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Honor the Negative Space

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Bradford Grant's concept of "negative space" is the area between, around, above and below objects. Becoming aware of negative space gives us a feeling of spaciousness in our environment. Awareness of negative space as it relates to time opens our lives even more. This paper examines and helps us to value the negative space which flows around, between and through activities and which makes up the latticework of our days.

Keywords: mindfulness, observation, attention, pause, contemplative teaching

There are the moments in our lives when we glide onto the stage to accept an award for research which we conducted for twenty long years, or when we hear that the book we have been obsessing over is going to be published or that the student we have been meeting with weekly has been accepted into the graduate program she coveted, or a difficult concept which we have been struggling to explain to our students has finally clicked and understanding has dawned. And then there are all the other moments.

Negative space. Bradford Grant, Professor of Architecture at Howard University, introduced the term "negative space" to our summer session for teachers offered by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Negative space is not "bad" space, like the clutter on top of my office desk or the putrid smell of decay wafting from the forgotten refried beans in the back of the refrigerator. Brad described it as the space above, under, between, and around objects, like the three-dimensional dough left behind once the gingerbread man cookies have been removed. The "not object" space. He pointed out how the gentle curve of arced streetlights divides the sky into two sections: a limitless space above resting on a tortoise-shell-shaped hump, and a bell-shaped window flowing down to the ground. The puzzle-shaped pieces of blue you see through the canopy of leaves in the trees. The shifting geometric shapes formed by space between legs of chairs and tables. The "not" things. The negative space.

Looking at the negative space is an effort of shifting attention from the things we have been taught to notice, avoid, and manipulate to the universally unobserved and dismissed interstices of our world. Recognition of negative space broadens our world, forces us to be aware of an expansiveness we normally miss. Albert

Einstein taught us that space and time are part of the same continuum; therefore, honoring negative space can mean not only looking beyond the physical lumps scattered throughout our environment, but also becoming conscious of the time between activities, the “down” time, the unimportant time lacing together important events. There is negative space in every day, within every event, the recognition of which can make our lives sweeter, calmer, and more productive. If the negative space Brad taught us about is “not object,” the form of negative space I am introducing is “not task.”

In philosophy we refer to the *tabula rasa*, the “blank slate.” Each day is like that, a blank slate containing countless opportunities, until we start cluttering it, often from the moment we open our eyes in the morning, with a list of must-do’s. In the old *Star Trek* series, the characters would go to the transporter room to be beamed down to a planet. As they stepped onto the transporter circle and their atoms were copied to be replicated in some distant place, there was a moment when they entered the sweet spot of infinite possibility: their atoms were dissolved and it was possible that they could reassemble on the planet as something completely other than the human they had been. They might reassemble as a furry tribble, or as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named from Harry Potter. In that split second when they disappeared from the starship *Enterprise* and before they reassembled somewhere else in the universe, in that pause, negative space offered the world.

It is not necessarily in the activities so meticulously planned and executed, around which we organize our days, that the most important things happen. So much happens in the cracks in our lives, much that we may not even notice. I was attending a retreat a few years ago and was walking on a path through the woods. Although it was a beautiful sunny day, I was not attending to the peaceful landscape because I was having what Judith Viorst describes as a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. I was miserable. As I was dragging along, a woman, a stranger, was walking the path from the other direction. As we passed she looked up and smiled at me—the sweetest, kindest smile I have ever encountered. That one look completely changed my day. My mood lifted immediately, and I felt a surge of happiness that I can still remember years later. It was a moment from the empty, unplanned space in our lives, and it affected me deeply.

Although we dash through life feeling harried, overwhelmed, and crushed by obligations, there actually is a lot of negative space in our lives. We simply don’t notice it. We squander negative space by obsessing our way through it, packing it with anxiety or wasting it with regrets. But we do not honor it, or relish it, or “be” with it, the negative space sprinkled within our lives, representing a pause which we can bring out of the shadows. When we consider this pause, four opportunities for experiencing negative space come to mind.

1. The pause with intention. When the conductor raises his baton there is a collective inhalation as the audience and the musicians ready themselves for the glorious first note. Intentions are crucial; they are our ramp to the tangible. How do we enter our activities? How do we begin our classes? How do we open a meeting? Rushing in with papers sliding from our arms, mentally rehearsing the main points to be discussed? Do we enter meetings rehashing the last argument with our partner or trying to figure out when to schedule the next playdate for our children? We have heard of the stillness before the towering tsunami wave, how the ocean draws back and there is a frozen moment when the tsunami energy and power coalesces and water several stories high comes crashing down on the shore. We, too, have an inner power which we can access if we learn to notice that space. How we enter an activity is important. How we begin is important. Moving from the negative space (the non-activity) into the positive space (the activity) should be a slow, seamless glide replete with the intention to welcome, to be kind, to honor what surfaces within the event. The stance on the diving board before the first move determines whether the dive will be a well-executed forward two-and-a-half pike or a belly flop. How often do we jump into the car, snap on the seatbelt, and pull out into traffic without taking an instant to feel the car seat, smell the interior of the car, or pay deference to the journey? Even if there is no conscious intention, simply pausing before the act, recognizing the quiet, the moment of infinite possibility, honors the negative space.
2. The pause between. The individual chapters in a book give us space to breathe, often heightening tension as they make us turn a blank page. Running from one event to another, moving from one activity to another in the classroom, we may not recognize that there is the opportunity for space between adrenaline surges. Our days look tight and dense, but there is still space—there is always space—for us to pause, to breathe, to turn within. Just take a moment to sit on the bench on the way to the meeting. Walk outside on the bathroom break. While the students are doing an assignment, instead of grading the last stack of papers, those fecund papers that spontaneously reproduce in your bookbag, savor the moment. Pause.
It's the space between the harp strings that allows them to vibrate and make their music. Musicians have pointed out the way that the rests, the quiet spaces within the music, enhance the musi-

