

Safeguards Letter

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Holding a Place In Line

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I have some clear childhood memories of standing in line. We used to have to stand in line at the nurse's office in school to get our polio shots, and my brother always fainted. We stood in line before every recess and lunch period in elementary school. We even stood in line to walk to the bathroom. And on Saturdays, at one o'clock, my brothers and I would stand in line to buy our tickets for the kids' matinee.

One memory has to do with being yanked out of line. Our family was traveling, visiting for a couple of days in New Orleans. We walked around a section of the city with lots of shops and a wonderful bakery that made French crullers. I stepped away to the water fountain, into line behind two grownups. A woman I didn't know grabbed me by the back of the neck, pulled me out of line, and directed me to the fountain marked WHITE.

Now I stand in line at the grocery store, sometimes at restaurants and the print shop. I also live with the idea that there is another line--of human experience--that I am always a part of and that I influence in small ways. The distinction between literally standing in line and figuratively holding a place in the line of human experience became much clearer about ten years ago when I showed up at the unemployment office. May I never be requested to stand in a line that long again. It stretched ahead for twenty-six weeks.

Twenty-six weeks seemed like entirely too long a time for anyone to just stand in line, so I soon began to think about it in that other sense, as preserving a place for a useful role in that line. While I was there, what would I stand for? During the first couple of weeks I watched other people and learned the routines. It looked to me like a number of people had already filled the expert roles. Others had become the silent observers and still others the vocal cynics. One person chose to use the time to read stories to two small children. I decided to be one of the "look people in the eye and be cheerful" people. There didn't seem to be many people representing that position.

I found there was a difference in the standing-in-line experience, depending on how I thought about being there. I ended up meeting some interesting people and hearing some amazing stories. I understood, as well, that my choice to be a cheerful person in line was a relatively easy one because I was certain that I would not repeat this experience. I did have a lot of time to think while I was standing there, and there were a lot of things I needed to make decisions about. At the time I was trying to figure out how I could begin to do useful work without having a job or position. I wanted to earn enough to live and support my sons but not generate much tax liability. Uncertainty seemed to dominate my attempts to begin my future. Standing in that line was a concrete example of what I seemed to be facing in

lots of other areas of my life. Just as I wanted to choose something to stand for and preserve a place for in that temporary line, I wanted my life's activity to preserve a small place for living and working hopefully in the uncertainty that surrounds all of us humans.

When I noticed that cheerful persons seemed a minority in line, it seemed clear that there was room for one more. Why not be that one, especially if I were only going to be around for one twenty-six week stint? In the same way, with only one lifetime, why not continue to choose hope? As far as I could tell the scarcity of cheerfulness in the unemployment line paralleled a scarcity of hope in the lives of many people outside that place.

There was another feeling too. When I looked at the worn, cracked seats on the chairs or at the tiled floor where the pattern had been worn away, I knew that people had been there long before me. I imagined that some of them had come to stand in line and some of them had come to hold a place. Though I would never know them, I felt that I had colleagues in the same activity. Even though we had stood in line on different days, in different years, we were contemporaries, sharing a common experience or performing a common task. This identification with people as sharing "of the same time" experiences with me is a notion that I've happily taken license with ever since. It's been a way of expanding my sense of the present, approaching what John O'Brien calls the "200 year present". By beginning to describe the present in terms of common activity and interest and by stretching my sense of the present through relations with others, I experienced an immediate growth in my circle of allies and intimates. This expanded idea of what constitutes the present has put me in closer touch with my heroes.

I realized that I was just one of many who had stood through a common experience, and I understood that someone before me had also chosen to bring cheerfulness to the line. Because someone did that, keeping the expectation alive, there was a chance for me to do the same when I showed up. There was a connection through activity that I only recognized because of circumstance. Ordinary people decide about the roles they will fill or the ideas they will stand for; thereby, they preserve those roles and ideas in the places where life takes them. Only the particulars limit their influence. Sometimes the decisions of ordinary people in particular situations turn those people into heroes.

I continue to live with these ideas and keep finding work to do that I regard as consistent with keeping a place open for hope, through activity. I've become more practiced at acknowledging small acts of heroism in others, and in myself. I have noticed that my expectations about heroic activity have increased. And, through the happy coincidence of circumstance and opportunity I live now in what I think of as collegial association with a few of my longtime heroes. This is of great comfort to me, and it happened so easily.

*I have read Myles Horton's autobiography, *The Long Haul*. Myles became one of my heroes on the day when I met him. As a young man, Myles had developed a simple, clear idea about how people learn useful things. Then he spent his life creating opportunities for that to happen. When he was trying to figure out what direction to take in his work, Myles visited*

Chicago and spent some time with Jane Addams. They met early in his life and relatively late in hers. Myles admired Ms. Addams' ideas about democracy and leadership within democracy. These ideas, she claimed, were influenced by her father, who, in turn, believed his ideas to have been influenced by Abraham Lincoln. As I read this, I felt closer to understanding why Jane Addams and Abraham Lincoln have been my heroes for a long time. And for the first time I had an appreciation that Ms. Addams, Mr. Lincoln, Mr. Horton, and I are "of the same time". What a wonderful comfort to affiliate with these people through a chain of ideas, activity, experience, and personal relationship (however casual)! This connection buoys my spirit and strengthens my resolve to act and work to preserve a small space for hope through what I do.

Associating freely with heroes has been a faithful reminder to me that my task can't be to "fix problems". Sometimes I have forgotten that, and those are discouraging times. My task is merely to hold a place for hopeful activity in the midst of painful dilemmas and realities--like the oppression and violence that are part of living in this time. The task is to keep the ideas alive as long as alternatives remain. The luxury of living in the extended present is that I am in the company of heroes--the ones I've known and the ones I haven't yet met.