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The Empty Space

In September, I went to visit my daughter in Ohio. That drive is a long one, and I dread it, especially the very end, when I approach Columbus and its multi-lane traffic as I go 70 miles an hour trying to figure out which lane I belong in and how to mix myself into all the rest of the traffic. I was particularly anxious this time around because, although I had brought printed directions, I wanted GPS support as well, and I could not figure out how to get my phone or my ipad to interact with the technology in my car. A young friend had tried to help me out before the trip, but I was stymied on the road when things did not work as I expected them to. I was doing pretty well with my phone's audible directions until I got to the outskirts of Columbus, when I began to really need them, and no directions were being announced. When I glanced over to try to figure out why, I saw that my phone was dead—battery at 0%. It was plugged into the usb port, so I had no idea why it was totally drained, and it hardly mattered. I went by written directions until I missed an exit, and after that I got off the highway as soon as I could and began to look for a place to stop. I saw a tall sign that said Waffle House, and I figured I could get coffee and possibly access to an electrical outlet at a Waffle House—refresh myself and recharge my phone, at least enough to contact my daughter. When I pulled into the parking lot, though, it wasn't a Waffle House at all; the place appeared to be some kind of auto parts store, and it looked closed, or possibly deserted.

I was stumped. At first I decided to get back in the car and keep driving, but that required more stamina than I had in that moment. I walked to the street corner to try to figure out what that huge Waffle House sign was referring to, and then decided that if I couldn't spot the Waffle House I would just walk around until I found a public place where I could legitimately sit down and plug in my phone. I had no idea what else to do.

While I was walking to my car and then turning around to walk back to the street, a man approached me. "Do you need help?" he asked. "You look like you might be lost." I told him my dilemma and he said, "Come in. Let's look up your daughter's address." He took me into what I presume was his office in the auto parts shop, or whatever it was. He looked up my daughter's address with his google maps or something, assured me that I was very close, explained the directions as he showed me the map on his computer screen, then wrote the directions out and gave them to me. He plugged my phone in as he worked, getting me a tiny bit of a charge, enough to contact my daughter if I needed to. I thanked him over and over again, and he said calmly, "I like to do my good deeds when I can." I got in my car, drove to the corner, and began to follow the directions the man had given me. I was at my daughter's front door in less than ten minutes.

On the evening of my arrival, my daughter gave me a book that was written by a teacher she had when she was in elementary school. His name is John Hunter, he is still teaching, and he created a game that he has used with his fourth graders for decades. It's called the World Peace Game, and it has become widely known and has brought Mr. Hunter a larger audience

than he ever anticipated. Someone created a documentary about the game, Mr. Hunter has done a well-received TED talk, and he has traveled the world giving demonstrations and talks about the World Peace Game. What struck me first about this book, and about Mr. Hunter's perspective, is the state of mind that he calls the empty space. The empty space is a crucial part of the World Peace Game, and Mr. Hunter sees it as a crucial part of dealing with any crisis or situation that seems to us to be insurmountable. When I got off the highway in Columbus and pulled into the parking lot of what I mistakenly thought was a Waffle House, I was used up. I was tired, my phone, which was my main source of support, was useless, I had no idea where I was, or how to find out where I was. I did not know what to do next. I had entered the place that I would discover a name for when I started reading Mr. Hunter's book: I was in the empty space.

Before we think further about the empty space, I want to give you some background about the World Peace Game. When Mr. Hunter was my daughter's teacher decades ago, he taught in the Special Programs for Academic and Creative Excellence—SPACE—in Richmond Public Schools. My daughter's class didn't play the game, and I think he was still developing it at that time, possibly using an earlier version of it with high school kids. I do remember Mr. Hunter producing a tv show with my daughter's SPACE class in a public television studio downtown one evening. I was there with other parents observing, and we were amused by the level of frenzy in the studio. All the kids were talking at once, calling to each other, calling: "Mr. Hunter! Mr. Hunter!" three or four at a time, while he glided through the room serenely interacting with one group or another, smiling gently. In the book, he calls that "chaos at a waist-high level". I said

to him, “I would be losing my mind if I were you! How do you do this?” He kept smiling, and answered, “It’s OK...you just go with the flow.” The production of a tv show did not carry anywhere near the weight of the World Peace Game for the children, but that event early in Mr. Hunter’s career foreshadowed the sense of deep connection he had with his class. Without that connection, that trust, I don’t think the game could succeed.

As the title implies, the purpose of the World Peace Game is to give the players the opportunity to do what all the nations of the Earth have not been able to do so far: create world peace. Mr. Hunter has developed various leadership roles, some of which he assigns, some of which the children choose. There are four fictitious nations which the children name each time the game is played. One is poor, one is wealthy, there is an ethnic minority with a religious identity, various nations control various natural resources. The game’s physical dimensions are fairly large: it’s composed of a four foot square Plexiglas structure that has four levels: undersea, ground and sea, air, and outer space. The game is populated with plastic soldiers, tanks, planes, weapons, cotton clouds, and other accessories that the children can manipulate. Mr. Hunter has created fifty interrelated crises for the children to solve, so that any change in one of those fifty situations changes all of them. In order to win the World Peace Game, the children have to solve all fifty of the crises, and each nation has to have more assets at the end than it had at the beginning. Just reading about the game made me feel overwhelmed, and I’m an adult with a post graduate degree.

