

Belonging

The Metaphysics of Place: A Mystical Human-Rights Practice

Everyone please take your place. I hope you get to liking that word, place, because you're going to hear it plenty during this talk.

I'd like to start with a sort of guided visualization. Mostly I want you to experience a couple of concepts I'm going to introduce later in this talk. And I have to assume that, since you've come to a lecture on mysticism, you're OK with that. I'd like to make clear that I created this practice over time to help me see beyond the embodied person I'm encountering. I'm not trying to get you to believe that this is anyone's reality but my own. What I'm about to reveal to you is simply my method for seeing myself as beyond skin, bones, and ego personality, so that I can see others beyond theirs. Ready?

OK, just settle in your chair and close your eyes. Relax and let go of anything you might still be fretting about this morning. Concentrate on just being still. Rest your hands comfortably in your lap; take some slow, deep breaths and imagine the oxygen lighting up arterials as it travels down to the tips of your toes. ...
... Be aware of yourself as you sit in your place. ... Feel your arms and legs as they touch the chair, the soles of your feet as they rest on the ground. ... Now move your perception slightly backward and upward, so you can see yourself as if from the

outside. ... We'll call this outer vision self-awareness. ... From that place, draw an imaginary ribbon of light to encircle your whole body, from the top of your head, down along your neck, shoulders, arms, legs, under your feet, and up the other side to complete the circle at the top of your head. ... We'll call this the halo of consciousness. ... Now change the focus of your breath so the oxygen is breathing light and energy into this halo. ... With each inhalation, the halo enlarges a little bit. ... Think of an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The virgin is the central feature, but she has a halo of light around her. ... I like to think we all have this halo of light—every person on earth, not just the saints—and that it's our connection to the divine.

Now open your eyes and return to the room. We'll revisit those images later.

I'm fairly sure that all of you have something you've heard or seen—or learned about—that you can't quit thinking about. Mine is Aristotle's *Physics*. The first time I read it, I was moved by his earnest, almost innocent, attempt to understand and define basic physical concepts. Most of us don't really even *think* about concepts like place, time, void, or movement. The two concepts that caught my attention years ago, and have provided a bone to chew ever since, were Aristotle's ideas about time and place. Specifically how he thought about the meaning of 'now,' and how he tried to come to an understanding of 'place.' For now, we'll just focus on Place.

Aristotle starts talking about place by saying, kind of charmingly,
quote:

“...the idea that existing things exist *somewhere* is universally accepted. ... But what is place? The question is beset with difficulties.”

He says that there IS such a thing as place, but that place also has a certain *power*.

Place has a certain power? To me, that means it's dynamic and movable, not stationary.

Recently reading this again, I saw it in a new light. I started thinking about people who are *in* their place...and about those who are *not* in their place. In this era of mass migration, people have become so desperate that they're willing to uproot their families and leave the place of their birth to find another place that's, hopefully, more benign. Migrants may be hundreds, even thousands, of miles from their homelands.

But if you think about it, they are still in their place.

The way I see it, their place isn't their country, or even their body, but the space their body occupies. No one can take their place. Someone can shove them aside or put out the straight arm and say, "You have to stop here and you can't come over this line," but they cannot take their place. Their *place* goes with them wherever *they* go. The only

way one person can take another's place is to kill them, and then remove their body, leaving a void. Aristotle says that ...

“...*void* is probably *place* deprived of *body*.”

Let's do a little experiment. Everyone please look at me. Each one of you is occupying a different place. No two seats overlap in any way. And because of those different places you're occupying, each one of you has a different perspective of me – not a wrong or a right perspective, just a different one. It's all relative, right? Relative to where you're sitting – and I'm standing. Now, if I step a foot or two to my left – your right – you each have a new perspective on me. So as I move, even though you're stationary, both our perspectives change...yours of me, and mine of you.

That's *one* of the powers of place. We're seeing each other relative to our own position, but our own *place* has not changed. It *can't* change. When I step a foot or two to my left, I am taking my place with me. Now my place is over here. And when I step back into my original position, I'm bringing my place back to where it was previously. My place is not behind the lectern, or over there. My place is with me – wherever I go. Just as your place is with you, wherever *you* go.

Aristotle says ...

“... every perceptible body is in place.”

