What it means to “hold space” for people, plus eight tips on how to do it well  
By Heather Plett on March 11, 2015  
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When my mom was dying, my siblings and I gathered to be with her in her final days. None of us knew anything about supporting someone in her transition out of this life into the next, but we were pretty sure we wanted to keep her at home, so we did.

While we supported mom, we were, in turn, supported by a gifted palliative care nurse, Ann, who came every few days to care for mom and to talk to us about what we could expect in the coming days. She taught us how to inject Mom with morphine when she became restless, she offered to do the difficult tasks (like giving Mom a bath), and she gave us only as much information as we needed about what to do with Mom’s body after her spirit had passed.

“Take your time,” she said. “You don’t need to call the funeral home until you’re ready. Gather the people who will want to say their final farewells. Sit with your mom as long as you need to. When you’re ready, call and they will come to pick her up.”

Ann gave us an incredible gift in those final days. Though it was an excruciating week, we knew that we were being held by someone who was only a phone call away.

In the two years since then, I’ve often thought about Ann and the important role she played in our lives. She was much more than what can fit in the title of “palliative care nurse”. She was facilitator, coach, and guide. By offering gentle, nonjudgmental support and guidance, she helped us walk one of the most difficult journeys of our lives.

The work that Ann did can be defined by a term that’s become common in some of the circles in which I work. She was holding space for us.

What does it mean to hold space for someone else? It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they’re on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control. Sometimes we find ourselves holding space for people while they hold space for others. In our situation, for example, Ann was holding space for us while we held space for Mom. Though I know nothing about her support system, I suspect that there are others holding space for Ann as she does this challenging and meaningful work. It’s virtually impossible to be a strong space holder unless we have others who will hold space for us. Even the strongest leaders, coaches, nurses, etc., need to know that there are some people with whom they can be vulnerable and weak without fear of being judged.

In my own roles as teacher, facilitator, coach, mother, wife, and friend, etc., I do my best to hold space for other people in the same way that Ann modeled it for me and my siblings. It’s not always easy, because I have a very human tendency to want to fix people, give them advice, or judge them for not being further along the path than they are, but I keep trying because I know that it’s important. At the same time, there are people in my life that I trust to hold space for me.

To truly support people in their own growth, transformation, grief, etc., we can’t do it by taking their power away (ie. trying to fix their problems), shaming them (ie. implying that they should know more than they do), or overwhelming them (ie. giving them more information than they’re ready for). We have to be prepared to step to the side so that they can make their own choices, offer them unconditional love and support, give gentle guidance when it’s needed, and make them feel safe even when they make mistakes.
Holding space is not something that’s exclusive to facilitators, coaches, or palliative care nurses. It is something that ALL of us can do for each other – for our partners, children, friends, neighbours, and even strangers who strike up conversations as we’re riding the bus to work.

Here are the lessons I’ve learned from Ann and others who have held space for me.

1. **Give people permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom.** When we were supporting Mom in her final days, we had no experience to rely on, and yet, intuitively, we knew what was needed. We knew how to carry her shrinking body to the washroom, we knew how to sit and sing hymns to her, and we knew how to love her. We even knew when it was time to inject the medication that would help ease her pain. In a very gentle way, Ann let us know that we didn’t need to do things according to some arbitrary health care protocol – we simply needed to trust our intuition and accumulated wisdom from the many years we’d loved Mom.

2. **Give people only as much information as they can handle.** Ann gave us some simple instructions and left us with a few handouts, but did not overwhelm us with far more than we could process in our tender time of grief. Too much information would have left us feeling incompetent and unworthy.

3. **Don’t take their power away.** When we take decision-making power out of people’s hands, we leave them feeling useless and incompetent. There may be some times when we need to step in and make hard decisions for other people (ie. when they’re dealing with an addiction and an intervention feels like the only thing that will save them), but in almost every other case, people need the autonomy to make their own choices (even our children). Ann knew that we needed to feel empowered in making decisions on our Mom’s behalf, and so she offered support but never tried to direct or control us.

4. **Keep your own ego out of it.** This is a big one. We all get caught in that trap now and then – when we begin to believe that someone else’s success is dependent on our intervention, or when we think that their failure reflects poorly on us, or when we’re convinced that whatever emotions they choose to unload on us are about us instead of them. It’s a trap I’ve occasionally found myself slipping into when I teach. I can become more concerned about my own success (Do the students like me? Do their marks reflect on my ability to teach? Etc.) than about the success of my students. But that doesn’t serve anyone – not even me. To truly support their growth, I need to keep my ego out of it and create the space where they have the opportunity to grow and learn.

5. **Make them feel safe enough to fail.** When people are learning, growing, or going through grief or transition, they are bound to make some mistakes along the way. When we, as their space holders, withhold judgement and shame, we offer them the opportunity to reach inside themselves to find the courage to take risks and the resilience to keep going even when they fail. When we let them know that failure is simply a part of the journey and not the end of the world, they’ll spend less time beating themselves up for it and more time learning from their mistakes.

