

Keeping Your Distance  
Rev. Kathleen Ellis  
18 Nov 07

In September, my husband Jon and I took a quick trip to Colorado. As we drove northwest, the sun almost blinded us on its way to a stunning sunset. With every mile the ordinary facts of my life became smaller over time and distance. There were a few lingering tasks that would need doing by phone and email, but the list was small. The rest could wait. It had to wait. And I had to let it go for several days.

Most people take an occasional weekend vacation like this. And even when I stay at home, I will change up my routine from time to time just to get away from the ordinary schedule and habits. A walk around the block makes for a quick break. Habitual distancing, you might say.

It's a matter of perspective. When I first learned about perspective, it was in an art class. We drew railroad tracks and learned that at the horizon the tracks appeared to come close together. I had to stand on some tracks to test the theory. I have a terrible time with directions, too—NSEW—though my father tried his hardest to teach me. As an adult, I took a drafting class to help me with this missing skill.

Learning to draw lines was simple enough. But when it came to drawing engine parts I was mystified. I had no idea what these parts looked like, so it was tough to draw them from a different angle. My first husband would find the little rotors and cogs so I could look at them from different viewpoints. When he didn't have the actual part, he would carve one out of balsa wood so I could turn it around for myself. I learned a lot, though it is definitely not one of my skill sets.

Anyway, there we were, driving into the sunset. Jon and I were traveling north and west on Highway 84 through Abilene, Snyder, Post, Southland, Lubbock, on our way to the mountains of Twin Lakes, Colorado. Though I grew up in the flat land surrounding Shreveport, LA, one of my first jobs was at Rockbrook Camp for Girls, in the Appalachian Mountains near Brevard, NC. I was the hiking counselor and we had some wonderful opportunities to climb up and down the beautiful trails and make camp at the end of a long day.

I saw first hand that mountains appeal to body, mind, and spirit. To begin with, there's the vertical distancing from the lowlands, oceans, and floodplains. Climb until your legs ache and you will appreciate the rest stop when you lean against your backpack and pull out the trail mix or dried fruit.

Climb higher and you will come upon astonishing vistas overlooking a valley or a village, maybe a river down below that looks so small now. After a meal and cleanup, even the hard ground can feel pretty comfortable.

Climb higher until you reach the summit. Maybe it's cold at this altitude, above the tree line, nothing to stop the wind or the creeping mist of fog settling in for the night. On a previous trip to Japan, we traveled by bus halfway up Mt. Fuji, but it was shrouded with fog. On the way back down, suddenly the sun broke out to illuminate that sacred, snow-capped mountain. My son Rob, who lives in Tokyo, has actually hiked up Mt. Fuji; he doesn't remember ever having been any colder than that, nor any less in awe of the majesty of the moment.

The writer Peter Anderson knows many more mountains than I have seen. He is a Colorado author, poet, teacher and river guide who also has a Master of Divinity degree from Earlham School of Religion. One of Anderson's books is called *First Church of the Higher Elevations: Mountains, Prayer, and Presence*. He finds a spiritual connection on his walks in various mountain ranges as well as a place for grounding his personal spirit. His land is in the mountains of southern Colorado.

"On this summit," he writes, "I know where I stand. Along with the geographical clarity that comes with elevation gain, I sense a new orientation in my being. In a few lucid moments, it is as if the boundary that defines my sense of 'self' has become more permeable. I feel less contained, less isolated, more like a moving part in a greater entity called mountain."

Jon and I were able to climb to a summit that overlooked the twin lakes down below. Surrounded by aspens whose bright yellow leaves fluttered in the wind we savored the dual sense of being above it all and a small part of all we could see.

A few weeks later we were on our way to the Amazon! From an airplane I always enjoy the view of houses and roads, cars like ants, squares of farms. This time we flew over the equator, above the rain forest, and landed in Belém, a large city located in Brazil at the mouth of the Amazon. It was another different world, moving from mountain to rain forest. The physical distance from Texas facilitated a mental distance from work and home. Distance, whether it is physical or mental, can help you gain perspective on your life.

Last night I asked some Live Oak women what they do to gain perspective. Writing, meditation, and singing are some of the ways; or going into the backyard, listening to a waterfall, listening to the silence within yourself even in the midst of traffic noise and helicopters overhead.

When you take home your *Guest at Your Table* boxes, think about the real people for whom you share your coins and checks. Try to wrap your mind around the lives they must live, and be grateful for your own circumstances.

Just last weekend I was traveling again, this time to Glen Rose, Texas, for our UU district's Fall Leadership Conference. It was just a few hours' drive away, but it was certainly a change of routine and a place of respite where the Paluxy River and the Brazos River come together. One beauty of out of town conferences is the time in between sessions. There were chances to network informally with other participants, to see former Live Oakers like Nathan Ryan (who is doing well now in Dallas), and to ponder.

Pondering can be done anywhere, of course. Some of you are pondering right now, as your minds wander from this room into another world. Pondering can be as simple as daydreaming during a break at work or a pause between activities.

Some people make a daily ritual of pondering. For some, it comes first in the form of meditation, when you either follow a guided story or try to empty your mind of distractions ... let them float past you like clouds. Then as you come out of your reverie or your mindlessness, pondering follows quite naturally.