Doesn't that just suggest an orderliness to you? It means that, like the proverb states, every person (and every animal, fish, tree, rock, etc.) has a place. They're not just a body or an object to be stopped or chased or cut down, but beings in their places. For some, it's a palace – or one of several palaces, or hotels, golf clubs, or government housing on Pennsylvania Avenue. Others may have only one small home, with or without a yard. Still others have only a place in a caravan of migrating humanity, all with hope in their hearts that they will find welcome at their destination.

But despite their movement, they *still* have a place. And their place is wherever *they* are. These migrants move northward at five or ten miles a day, but they are still – each one – in their place, and their place is moving in tandem with others, all of whom are seeking a safer, better place to live their lives. Otherwise they would not have abandoned their country, their place of origin, their ancestry. Instead of thinking about what they will gain from being in the United States, let's think of the sacrifice they've made to get here.

Even in movement, people need a place (and must be assured a place) to *be* while they're in transit. This guarantees them a sense of security and safety on their journey and in their life, which creates calm for everyone and even generates a sense of freedom, probably Americans' highest value.

Consider traffic: If we didn't respect each other's right to "be" in their place, even when that place is in motion, you'd have nonstop car crashes on the road, which would most likely lead to road rage, and someone would be armed, because it's their *right*, and others would get killed, which means they'd be deprived forever of their place. And the person who did the shooting would go to jail, severely limiting *his own* freedom. Simple politeness is key here. You respect my right to be on the road, and I'll respect yours.

That privilege of place – or the right to the space that my body occupies – goes with me *wherever* I go. So by analogy, in a caravan of thousands of Hondurans and Guatemalans, for example, migrating north through Mexico toward the United States, each of them are bringing their place along with them. They are constantly in their place, and their place is also on the move. But it is still _____ (their place).

What if we treated this as reality, instead of just a thought experiment? Aristotle said, *quote*:

“...the most common and most fundamental kind of change is change of place, which is known as movement.” (78)

How would we treat a few thousand migrants who walked in a column all the way from Central America to the border between Mexico and the United States to escape violence and poverty in their country, knowing how heartbreaking it would be for us to leave the

land of *our* birth? Would we put our hand in their face and say, “Go back. You don’t belong here. You have no place here”? If we did,

we'd be wrong. Because of course they have a place here. The proof is right there in front of us. They have brought their place with them, all these 2,000-plus miles.

When you look at place in this way, there's no such thing as a border. A border is only the contrived ego statement of a nation, and it delineates how that nation feels about being more privileged than those who were born in another nation. That's why some people desperately want to build a wall – because a wall protects privilege and makes it that much harder to get through to the side of opportunity. But what's up with people who intentionally try to keep others from enjoying the freedom and opportunity that *they themselves* take for granted, simply because they were born on the enviable side of an invisible line? How can they talk about this amongst themselves without feeling deeply ashamed of their selfishness?

Talk about a trade imbalance...we could be exporting freedom, opportunity, and security, but we hoard it for ourselves, which makes it toxic. And we create crises at the border. But the only real crisis is that poor people are threatening our privilege: tired, poor huddled masses **yearning** to breathe free are scaring the hell out of us because our president keeps telling us we *should* be scared.

A place for everything and everything in its place. Just thinking those words, especially when trying to organize a junk drawer, settles the

mind into its own feeling of orderliness, of calm, even of reverence for each individual item – because it's in its place. It belongs.

My gosh. How different things would be if we thought of every person that way. Not just the people we know who are in our same income and educational level, who are the same race and ethnicity as we are. And not that they should be put in their place or should stay in their place, but that they ought to be allowed to find the habitat that best suits the place that is *naturally* theirs as human citizens of the Earth? And that everyone around them ought to give them the proper respect and accord to allow them to move safely and always feel that there is a place for them. It should be a fundamental human right. ... Freedom of movement.

This sounds radical and maybe even dangerous. But we do it every time we interact with other humans: whenever we walk down a sidewalk with pedestrians traveling in both directions; when we shop in a grocery store or any store with other customers and with clerks and store employees. We recognize each person as someone who has a place. Sure, another customer can step in front of you in, say, the produce department, to grab the most perfectly ripe avocado in the bin, but that's definitely the exception. In fact, I'm an inveterate shopper of avocados, and I can't remember it *ever* happening! A driver can cut you off in traffic, but they haven't literally cut you off: It means that they have not accepted and respected your right of

place. It's indecent to treat someone as if they don't exist. It isn't the close call that makes us angry. It's the disrespect.