6. **Give guidance and help with humility and thoughtfulness.** A wise space holder knows when to withhold guidance (ie. when it makes a person feel foolish and inadequate) and when to offer it gently (ie. when a person asks for it or is too lost to know what to ask for). Though Ann did not take our power or autonomy away, she did offer to come and give Mom baths and do some of the more challenging parts of caregiving. This was a relief to us, as we had no practice at it and didn’t want to place Mom in a position that might make her feel shame (ie. having her children see her naked). This is a careful
dance that we all must do when we hold space for other people. Recognizing the areas in which they feel most vulnerable and incapable and offering the right kind of help without shaming them takes practice and humility.

7. **Create a container for complex emotions, fear, trauma, etc.** When people feel that they are held in a deeper way than they are used to, they feel safe enough to allow complex emotions to surface that might normally remain hidden. Someone who is practiced at **holding space** knows that this can happen and will be prepared to hold it in a gentle, supportive, and nonjudgmental way. In The Circle Way, we talk about “holding the rim” for people. The circle becomes the space where people feel safe enough to fall apart without fearing that this will leave them permanently broken or that they will be shamed by others in the room. Someone is always there to offer strength and courage. This is not easy work, and it is work that I continue to learn about as I host increasingly more challenging conversations. We cannot do it if we are overly emotional ourselves, if we haven’t done the hard work of looking into our own shadow, or if we don’t trust the people we are holding space for. In Ann’s case, she did this by showing up with tenderness, compassion, and confidence. If she had shown up in a way that didn’t offer us assurance that she could handle difficult situations or that she was afraid of death, we wouldn’t have been able to trust her as we did.

8. **Allow them to make different decisions and to have different experiences than you would.** Holding space is about respecting each person’s differences and recognizing that those differences may lead to them making choices that we would not make. Sometimes, for example, they make choices based on cultural norms that we can’t understand from within our own experience. When we hold space, we release control and we honour differences.

This showed up, for example, in the way that Ann supported us in making decisions about what to do with Mom’s body after her spirit was no longer housed there. If there had been some ritual that we felt we needed to conduct before releasing her body, we were free to do that in the privacy of Mom’s home.

**Holding space** is not something that we can master overnight, or that can be adequately addressed in a list of tips like the ones I’ve just given. It’s a complex practice that evolves as we practice it, and it is unique to each person and each situation. It is my intention to be a life-long learning in what it means to hold space for other people, so if you have experience that’s different than mine and want to add anything to this post, please add that in the comments or send me a message.

**Note: I have written a follow-up piece on how to hold space for yourself first.**
Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch.

— Parker Palmer, Let Your Life Speak

Wow. What an amazing week it has been! A week ago, I shared my post about what it means to hold space for people and it has been spreading like wildfire. Suddenly, tens of thousands of people were visiting my website, thousands were signing on to my newsletter and sharing it on social media, and hundreds were commenting and sending emails. In the end, the post received so much attention that my website was taken down by the hosting company and wasn’t revived for 24 hours (when I finally switched to another host).

It has been humbling and gratifying, and a little overwhelming. I learned the hard way where the inefficiencies are in my website and business, and now I’m doing the work of trying to make sure I’m well supported by people who know how to help me. I find it rather synchronistic that a post about holding space has reminded me how I need to allow others to hold space for me instead of trying to do it all on my own!

This desire to hold space well for other people is vast and diverse.

I have heard from the most fascinating range of people about how this post is being circulated and used. It’s showing up in home schooling forums, palliative and hospice care circles, art communities, spiritual retreat centres, universities, alcoholics anonymous groups, psychotherapists’ offices, etc. The most interesting place I heard about it being shared was within the US Marines. It is also touching the lives of people supporting their parents, children, spouses and friends through difficult times.

The lesson in this is that no matter who or where you are, you can do the beautiful and important work of holding space for other people. There are so many of us who are making this a priority in our lives that I feel hopeful that this world is finally swinging like a pendulum away from a place of isolation and individualism to a place of deeper connection and love. Isn’t that a beautiful idea?

Recently, I participated in an online course on “Leading from the Future as it Emerges: From Ego-system to Eco-system” and the underlying premise of the course was that we need to find a way to make deeper connections with ourselves, others, and the earth so that we bring about a paradigm shift and stop this crash course we’re on. There were more than 25,000 from around the world participating in the course. That’s a LOT of people who share a common passion for changing the ways in which we interact and make decisions. I walked away feeling increasingly hopeful that I am part of a swelling tide of change. The response to my blog post has further reinforced that hopeful feeling.

We are doing the best we can to live in love and community.

We are not perfect, and sometimes we still make selfish decisions, but we are doing our best. Thank you for being part of the change.

The other thing that struck me as I read through all of the comments, emails, etc., is that, while all of you are all responding from a place of generosity and openheartedness, wanting to learn more about holding space for others, you also need to be given permission and encouragement to hold space for yourselves.

This is really important. If we don’t care for ourselves well in this work, we’ll suffer burnout, and risk becoming cynical and/or ineffective.

PLEASE take the time to hold space for yourself so that you can hold space for others.

It is not selfish to focus on yourself. In fact, it’s an act of generosity and commitment to make sure that you are at your best when you support others. They
will get much more effective, meaningful, and openhearted support from you if you are healthy and strong.

