

PLACE VALUE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
Senior Minister, All Souls NYC
October 13, 2024

It's worth pausing for a moment to recall the Rev. Pamela Patton's ordination last Sunday, which was a wonderfully joyous event. For Pamela, the service marked the culmination of more than a decade of discernment and preparation. For All Souls, it celebrated the congregational right to confer the role of minister upon one who was called from among us. For those beyond the congregation who gathered with us as we enacted the rite of ordination, it provided a glimpse into how this historic community of faith understands itself at the intersection of religious practice and human need. It was indeed a memorable event — for Pamela and for all of us who gathered here.

My guess, however, is that 10 years from now, you will remember few details of the service. You may remember that the music was terrific as usual, but you may not remember that Richard Einhorn composed a new work for the occasion or that Nathan Siler arranged compositions by Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. You may remember that there were a dozen or so participants, but you may not be able to name anyone other than Pamela and me. But here's what you will remember about Pamela's ordination: it took place in the sanctuary of All Souls.

Why wouldn't you remember where it happened? This sanctuary is hard to forget. The quiet elegance of this sacred space helps calm our frenzied minds and restore our flagging spirits. It's where we can find hope when times are tough and a sense of purpose when we find ourselves perplexed. All this happens here, in this place.

But there's another reason you will remember where Pamela's ordination happened long after you have forgotten the details, including when it happened. It has to do with how our memories go about encoding events that we experience.

Recent research has discovered that memory encoding, which is coordinated by the hippocampus in our brains, typically starts by encoding place — where something happens. So-called place cells in the hippocampus map our physical environment by creating a mental map based on cues that are specific to the space we are in. Interestingly, these cells are shaped somewhat like a three-sided pyramid (with a base) — more or less like a Hershey's chocolate kiss. These place cells send cues to the network hub of the brain to create a spatial memory of the event, based on the three spatial dimensions — length, width, and height.

After place has been encoded in this way, the spatial information becomes linked with temporal data encoded by time cells. Together, place cells and time cells enable us to remember both where and when something happened. The more fundamental of

these two aspects of memory, however, is place. Why? Three of the four dimensions we can perceive have to do with place, and they get encoded first.

The question of why we can encode only four dimensions — three spatial plus one time — has generated considerable debate. Do we perceive only four dimensions because it accurately reflects the nature of the universe, or is it because of the limitation of the structure of our memory cells? Some researchers suggest that the brain's neural structures could perceive and model more than four dimensions, though that capability currently remains undeveloped. Others suggest that our brains are inherently limited to three spatial dimensions plus time, which thereby constricts our ability to understand a universe that has many more dimensions. It's an interesting debate, conducive more to humility in light of our limitations than to pride in our astounding capabilities.

Either way, our brains can apparently encode only four dimensions, three of which have to do with place. Unlike plants, which are limited to one place for the duration of their lives (unless someone or something moves them around), we can go from place to place. But thus far, we can only be in one place at a time, which is why we place paramount importance on where — where we live, where we work, where we worship, and eventually where we are laid to rest.

This priority of place in memory has an interesting analogy in the number theory concept of place value. In number theory, place value means that the position a digit occupies in a number conveys information about its value. This was not true in the Roman system. Roman numerals are letters that stand for a specific number: X always is 10, C always is 100, M always is 1000, and so on. Specific numbers are represented by a string of letters — MDCLX, for example, stands for 1,660. Although cumbersome, the system worked well in its time. However, the development of modern science and technology required a more efficient means of dealing with large numbers and calculations.

Enter place value, which transformed the landscape dramatically. In the Hindu-Arabic number system, which we use, a digit's value mostly depends on its place. Not completely: it's true that nine and one have different values. The difference between nine and one is eight, and that is indeed a difference. But the difference in value between any two single digits will never be greater than eight.

On the other hand, even though all ones are the same, not all ones are equal in value. The value of a one in the tens column is ten; the value of a one in the billions column is one billion. The vast difference in value between ten and a billion has nothing to do with the nature of the ones in themselves. The ones are identical. The difference in their impact has only to do with — indeed, it has everything to do with — their context, their place.

The same principle can be applied to human beings — in the following sense. While the inherent ability of individuals to create value for themselves and others will vary from individual to individual, the difference in impact can be exponential

depending on where they are — what role they play in the vast network of human interaction.

You may be familiar with the “small world experiment” conducted in the late 1960s by Stanley Milgram, a Harvard social psychologist most famous for his shock-treatment obedience experiments. In his small world experiment, Milgram wanted to find out how closely connected people were — people who lived in different parts of the country and didn’t know one another.

Milgram constructed a list of 160 randomly chosen people who lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and he contacted each of them. He gave them a packet that included the name of a stockbroker who worked in Boston and lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. They were instructed to send the packet to a person in their circle of acquaintances whom they thought could get it closer to the stockbroker. Milgram wanted to know how many people were in the human chain that linked one person, chosen at random in one part of the country, to another person in a different part of the country, also chosen at random. How closely are human beings connected?

Before he conducted the experiment, Milgram asked some of his friends for estimates of how many people each packet would have to pass through to get from Nebraska to Massachusetts. His respondents predicted that the average human chain would have about one hundred links. The actual result? Milgram found that most of the letters reached the stockbroker through only five or six people, which gave rise to the concept of six degrees of separation.

Here’s the most interesting aspect of Milgram’s discovery. When he analyzed how each letter made its way across the country, he found that many followed the same route. Of the packets that reached the stockbroker at his home, two-thirds were given to him by the same person, a clothing merchant in Sharon whom Milgram calls Jacobs. And most of the packets sent to the stockbroker at his office came through just two people, whom Milgram calls Brown and Jones.

In all, half of the letters received by the stockbroker were given to him by only three people. After half a continent and hundreds of connections involving distant relatives and former colleagues and old friends and college acquaintances, it came down to Jacobs, Brown, and Jones. Put another way, “six degrees of separation doesn’t simply mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those few.”

In other words, in the human sense of the concept, Jacobs, Brown and Jones have high place value. Each of these three is only one person, like everyone else in the chain. But where others made only one connection, these three made dozens. Their impact on achieving the goal of the experiment, however, their value in making the connections, is on a different order of magnitude from that of everyone else. Because of the role they played in the lives of the people around them, Jacobs, Brown, and Jones

found themselves not in the ones column, but in the tens column, or even the hundreds column.

My goal this morning is to impress upon all of us the value of place — this place and your place. In this sanctuary, generations of people — including those of us gathered here today, either virtually or in person — have gathered to be comforted, to be challenged, and to be transformed. In profoundly important ways, we are different people because of what we have experienced in this place.

Don't take it for granted. All Souls didn't spring full-blown from the preaching of William Ellery Channing or the architectural imagination of Hobart Upjohn. Rather, this congregation has maintained its place as a sanctuary because countless individuals over the centuries believed in it and sacrificed for it. This place continually calls each of us to give our utmost to fulfill our highest aspirations.

Which brings me to the value of your place. I'm not talking about where you live, though I hope your home has become a place of comfort and support as you live your life. Rather, I'm talking about the node you occupy in the complex web of human relationships. I'm talking about whether you live focused inwardly on your own needs and longings or have turned your attention outward to attend to the needs and longings of people around you. If you close yourself off, the world will seem like a vast and unfriendly place. If you open yourself up and give of yourself to others, the world will suddenly become small, because you will feel connected to the people around you.

The good news is that this place can help you find your place. In the beauty of this sacred space, we find the courage to open our hearts, the vision to expand our imaginations, and the inspiration to extend our hands to those around us. Treasure the value of this place — now and always.