# How I Learned to Love the Void [1]

December 28, 2015 Writing and Faith [2]
Advice [3]

## Theme Essay by Marlene Adelstein

### Lessons in *Ma*: Breathe, Loosen, Pause

**Earlier this year, when a friend and I** had both just finished writing novels, we found ourselves commiserating. We'd sent our manuscripts out into the world and were waiting and worrying. Waiting for good news. Worrying about bad news.

"What do you call this weird space we're in?" she asked. "We're not writing, but we're not *not* writing."

"Exactly," I said. "We're in the space between."

It was hard to move on to new work, even though I had lots of ideas percolating—stories, essays even another novel—and so did my friend. We were unsettled, in that hard-to-name place of finishing something big and desperately wanting to let it go but still unable to do so.

I knew writers couldn't be the only ones to struggle with the anxious void between projects. I assumed most artists had the same edgy feeling when they came to the end of a painting, musical composition, or sculpture. Yet, it wasn't until I'd done a bit of research that I realized why such dry patches can be so valuable.

In talking with my friend, I'd unknowingly alluded to the Japanese concept of *ma*, which in English means "gap" or "space between." This loose translation, however, belies the cultural nuances of the word, which has its origins in

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Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. I'm not religious, and it's been my writing that has mostly nourished me spiritually through difficult times; my own space between was challenging. But when I stumbled onto *ma*, its surprising lessons were a welcome comfort.

First, though, I had to get through my trouble with letting go. I'd grown as fond of the characters in my novel as if they were like quirky family members who'd come for a holiday visit and wouldn't leave: the precocious ten-year-old birder who disappeared from a shopping mall; her self-destructive mother who obsessively collected junk, thinking it might offer clues to her daughter's whereabouts. Moving on to something new felt a little like cheating on a lover.

Or maybe I was grieving for these characters as if they were dead. Maybe moving forward meant admitting the book was over and that nothing would happen with it. Fear of rejection loomed large, and doing nothing seemed safe. I felt as if I needed a twelve-step program to wean myself off the book I'd spent too many years on.

And yet, I was determined to make use of the free time I suddenly had. Slowly, I began to ponder new stories and characters while I walked my dog. I made up "what if" scenarios in the shower. I jotted down notes, cut out articles, went to the library searching for inspiration, hoping for those moments of synchronicity when new pieces of a story fall into a writer's lap like a gift.

That conversation with my friend lingered: *What do you call this weird space we're in?* It felt like being on a ledge, with vast emptiness below my feet. It wasn't a pleasant place. It was almost, I imagined, like withdrawal from a drug. I wasn't writing—but I wasn't not writing.

Forcing creative work is never good, so I took a break from trying to move forward. A *Yoga Journal* article from a few years back actually titled "The Space Between" first caught my eye. It was about the transitions between poses, those moments when you pay attention to the breath and the changes in how your body feels. As author and yoga teacher Jason Crandell puts it:

> Moving slowly through transitions is more demanding, mentally and physically. But if you always rely on momentum to take you to the next pose, you'll never build the strength to stop using your momentum.

I practice yoga, so I could relate, but this still didn't define that uncomfortable hiatus for me as a writer. I then came across a number of evocative quotes about the creative process in Alan Fletcher's 2001 book *The Art of Looking Sideways*. Isaac Stern once described music as "that little bit between each note—silences which give the form." Fletcher, a well-known visual designer, also included this translation from the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tzu:

> We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.

In *The Language of Zen* by Richard Burnett Carter, I happened on a reference to the nineteenth-century philosopher, Zen Buddhist scholar, and Japanese tea-ceremony master Hisamatsu, who believed a "master lives in emptiness while working in form."

I was getting close. These sentiments spoke to me and my writing stillness, and as I kept scouting around, I soon discovered that all these writers and artists were speaking about *ma*. I learned that in Japanese architecture, music, drama, fine art, and gardens, *ma* represents a void or emptiness in time or space. It's a blank interval that gives shape to the whole.

The idea of *ma* spans everything from the dug-out space of a canoe to the space between words on a page. The gaps in a conversation. The blank spaces of a painting. The silences during a play. The moments between your ideas. *Ma* can be the distance between you and your lover or the time between a look and the first kiss.

In a 2002 interview, the filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki told Roger Ebert that he included action-free stretches in his

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animated classics like *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* for a reason: “We have a word for that in Japanese…. It's called *ma.* Emptiness. It's there intentionally.” Miyazaki then went on to demonstrate by clapping his hands several times:

> The time in between my clapping is *ma.* If you just have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness. But if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension.

This filmmaker believes in allowing his characters to pause and just be, whether they’re staring at the horizon or inwardly dreaming. “The people who make the movies are scared of silence,” he adds.

Wonderful things can happen in this emptiness. As environmental designer Lawrence Abrahamson explicitly states in his 2013 essay “The Potential of Nothing”:

> In nothingness, *ma* enables. The empty boundary provides a place for everyone’s version of reality or imagination to exist.

Instead of fearing the space between, then, I decided to embrace it. *Ma* was the perfect concept. The perfect word. (That it happened to be my initials made it feel especially right.) I’ve always worked best with quiet. Inspiration and ideas often come to me when I remove myself from day-to-day life. The more I read about it, the more it seemed that all things are possible in *ma*.

This place, this space, this *ma*, was my moment to breathe in, think deeply, enjoy the space between. I could take the blankness, the fearful nothingness, and turn it into something profound and rejuvenating. I could wonder what my characters, old and new, were up to—and let them be. I could mull over my ideas without picking up a pen or tapping on a keyboard.

I could get ready to write a piece about *ma*.

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**Publishing Information**


- “The Space Between” [4] by Jason Crandell, *Yoga Journal*, June 29, 2011.
- *The Art of Looking Sideways* by Alan Fletcher (Phaidon, 2001).
- *The Language of Zen: Heart Speaking to Heart* by Richard Burnett Carter (Sterling Ethos, 2010).
- “Hayao Miyazake Interview” [5] by Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun Times*, September 12, 2002.
- “The Potential of Nothing” [6] by Lawrence Abrahamson, *Mas Context*, Spring 2013.


**Art Information**

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For more information, visit Marlene Adelstein's website [8].

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