cal quality of the notes. We can throw open our day by making way for space, taking time to walk during our lunch break, especially in nature, or closing our office door for a few moments to simply sit quietly or read something affirming, or just by looking out the window. It does not have to be a long pause; even a few moments can help you hit the reset button and move into a more relaxed place. Savor the pause between.

3. The pause with exhalation. At the end of the class, the meeting, the activity, we can take a moment to witness the ending. Be present for the conclusion. So often we are off planning the next event even as we are gathering the evaluation forms and stuffing our items into our briefcase. Being thankful for the meeting, or class, or activity honors our lives and helps to short-circuit the inevitable post mortem of what went right and the stickier, harder to get rid of “things that went wrong.”

The *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred text from India, uses the phrase “surrendering the fruit.” It refers to plowing the field, doing everything one can in order to get the best possible harvest, and then letting go. You surrender the results. You had no control over them anyway, and letting them go mentally creates space.

There is a story about two monks who were out walking and encountered a woman who was desperately trying to get across a stream. The monks had taken vows which precluded their interaction with women, but vows notwithstanding, one of the monks picked up the woman and carried her across the stream to the other side. He deposited her safely on the shore and the two monks continued on their way. A few miles later, the other monk could no longer contain his anger and began berating his brother monk for touching the woman. The first monk responded, “I set the woman down by the stream. You are still carrying her.” For the second monk, there was no exhalation, no pause. He was so wrapped up in his negative thoughts that he missed the completion of the act and the ensuing rejuvenating space. Value the pause at the close.

4. The most powerful is recognizing the underlying space throughout. Mary Rose O’Reilly talks about “resting in the stroke,” incorporating rest into each movement. Musicians who play massive pipe organs are moving hands and feet simultaneously, operating consciously on two separate tracks. We can also maintain our activities while being continuously nurtured by the quiet within. The space within the hollow body guitar gives it its sound. We have infinite

space within us, which we can tap at will. We can infuse all of our events with spaciousness, making them a latticework of negative and positive activity.

I once team-taught a class with a woman who was very bright, but became completely rattled in front of a room full of students. When it was her turn to teach she would fumble with her notes, drop books, and lose her place when she was speaking, all while her hands fluttered and her feet shuffled from side to side. She telegraphed anxiety, and the students would become restless while the rest of her team of teachers stood poised on the sidelines to help her or take over before the *Titanic* reached the bottom of the sea. The worst of it was that her discomfort made her irritable, and she would either snap at the students when they asked questions or else respond sarcastically. Outside of class she was a lovely person, and when students would come to her office and talk with her individually she was helpful and kind. In front of a group she simply was not able to tap into the quiet flow within. Like a syringe drips energy-giving glucose into your veins, remaining aware of the well of quiet within can keep a person grounded and at her best. It is so easy to live one's life always on the edge of irritation, suspicion, doubt, and insecurity: one can march into each class mentally calculating how many days are left in the semester or glare at students taking exams, constantly searching for the cheaters that *must* be there, or one can agonize through countless meetings, angry when someone asks a question close to the time set for the end. You can spend a lifetime in doubt about your abilities and always comparing yourself to someone else, or remain in the present moment, in contact with inexhaustible space. When feeling frantic, a person can consciously slow down her actions, matching movements with deep exhalations of breath. A person can widen her awareness of the environment, noticing color, texture, smell, and sights on the periphery of her vision. A person can consciously focus on her breath, visualizing it flowing from the soles of her feet straight up to the crown of her head and back down, or out to each of her extremities. Or stoking a warm blaze in her heart. These practices clear out the negative debris that blocks our connection to the space within. We are so full of hopes and fears and envy and doubt that we can barely push our heavy bodies across the earth. If we tap into the negative space all around and within us, we can fly.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RENÉE A. HILL is a philosophy professor at Virginia State University. Although her area of specialty is political philosophy, as a long-time meditator she has become more and more interested in sharing contemplative practices with her students and colleagues. To that end, she has begun incorporating contemplative practices into her classes as well as exploring content which incorporates the cultivation of inner peace and the alleviation of suffering. She has developed courses on the philosophy of compassion, healing after genocide, and contemplative practices.