

Betweenity
September & October 2023

How often do I stand at the threshold which separates the intimacy and safety of my house from the outdoors full of racing cars, strange barking dogs, purchases to make in stores whose aisles are crowded with strangers? How often do I teeter on that threshold, which becomes a wall, forcing a commitment to stay on one side or venture to the other? Here, at this between point, I must retreat to the familiar or quickly ensure I have my survival kit—wallet, debit card, and keys. I am lucky. To be honest, both worlds are familiar, and my choice is inconsequential.

When I was an undergraduate at a small liberal arts college for women, I gathered with my friends to talk of the many cultural changes and, a world away, the Vietnam War. Many of the young men of my high school graduating class were fighting there. My friends and I were enticed to raise our own voices in protest, and, finding our opportunity on a warm day, we climbed into a car owned by the oldest among us—only seniors could bring their cars to campus—and headed north on the interstate to the streets of Washington, D.C. This was the real thing. We left behind the soap opera “Dark Shadows” and the wild dancing in the dorm halls after Quiet Study Time. We quickly found ourselves in the midst of serious protest. Soon, the shout bounced from one tight group to another and found its way to us. Tear gas!

Today, I could not describe the throng of committed activists calling for peace. I could not describe the buildings with which I was normally familiar. I cannot remember which friends were scrunched into the car as we headed to the Nation’s capital. I don’t remember the car, except that it was a large boat of a vehicle. What I do distinctly remember is the slope of the sidewalk, its gray grain of concrete, my feet firmly planted when I stopped running. Behind me, a sharp turn to the right, were the crowds and the tear gas, the acrid smell, the angry, nearly defeated young people who hated what the military was doing to their generation. Ahead of me, small forests of trees to the south, and further, Virginia, and my college. Just out of the city, a placid, nearly bucolic setting.

What is most profound is that I can still feel my hesitancy. I can still feel, because I felt trapped, the sudden narrowness of what had just been a wide city sidewalk. My commitment and convictions went one way. My fear and immaturity went another. I was between what I wanted to be...and what I wanted to be. Had the space been a tightrope, I might have felt more freedom. But there I was, my flat little feet planted on a wide D.C. sidewalk and I feeling as if I might fall any minute from the narrow threshold into a land where I did not want to be. Or did I? And then it became apparent. Two worlds railed against each other, and I had a choice.

According to the delightful cup of morning wordism that greets this logophile on her computer, via wsmith@wordsmith.org, there exists a word for “the state of lying in the interval separating two conditions, qualities, extremes, etc.” The word itself is to be savored daily, when the calmness of the kitchen at dawn begins its blend into the chaotic day that lies ahead. The word, according to Wordsmith.org “was coined by the 18th century novelist, historian, man of letters, and politician Horace Walpole who also gave us “serendipity”. The word is “betweenity.”

Breakfast and the daily schedule. Decline and creeping in. Note as well the betweenity of seasons, when Winter is melting and declining, and fragile Spring creeps forward, slowly, carefully, so as not to destroy any too-early blooms. I think as well of the ocean waves, just as the high and powerful crest races forward and then crashes into mere water on the sand.

And what of the house that was sold, emptied, and scrubbed clean for the next tenants? Picking up my purse by the door, looking around slowly, carefully, I was still the owner. I held in my heart the memories, could hear my then tiny children's giddy laughter as they, still in jammies, thumped on their bottoms down the carpeted steps to French toast and cartoons. The house came alive again in that memory of laughter. Then, I grasped the doorknob, and for just a moment, I was in the betweenity of a home once filled and a home to be filled. Two moments, emptiness and fullness. I stood in the doorway, looked back, looked outward, took a step and closed the door behind me. Betweenity might be impossible to sustain.

In that betweenity, though, there may be the calm that comes with lingering before a choice is made. There may be delight in declining acceptance and familiarity and creeping into the familiar. There may be strength, wonder, and wisdom in stepping forward and reaching back, in embracing both sides of betweenity.

According to legend, the fifth-century Irish saint, Brigid, "was born just before sunrise, in the twilight of early morning, in that time governed neither by the sun's light nor the moon's light, but by the two lights, the twi-light." The legend tells that Brigid's mother "gave birth to her neither within the house nor outside, but at the threshold of the dwelling". According to John Philip Newell, who wrote *Sacred Earth Sacred Soul*, from whom these beautiful, quoted words come, Brigid's birth signaled that she would always be "associated with the meeting place between opposites, the night and the day, the sun and the moon, the within and the without. ... She stands at the doorway or meeting place between the so-called opposite dimensions of life, which have been torn apart from each other."

Betweenity! Allowing, in the liminal space, the view of both sides. Allowing the invitation of transitions and the mending of the torn and shattered opposite edges. Allowing common ground to take seed, and difference to be revered. Allowing, perhaps, peace. It is time to embrace betweenity.