Mr. Hunter writes about the fact that he always feels the same anxiety that the children feel when they are overloaded with information at the beginning of the game, and he often questions his own skills as a teacher. It is painful for him to watch as the children struggle in the early stages of the game with all the complicated components. Yet he has learned over the years, for himself as well as for his students, that failure is a crucial part of the World Peace Game. It is *necessary* for the children to start out believing they have the answers and then proceeding through the discovery that the answers they thought they knew will not work. It is that process that leads to the empty space, where possibilities they had ignored or had not yet imagined can then come into the light.

The empty space is a place of contradictions. It is not comfortable to be there, especially for people like me, whose life circumstances have led us to believe that everything that *involves* us needs to be initiated, managed, and completed *by* us. In the empty space, we learn that such a conviction is simply not true, and we often have no substitute convictions to replace it. We are totally at a loss, and we do not see the way forward. On the other hand, ironically, that feeling of being at a loss can bring something like a sense of relief, at least temporarily. Along with frustration and anxiety, there comes a restful feeling, a feeling of freedom even, when we have been relieved of duty, so to speak—relieved of the requirement to fix everything, make everything turn out OK, solve all the problems. Some might call it giving up; others might call it something different: moving into another mindset, perhaps. We may be giving up something—control, certainty-- but what we're giving up may be exactly what has been keeping us stuck. When I was driving to Ohio to see my daughter, I was clinging to

the conviction that technology was the only thing that could efficiently get me to her house. I would never have had the nerve to start on that trip if my plan had been to just eliminate the technology, get to Columbus, pull off the highway, and wait for a stranger to guide my way. And yet that is exactly how I got to where I wanted to be.

My experience points to another contradiction that we find in the empty space: we simply cannot achieve any valuable endeavor, great or small, in isolation. Mr. Hunter's fourth graders learn year after year that the only way to win the World Peace Game is for all the players to cooperate with each other. They do not agree—they do not have to agree—but they do have to come up with many ways to compromise, recognize the value of needs other than their own, and give up something that they want on behalf of a less advantaged population or situation. Sometimes the solutions that they imagine for various crises seem impossible, but that's precisely the value of the empty space—when solutions that the children thought *were* possible don't work, they learn to be fearless about trying the ones that appear on the surface to be impossible.

One of the most moving stories that Mr. Hunter tells is about a boy who wanted to dominate the world in the game. He was a subtle sort of bully, in the game and in the regular classroom. As Mr. Hunter tells it, this child viewed the world in terms of winners and losers, and whenever he perceived someone else as a loser, he viewed himself as a winner. We can imagine what sort of destruction this world view could cause, in the in the real world as well as in an elementary school game, and this child was

playing the game more individually, more to his own advantage, than Mr. Hunter had observed before.

The game has options in it for rebellions, which can be initiated by various players. The outcomes are decided by coin tosses that are weighted in favor of the positions of power, just as the outcomes of genuine rebellions are weighted in favor of those who are in power. The penalty for losing a rebellion is exile, and a loss of one's position in the game. The only way to continue to participate in any capacity is to ask the leaders of another country to let you in. This domineering boy's identity in the regular classroom, as well as his role in the game, made him the sort of child that others did not defy—social standing in the fourth grade is fragile enough and important enough to make children very hesitant to take on a bully. Mr. Hunter became more anxious as the game progressed, and he feared that this boy would ruin the game with his tactics. Still, he was committed to letting the game take its course, with the children making the decisions and learning from their consequences.

Mr. Hunter tells about being astonished one day when one of the shyest, least talkative children in the class stood up and declared a coup against the bully. It was a risky move; if she lost, the cost in the game would be exile. The cost in the social order of the classroom would be high also, since she had defied a boy with a more prominent standing than she had, and that came with its own set of consequences. Mr. Hunter was distressed, but not surprised, when this girl lost the coin toss, and he worried about the effects that loss would have on her. But before she could even return to her seat, another child stood up and declared a coup. That

child, too, lost the coin toss. Immediately, a third student stood up, declared a coup, and lost the toss. Then a fourth child declared a coup and lost. Finally, the fifth child stood, declared a coup, and won the coin toss. At great expense to five children, the tyrant was at last defeated.

Later Mr. Hunter realized that the only way for that action to have taken place was for the children to have planned it...what they would do, what order they would do it in, how many would be involved. He didn't know when that planning had happened, but he knew it was outside of class—maybe lunch, maybe recess—some time when they could get together and agree that change had to be created, no matter what the cost. I imagine those children in the Empty Space, opening themselves to ideas that had once seemed intimidating, even impossible. But they knew that world peace could not be won if they continued on the path that was being set for them. They knew that their own comfort and well-being might have to be sacrificed. Once they were in the Empty Space, they could rest, wait, think, release their attachment to outcomes they had hoped for, and watch for the way to open. Here's what Mr. Hunter says:

“I learned something, too. I learned that if I am frightened into forgetting the wisdom of peace, I will always be wrong. Sooner or later, the tyrant will be deposed, the cruel warrior will be defeated, the unjust leader will be overthrown. Many individuals may have to suffer—perhaps they will even have to die—before justice is done. But the collective wisdom of the group will ultimately create a kind of counterforce that will not rest until the right action is taken—and succeeds. Even fourth graders can see that.”

We are in dark times in the history of the world, with our animosity and distrust and fear directed at those who are on this path with us, and yet whom we see as “other”. This is not the first time we’ve been in dark times, and it will not be the last. But dark times are not the only times we have. Dark times are the perfect opportunity for us to go into the empty space and see what unfolds, see what we can imagine that we haven’t imagined so far, let go of how we thought things should be, and find out how, together, we go forward into what is possible. As Mr. Hunter says, “The collective wisdom of the group will ultimately create a kind of counterforce that will not rest until the right action is taken—and succeeds. Even fourth graders can see that.”

And so may it be.