

Stepping into Emptiness *("To Fill Ev'ry Bare Space")*

*"Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God,
and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit,
he has poured out this that you both see and hear."
(Acts 2:33)*

*O Spirit of God, fill the earth with Your joy,
Give voice to our song that our praise may employ
Your wellspring of peace to fill ev'ry bare space
With sweet notes of gladness and fair tones of grace.
(Johanna Anderson)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Trinity Sunday, June 3, 2012
Volume 1 Number 44
St. James United Methodist Church, 321 Pleasant Valley Drive, Little Rock, AR 72212

"He has poured out this that you both see and hear." To speak of the Holy Spirit's work on Pentecost Peter offers an image of pouring, a pouring out of the Spirit to create waves rippling out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world. In every direction the Holy Spirit would lead the church outward *"to fill every bare space."*

Those words are part of a poem by Johanna Anderson and put to music by Craig Courtney. Click on this link to hear a Baptist youth choir sing the anthem, paying particular attention to the Pentecost-enriched language of the second stanza, listening especially to the choir when they sing the word *"space"* in the stanza offered below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y0obD0c4HM>

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Did you note how, when the choir sings the word *"space,"* voices travel up and down a chord cluster as if filling every bare space in the musical scale. This is *Text Painting*. (I think now of Garth Brooks singing the word *"low"* in the famous line, *"I've got friends in low places."*)

With the word *"space"* voices rise and fall at the same time, filling the scale in every direction. That's Pentecost, a pouring out of the Holy Spirit moving the church to *Step into the Emptiness* of the world in every direction, filling every bare space.

Filling every bare space is what I see in Bernini's 17th century alabaster window and sculpture in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost symbolized as the dove in the midst of golden rays extending outward in every direction.

When I visited the Vatican for the first time I my eyes fixed on this golden sight in the distance.

Despite the vastness of the nave and the wonders of art all around us, it was the dove window that stood out, as if *Filling Ev'ry Bare Space*.



I want now, having ushered you into sacred space, to shift gears and fall back to perhaps where I should have begun, playfully to prep you for my theme. Leaving the hushed basilica, let's go back outside into the vastness of St. Peter's Square, a place where you can see all sorts of strange happenings. In this wild worldliness of the square I want to tell you about my title, *Stepping into Emptiness*. It makes me think of Improv. Improvisation. One of my favorite television shows is "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" the show "Where everything is made up and the points don't matter" (that's the tag line introducing each show).

It's true, everything is made up with themes and situations often shouted spontaneously from the audience. This is no sitcom and these are not actors speaking from memorized scripts and performed with practiced proficiency. These are improv experts, "*Stepping into the Emptiness*" of the moment, on the spot making up their lines in hilarious sketches and songs. In other words, they start with a bare space, a blank, page, and I never ceased to be amazed at how they fill those bare spaces with humor. Were I on that stage, bare spaces would mostly remain bare spaces, filled perhaps with some stuttering and stammering. Give me 10 or 15 minutes and I might carefully craft words to say that would have been funny, but don't ask me to improvise. It's the immediacy that's scary, the opportunity to fill the empty moment at hand before it passes.

In fact, though, in seminary we had exercises to train us to do precisely that. "*Be instant in season and out of season*," my homiletics professor reminded us Paul wrote, testing us on how skillfully we might rise to the openness of the unexpected instant. Each student was called to the front of the class in turn, the professor speaking a single word and the student expected to offer an impromptu devotional. That word may be "toothpick," "couch," "cigar," "volcano." Then, instantly, we would step into emptiness and offer a devotional.

It was fun and good training for pastoral ministry. Still, I prefer carefully writing in the quietness of the study, despite my having such high regard for improv experts. That high regard is a jealous regard, knowing myself challenged by that spontaneous moment. I crave that ability to *Step into Emptiness* and fill the bare spaces with a creative pouring out of words. Alas, improv is not the best club in my bag, preferring things scripted. That is true of most of us, I think, which is what makes these gifted ones so spectacularly entertaining. Where I see an end, they see a beginning. Where I see a blank page filling me with fear of saying the wrong thing, they see a blank page filled with potential of saying a wonder-filled, wow-filled thing.

My recurring nightmare is to step into the pulpit and find it empty, realizing only at that moment that I had forgotten to print my sermon. With the bare wood of the pulpit staring back at me rather than the carefully crafted content of my sermon, the bare space is met with a blank stare.