For the most part, though, people abide by the laws of traffic. The majority of people also abide by the unwritten rules of respect, and the natural laws of physics. One-on-one, individuals are pretty good at being cordial and recognizing each other's right to be in their place and to sometimes share that space with another. Think of the self-imposed choreography of Taos drivers, who allow others to enter the chain of traffic in a variety of ways, through flashing headlights, a wave of the hand, or simply by slowing to create space. This attitude of generosity and space-making signals the decency of the people who live here. Instead of our saying, "Well, that's the way people *ought* to behave," we should be saying, "This is a miracle – animals moving on the land as coordinated and considerate beings."

Usually, the rights of movement in the public sphere are conferred through the primacy of first arrival. A good example in traffic is the four-way stop. Even little kids know this natural law when they say, "I was here first!" They understand this instinctively. And if you're testing the firmness of that avocado and a stranger comes up and reaches under your arm to get at the avocado right next to the one you're testing, you will be offended by their encroaching on your space, which is rightly looked upon as an act of rudeness.

This usurpation of place almost never happens in daily life though. You're more likely to notice if you're first to arrive at that scenario

that someone else needs to sample the avocados, too, and you will either hurry up and finish or, if you need more time, you'll signal by scooting over, or through body language, or even eye contact, that you are aware of their presence and are willing to share that space. If you signal a little more consciously, say by looking them in the eye, you can access a state of transformation – not just for you but for the other person. You regard that person – even for a second or two – and silently acknowledge that they have a place. You willingly relinquish the primacy of your position. Even though you were first to arrive, you say, in essence, “That’s OK. I can see that you are a person who has a place here and who is respectful. Feel free to share this space with me. We can both work *around* each other.” This, I would say, describes grace, bestowed by and on regular people every day, whether they’re deserving or not.

If every person were accorded that respect for their place in the world, it would not only reassure each person that they belonged, but it would transform every person involved in the interaction. If we treated all people with a kind of gentle acquiescence, which could be translated to “polite acceptance of their presence,” it would change the world. Governments would quit oppressing their citizens, because freedom of movement and be-ing would be the highest *natural* law of any land. And protecting this right, as a primary mission of leadership, would feel noble and less terrifying to those who were trying to maintain order. People could cross borders in freedom. Fear alone is at the root of stopping them. Fear of the

unknown, fear of others who do not look, think, or speak like us – others who don't share our history. But that doesn't make them inherently dangerous. The danger is in our minds. But it's through relationship that fear and danger dissolve. Respect and kindness act like solvents on both.

Each person alive on Earth can only take one place – their place. So why are some people allowed to occupy so much space for their one place? There was a time when private property wasn't even a concept; but now, those who have accumulated great wealth can afford huge amounts of space in which they can feel safe from encroachment by others who are not only deemed less worthy but treated as if they *were* less worthy. Yet these people – whose worth is measured in dollars – these people have just one place. And when they die, they take their place with them, at least metaphysically. And that's ALL they take with them.

The very wealthy aim to protect their place even in death – and long after they are able to occupy it. So they have children to “take” their place. But these children have not earned that place. And besides, the parent does them a great disservice by not allowing them to find their own place in the world. It can only be greed, or fear, or vanity that makes one man feel the need to accumulate so much wealth and space to surround his place. As Epictetus wrote in his classic manual on virtue, happiness, and effectiveness – *The Art of Living* – “Through vigilance, we can forestall the tendency to excess. Your possessions

should be proportionate to the needs of your body, just as the shoe should fit the foot” (p. 67).

Holding more private property than is rationally needed for human comfort and a sense of security defies the laws of nature and obstructs the natural flow. The deeper one’s sense of personal worthlessness or insecurity, the greater the need to create a sizeable footprint of visibility and safety, whether through accumulating wealth and property or by building Ozymandias-type monuments to one’s ego. But no matter how inflated a man’s sense of self-worth, his “place” is no bigger, better, or more expansive than anyone else’s. It bears repeating: When he dies, he takes *his* place with him, too, just like the poorest immigrant.

And here’s the reference to that guided visualization. Aristotle says that place is not a vessel that happens to be holding a body. So why do I say that people are *in* their place? Their body is a vessel, certainly, but there is also what I’ve come to think of as that halo of consciousness surrounding their body – our bodies. Remember that you imagined it as an illuminated outline around your body that we can think of as the vessel of consciousness that carries us from our first memories to the end of our days with the knowledge that we are still the same person at eighty as we were at eight – even though biologically and cellularly, we’re not.

