

I just got back from visiting friends for a couple wonderful days away. I continue to be thankful for a Thanksgivings break—even a short one. I'm especially pleased I had a good time because it was hell getting there on Wednesday. Rumor has it, some of you may have had a difficult time getting ready for the big day as well. How many of you had to change plans because of the weather?

A place at the table seems an apt metaphor for inclusion, generosity, and acceptance. All of which I think go hand in hand with the spirit of Thanksgiving. The question is, who's at the table? Who do we invite to the table, who are we willing to host, serve, feed and care for?

For some of us, there's only room at the table for family---even so, often the same questions can be asked...who gets invited, who feels welcomed and how do we treat those we see as odd or those with whom we're not on the best of terms? Who gets excluded or otherwise shunned? These things happen in the best of families.

Was your thanksgiving holiday an example of birds of a feather or was it a cacophony of difference? It's said that variety is the spice of life. Was your holiday sufficiently spicy or was it bland by commonality, tradition or expectations of how it's supposed to be? While it's fresh in your minds, you might want to give some thought to how you could make your Thanksgiving holiday more enjoyable, more enriching, more inviting.

I know I've told you that Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. It goes back to when I was a child. We always had lots of people around on Thanksgiving. Mostly because we had a large family, but also because friends were invited...it was almost an open house, with people coming and going.

There was always excitement on Thanksgiving. The kids could be playing games in one place while people were in conversation elsewhere. There was peeling, cutting and wonderful smells in the kitchen. And people got spiffy for the day, it was a festive occurrence.

That was the beginning of my Thanksgiving tradition. That's the way I learned to "do" Thanksgiving and it carries over to this day. Its become my notion of "how it's supposed to be". And it was that way for Thanksgiving this year...even though I wasn't home. Well I was almost home, I was at my best friend's house—a friend for almost thirty years.

My friend is an engineer turned Feldenkrais teacher/practitioner. Also around the table were his wife, an artist and her granddaughter, a sophomore at Harvard. And their good friends, and increasingly my friend, an author and Buddhist teacher and his wife who's a professor, me and a local carpenter/contractor.

Conversation was lively and incredibly wide ranging. On some topics we just skirted around the edges, while others we dove into deeply and for elongated periods of time. Nobody seemed to feel the need to defend a position, even though everyone had opinions—there were no wallflowers at the table. I was aware of how everyone was invited/sometimes pulled into the conversations. Room was made for everyone to be included.

I found it interesting that every now an then, a few people had a need to trace how the conversation had moved from where it began to where it had arrived. Others seemed perfectly comfortable to simply have been on the conversational journey. There were very few side conversations. For the most part the group stayed in conversation together for the many hours we spent together. We enjoyed who was at the table.

The concept of a Place at the Table is a rich one for me. It has so many implications, so many applications. It's a powerful metaphor for the issue of inclusion. I think I first became captured by the concept many years ago when I read a book titled: *Romancing the Shadow: Illuminating the Dark Side of the Soul*", by Connie Zweig and Steve Wolf. It's about the psychological aspect of self referred to as our Shadow.

The Shadow is were we often find those unresolved aspects of self. They generally have to do with pains/fears we experience as a child. They are also the forbidden feelings we have, uncontrollable or destructive behaviors and our private shames. Yet, we often don't see them or are unaware of their impact. They hide in the shadows.

The book goes into great detail about the different type of issues that can reside in the shadow of our psyches and how they manifest themselves. They say that if we can illuminate what's in the shadow, befriend it, romance it into the light, we can use it's beneficial aspects.

But the part I remember best, the part that captured my imagination is the conceptual way they suggest we learn to work with that which resides in our shadow. They used the concept of a Place at the Table. They say that by paying attention to those aspects of self, with work, we can come to recognize their particular persona. Then, we can romance them and defuse their power to control our thoughts and the way we behave.

They used the example of King Arthur and the Round table. If King Arthur wanted to stay in charge of the knights, the worst thing he could do was to banish a knight to some far off region. How would he know what they were up to if they were far away and out of sight?

The authors instead say King Arthur would be wise to give them a place at the table, keep them in full view and allow them to be seen by the other knights as well. Allow them to speak and be heard. After all, they became knights because they had particular talents, capabilities, and the ability to make a difference.

So the idea of bringing our disruptive thoughts and behaviors, and our guilt ridden feelings to King Arthur's round table stuck with me. It was a powerful image. It's an image that works for so many issues, not just shadow work.

For example, our national and often our local political systems, now days, suffer badly from not allowing conflicting views to have a place at the table. Those in power have a particular frame of reference, a particular point of view that they insist is the only acceptable point of view. Anyone who deigns to have an alternative perspective is banished from the table, held at arms length away from the decision making process.

And if they don't control the decision making process, they set the table on fire and drive everyone away so no decision can be made or implemented. If only they had read the book I just spoke of, they'd see that the best approach would be to allow all the points of view to sit at the table in full view.

In that way, they would be able to hear various points of view, varied approaches and possibilities. Then and only then they would be in a position to cobble together an approach that had the greatest possibility of satisfying all in attendance, rather than deepening wounds, creating ill feelings, and mistrust.

Our country suffers greatly from so many feeling like they are not allowed a place at the table when money is being spent, when policies are being created, when laws are written, when laws are enforced.

That's the story Elizabeth Warren is telling when she says the game is rigged, that's the story many in Ferguson is telling when they say hands up, don't shoot. That's the story of the occupy movement when they talk about the 1%.

History is replete with stories of what happens when large numbers of people feel they are refused a place at the table. When people who have an awareness of their own worth and dignity are denied a place at the table, they at some point revolt. In it's extreme the term that is used is revoltion.

I'm increasingly concerned, frightened at times for the future of our country if we continue much further down the road of disenfranchising such large swaths of the citizenry. People being jailed for life for non-violent crimes; people losing the right to vote because they have served time in jail.

People feeling they are over-policed and not able to obtain justice. Stagnant wages, rising costs while those at the top of the pyramid become more and more wealthy. People increasingly seeing the electoral process being taken over by a small number of very wealthy individuals.

This all leads to people feeling they have no place at the table... which does not bode well for our future.

If only, if only those at the top, those with power-over knew more about Small Group Ministry. Yes, Small Group Ministry! Small Group Ministry has a built-in orientation for making room at the table. One of the more powerful concepts built into the small group process is called the “open chair”.

One of the operating tenants of Small Group Ministry is that there is always a chair left empty in any group. That chair is a visible symbol of inclusion. It says by its presence, there is always room for another. It says, we invite you in, we welcome you, we will make space for you.

That same notion, that same orientation, that commitment is what church should be about, or a Fellowship or any community of faith, any congregation. No church should tell anyone they are not welcomed because they are gay, divorced or lack money to put into the coffers.

A faith community is comprised of people, it is for the people. It's about the relationships between the people. Not the needs of people to feel self-important or to meet egotistical needs, but the needs of the whole person.

Let us operate on that Small Group Ministry concept of the “open chair”. Let this place be a place where the whole person can find a place at the table.

Amen