I have been pondering lately about the difficulty in keeping a healthy perspective when it comes to family. You and I know how to do it in our ordinary lives—the singing, the meditating, the journaling, the solitude.

We are coming up on the Thanksgiving holidays, when many of us travel home or invite relatives to join us in the celebration. Ordinary routines are disrupted. For a while everything goes just fine. Aunt Sally makes the cranberry salad, Uncle Ray brings the home brew, the kids are happy with their grilled cheese sandwiches and it all looks great. Except ... that you're treated like a child again, as though you had never left home and certainly never made much of your life. And why haven't you?

You can imagine the scene, played out in different formats depending on your family history. Susan Smith, our District Executive, challenged us to do a little role reversal: Okay, which of you goes straight to the kitchen to help with all the preparations? Your job is to show up, hand over whatever you are carrying, and plop down on the couch. Ask somebody to bring you a drink next time they get up.

Now, which of you are the couch potatoes? Go ahead, admit it, I know you're out there! .... You can usually be found right in front of the parade or the game at least until the meal is prepared, when you fill your plate and come back to the couch. Your job is to find a recipe from somewhere and show up with all the ingredients. Go straight to the kitchen and announce your plan to make a scrumptious whatever.

What do you suppose will happen? (Within about 2 minutes, people will be talking about you: what's the matter with you? What's going on? Are you sick? Are you in love?)

One reason this happens is that the group—in this case, a family—is an interconnected system. What happens in one part of the web affects every other part. A system tends to find a balance among all the individuals—the distant brother, the mentally ill cousin, the overprotective sister, the judgmental daughter. As long as everyone plays the part, we know how to cope. If there is a disturbance to the system, new symptoms will show up.

Some families are less reactive than others. If each family member is able to define his or her own life goals and values without pressure or demands from anyone else, they are described as well differentiated, according to the Murray Bowen Family Systems Theory. If I can take responsibility for my own actions and statements, and remain relatively calm and collected when the family is anxious or stressed, I can actually help restore calm to the family. Two things are required: that I remain in relationship with each of them, and that I remain true to my own

well-grounded principles. This doesn't mean that I'm rigid and unchanging, but that I don't let someone else's anxiety trigger my own.

Every system has an emotional field. The simplest version of a system is an emotional triangle formed by any three persons or issues. A bride could be in a triangle with her fiancé and his first wife; he is in a triangle with both women. The bride might also be in a triangle with her mother and the issue of whether or not she wants to have a child of her own.

A triangle is the most stable of relationships. Any two people will also be in relationship to a third person or perhaps a work project. But when any two persons become uncomfortable with each other, they will focus on the third leg of the triangle to stabilize their own relationship. In the extreme case of domestic violence, a husband and wife in conflict may focus on one or more of the children to defuse their anger toward each other. Even in relatively healthy marriages, one child can carry all the symptoms of stress for the whole family. If they could just get him straightened out, or if she just kept up her grades, the thinking goes, everything would be just fine.

Sometimes that problem child is a distraction from the difficult relationship between the parents. But neither parent can fix a child who doesn't want fixing. Have you ever heard of someone who thought the partner would change once they got married? If it's hard to change our own habits, it's well nigh impossible to change someone else's. Have you ever heard of parents who forbid a teenager daughter to date an unacceptable boyfriend, or even a girlfriend? The effort usually increases the possibility that they will "fall madly in love" with each other.

The effort to change the other parties in an interlocking triangle will be met with resistance. The most successful way is to change your own functioning within the system. It's only possible to do this if you remain in relationship with each of the others, but avoid responsibility for their relationship with one another.

So if you take Susan Smith's advice and do a role reversal for Thanksgiving or another holiday, watch for the reactivity in others. Stay connected, but not so stuck in your usual habits that you serve merely as a placeholder in the system. Prepare yourself ahead of time to get curious. Ask your mother what it was like to relocate to a military post far from home. Find out how your father got along with his brother. Get the focus off yourself and learn more about your family. They

will love to tell you their story, and you will get to deflect attention from yourself. Make plans to take a long walk or call a friend as often as necessary to keep yourself from getting caught up in the drama of family anxiety.

Systems theory applies to congregations as well. You represent many families of origin as well as nuclear families of your own. The congregation is a system. The ministers have their own families as well as congregational families. All of these relationships are interrelated, so that a change in one part of the system will reverberate throughout the entire web.

So let's return now to the place we began, in the unique perspective of the mountains. Carl Jung grew up in the Alps, so he encountered mountains early on in his life. At the age of fourteen, his father took him by cog railway up a mountain named the Rigi:

"With tremendous puffing, the wonderful locomotive shook and rattled me up to the dizzy heights where ever new abysses and panoramas opened out before my gaze, until at last I stood in the strange thin air, looking into the unimaginable distance...I kept carefully to the paths for there were tremendous precipices all around. It was all very solemn, and I felt one had to be polite and silent up here, for one was in God's world. Here it was physically present. This was the most precious gift my father had ever given me."

...

You have the gift. Own it! Exercise your power to stand your ground as the precious person you have every right to claim. Honor the inherent worth and dignity of yourself, then reach out in love to one another. And let the Live Oak say,

Sure!