So place is a property of physics, but it’s not a physical property. I would say it’s more a meta-physical property. We can’t trade our

halos of consciousness with others any more than we can trade places with them. But we can make a practice out of seeing others – all others – as living inside a beautiful, glowing halo of consciousness. We all have a connection to the divine, even the worst among us, so we all have these halos of consciousness, and paradoxically, they are best activated when we recognize them in others. When we acknowledge that consciousness in *others*, it enlarges our own.

Eckhart Tolle, in *Stillness Speaks*, says, *quote*: “Attention is primordial intelligence, consciousness itself. ... It joins the perceiver and the perceived in a unifying field of awareness. It is the healer of separation.” *Close quote*.

Seeing people as not just bodies on the planet at the same time you are, but rather as people in their place, dignifies them and gives them a kind of gravitas. Each person deserves to be acknowledged as worthy, simply *because* they are in their place. If we thought of that as a fundamental human right, not a citizen’s right, we would have to admit that the U.S. – and most countries – have a pretty abysmal human-rights record. To look away from someone, to overlook their presence, is almost as hurtful as denying them their freedom of movement. The most loving thing we can do for another is to dignify their presence by witnessing it with kind acceptance.

This is a radical spiritual practice, the practical application of the Buddhist philosophy of loving kindness. It’s a compassion practice that gives us a direct method of feeling more compassionate. It’s the

manifestation of the New Testament verse “God Is Love.” God and love in this practice are synonymous. God is not an old man with a long white beard – resting in a throne on a cloud somewhere in the sky – who embodies love. No, God is love ... itself ... and love is the god of all things large and small. To adopt this as a spiritual practice is effortless; it costs us nothing to think of every human being as possessing a kind of nobility. When we feel this way, it’s easy to look at all others as if they matter, *because they do*. They are formed of matter, and each has a spirit. Just witnessing them is a loving act. Witness *is* a form of love.

Love is light, and each of us has the potential to be a charged particle of that light. In some of us the light may feel extinguished (it’s not; it’s just kindling); in others it’s active and alive and moving through the world lighting up everything in its path. Each one of us can be that light, can activate those particles just by allowing people to be who they are. It’s an alchemical process: you let them be who they are and suddenly, you’re both transformed.

If we loved one another, it would be very hard to hurt one another. But telling someone to love a stranger or their enemy is a waste of time, because too many of us don’t even love our friends and families, not to mention ourselves. A more achievable practice is to witness one another with kindness. To acknowledge their presence as gently as possible. To respect them for doing a job only *they* can do, and THAT is to be in their place... When we bring our own agitation

to stillness and just witness, that's how we learn to love. It's easier than we think.

You don't have to go to the border, or to Syria, or Libya to try out these concepts and see how mystical it is to put them into practice. A mystical experience, according to lexicographers, involves or has "the nature of a direct subjective communion with God or ultimate reality." Every time we personally witness someone and acknowledge them as exactly who they are and where they need to be to fulfill their destiny, there is the potential for a mystical experience. Thomas Merton said, "When you see God in everyone, then they see God in you." Mother Theresa spoke of those she took care of, the desperately ill and poor, as God in all his troubling disguises.

No matter how troubling their disguise, they are on the same journey as you and me – the one from birth to death. They've just chosen a different path – perhaps a more challenging one than ours, but that's to be admired.

On the 50th anniversary of Robert Kennedy's assassination, I listened to NPR's Story Corps. Juan Romero, the busboy who cradled Kennedy's head after he was shot, said he'd met the senator and presidential candidate earlier that day, when he brought breakfast to Kennedy's hotel room in Los Angeles. *Quote*: "You could tell he was looking at you. He's not looking *through* you. He's taking you into account. I felt 10 feet tall." *Close quote*. Fifty years later, Juan Romero still felt the power of simply being acknowledged. Not because

Kennedy was famous but because it was apparent that he regarded all human beings as worthy.

We can do that for everyone we meet. There are plenty of occasions to witness another's place right here in Taos – right in this room! Test it on your spouse or partner, your closest friends, strangers doing business, the person at the street corner selling copies of *The Taos News* – and think of it as *they* who are giving *you* the opportunity to put these values into practice. See everyone, knowing that they are in their place. And trust that they are doing the best they can.

In this era of mass migration, the kindest thing to do for those whose places are in transition is to create a welcoming space for them to feel safe and accepted in their place, which by now we can see is the equivalent of our own. No better but no worse. If we aren't in a position to create physical space for them, we can at least create space in our hearts and minds. That alone will make a difference.