on earth, under the stars, and linked with each other.

For Further Study

To Bless the Space between Us: A Book of Blessings, John O’Donohue, Doubleday, 2008