Strange how different, for me, is the pulpit from the classroom. Teaching classes, I delight to step from behind the lectern into the note-less emptiness, riding the flow of the moment as directed by dialogue. I love also this spontaneity on the road, offering devotionals at sacred sites in the Holy Land or in the Mediterranean world in moments unforeseen and un-scripted.

Yes, but not here, not in this pulpit. The bare spaces of note-less-ness was my mode of sermon delivery in the Baptist pulpit in my 20s, but I came to find that style entirely unfulfilling. I sometimes hear excited compliments of those who speak from the pulpit without notes, as if it's an extraordinary thing. I'll admit I don't share such admiration, having always found the note-less mode less challenging for the preacher, not more, and less substantial for the listeners. But that's just me, at last understanding that the Spirit uses a variety of methods in the sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

“Stepping into emptiness,” by the way, is a phrase I was introduced to in an essay on instrumental jazz by musician David Rothenberg. The essay celebrates gifted musicians who are able to depart from the notes written on the score with a spontaneity that surpasses whatever limits one might imagine to hold them. This, Rothenberg says, requires a lifetime of practice but, when it emerges, sounds like pure invention, leaving the audience to wonder, *“Did you make this up as you went along? Did these beautiful notes come from midair?”* In one sense, the notes did come from midair, a response to the moment with pure novelty. In a deeper sense, though, a lifetime of preparation made it possible, a lifelong quest for complete mastery of one's talents.

Picasso once was asked how long it took to make a particular painting. *“All my life,”* was his answer. How long does it take a doctor to see a patient? A few minutes? No, but a whole life. How long for a carpenter to build cabinets? A whole life. Whatever your occupation, a lifetime of education and experience combine to create new and confident avenues of expression.

Speaking of jazz instrumentalists, Rothenberg wrote, *“It takes a lifetime to trust one's tools enough to rise to the openness of the instant. The improviser specializes in making the most of accident, an instant that is fluid, fleeting, creating a moment which has never been heard before this present moment, and at the same time, a moment that will never appear again. We all have*

gifts which can be elucidated, developed, expanded, and then, in a magical moment, squeezed and transformed in freedom of expression. That's the moment when training becomes art, when you handle the unexpected in a way which even you yourself never guessed you could."

"Only by stepping into emptiness can you fill the impossible with your work. The beauty in improvisation is that you can do more than you can calculate, you can soar far beyond any notes or structures you might plan. It's wonderful to be a part of it, to forget whatever limits you might imagine hold you. To create way past one's ability to keep track of things, to be trained enough to be ready for anything – that is the way life and art progress together. You must be able to do things that are, quite simply, beyond your abilities."

Bishop Will Willimon tells of a time, while Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, when he received a phone call from a very irate father. The caller was furious, saying, *"I hold you personally responsible for this!"* He was angry because his graduate school-bound daughter had decided to (in the father's words) *"throw it all away and go do mission work in Haiti with the Presbyterian Church."* The father complained, *"Isn't that absurd! She has a degree from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti. I hold you responsible!"*

Willimon said, *"Why me?"*

The father said, *"You ingratiated yourself and filled her mind with all this religious stuff."*

Willimon is not the sort to be easily intimidated. He asked, *"Sir, weren't you the one who had her baptized?"*

"Yes," said the father.

"And didn't you take her to Sunday School when she was a girl, and allow her to go on youth trips when she was in high school?"

"Yes. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Sir," said Willimon, *"You're the reason she's throwing it all away. YOU introduced her to Jesus, not me!"*

"But," said the father, *"all we wanted was for her to be a Presbyterian!"*

"Well, sorry sir, but you messed up," said Willimon. *"You've gone and made a disciple!"*

This young lady felt a calling and responded, willingly stepping into the emptiness of a previously unrecognized opportunity. You might say she was following in the footsteps of Peter, hearing the Call and leaving the nets of his studied craft behind, stepping a world empty and yearning for fullness, dark and yearning for a light.

Perhaps you are just now weighing a decision that seems like a Calling, feeling that to respond would seem to be a *Step into Emptiness*, and not at all sure that you are up to the task. May God give you wisdom and strength to *Step into Emptiness*.

Sources and notes:

David Rothenberg, *"Spontaneous Effort: Improvisation and the Quest for Meaning,"* in PARABOLA, Volume 21, Number 4 (Winter 1996, Play and Work).