In the Art of Hosting work that I do and teach, we talk about “hosting ourselves first”. What does it mean to “host myself first”? It means, simply, that anything I am prepared to encounter once I walk into a room, I need to be prepared to encounter and host in myself first. In order to prepare myself for conflict, frustration, ego, fear, anger, weariness, envy, injustice, etc., I need to sit with myself, look into my own heart, bear witness to what I see there, and address it in whatever way I need to before I can do it for others. I can’t hide any of that stuff in the shadows, because what is hidden there tends to come out in ways I don’t want it to when I am under stress.

AND just as I am prepared to offer compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and resolution to anything that shows up in the room, I need to offer it to myself first. Only when I am present for myself and compassionate with myself will I be prepared to host with strength and courage.

In other words, all of those points that I made about how to hold space for others can and should be applied to yourself first. Give yourself permission to trust your own intuition. Give yourself only as much information as you can handle. Don’t let anyone take your power away. Keep your ego out of it. Make yourself feel safe enough to fail. Give guidance and help to yourself with humility and thoughtfulness. Create your own container for complex emotions, fears, trauma, etc. And allow yourself to make decisions that are different from what other people would make.

This isn’t necessarily easy, when you’re doing the often stressful and time-consuming work of holding space for others, but it is imperative. Here are some other tips on how to hold space for yourself.

1. Learn when to walk away. You can’t serve other people well when your energy is depleted. Even if you can only leave the hospital room of your loved one for short periods of time, or you’re a single mom who doesn’t have much of a support system for caring from your kids, it is imperative that you find times when you can walk away from the place where you are needed most to take deep breaths, walk in nature, go for a swim, or simply sit and stare at the sunset. Replenish yourself so that you can return without bitterness. Whenever you can, take a longer break (a week at a retreat does wonders).

2. Let the tears flow. When the only thing you can do is cry, that’s often the best thing you can do. Let the tears wash away the accumulated ick in your soul. A social worker once told me that “tears are the window-washer of the soul” and she was right. They help to clear your vision so that you can see better and move forward more successfully. When my husband was in the psych ward a few years ago, and I still had to maintain some semblance of normalcy for my children, I spent many, many hours weeping as I drove from the hospital to the soccer field and back again. Releasing those tears when I was alone or with close friends allowed me to be strong for the people who needed me most.

3. Let others hold space for you. You can’t do this work alone and you’re not meant to. We are all meant to be communal people, showing up for each other in reciprocal ways. As I mentioned in my original post about holding space, we were able to hold space for my mom in her dying because others (like Anne, the palliative care nurse) were holding space for us. Many others were stopping to visit, bringing food, etc. We would have been much less able to walk that path with Mom if we hadn’t known there was a strong container in which we were being held.

4. Practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is simply “paying attention to your attention”. In mindfulness meditation, you are taught that, instead of trying to stop the thoughts, you should simply notice them and let them pass. You don’t need to sit on a meditation cushion to practice mindfulness – simply pay attention
to what emotions and thoughts are showing up, and when they come, wish them well and send them on their way. Are you angry? Notice the anger, name it anger, ask yourself whether there is any value in holding onto this anger, and then let it pass. Frustrated? Notice, name, inquire, and then let it pass.

5. **Find sources of inspiration.** There are many, many writers, artists, musicians, etc. whose wisdom can help you hold space for yourself. When I was nearing a nervous breakdown earlier this week because of the intensity of my post going viral, I went to a Martyn Joseph concert (my favourite musician), and when he started to sing “*I need you brave, I want you brave, I need you strong to sing along, You are so beautiful, and I’m not wrong*”, I was sure he was singing directly to me. (Watch it on Youtube.) That evening of music shifted the way I felt about what was going on and I was able to walk back into my work with courage and strength. Later in the week, when my site crashed and I was having trouble bringing it back to life, I went to sit in the poetry section of my favourite bookstore and read Billy Collins.

6. **Let other people live their own stories.** You are not in charge of the world. You are only in charge of *yourself* and your own behaviours, thoughts, emotions, etc. Often when you are a caregiver, you’ll find yourself the target of other people’s frustration, anger, fear, etc. REMEMBER – that’s THEIR story, not yours. Just because they yell at you doesn’t mean you’re doing it wrong. Take a deep breath, say to yourself “I am not responsible for their emotion, I am only responsible for how I respond”, and then let it go. When you’re feeling wounded by what they’re projecting on you, return to the points above and walk away, practice mindfulness, and let others hold space for you.

7. **Find a creative outlet for processing what you’re experiencing.** Write in a journal, paint, dance, bake, play the guitar – do whatever replenishes your soul. Few things are as healing as time spent in creative practice. One of my favourite things to do is something I call *Mandala Journaling*, where I bring both my words and my wordlessness to the circle. You can learn to do it yourself in *Mandala Discovery: 30 days of self-discovery through mandala journaling*.

I hope that you will find the time this week to hold space for yourself. Your work is important, and the world needs more generous and open hearts who are healthy and strong enough to serve well. Blessings to you.