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Doors

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Doors. They are simple technology. They open or shut, or stay somewhere in-between. But they represent, both physically and in symbol, the primary boundary between acceptance and rejection.

I go in. Before I can go in I must open the door. If the door is a part of my territory I may need only use my key (another technology which extends the sense of security I attach to the door). If it is the territory of another, then I must perform the ritual of first rapping my fist against the door - even if it is partly open - and beg for leave to pass through the portal.

A half open door would seem to show ambivalence. Why have a door if it is not to be open to full passage or closed to prohibit same? Approaching a half open door I feel awkward. I must not assume it displays the invitation associated with a door wide open; neither should I pretend it is shut. Shall I walk in, shall I knock; shall I look in or studiously avoid same?

I come from a society where the door is an important piece of cultural machinery. Bermuda has a population density of 3,000 people per square mile - one of the highest in the world, and THE highest among oceanic islands. With so many people living literally on each others door-step, a door is a necessary shield from the rest of the world and provides security. When I was growing up, the door to our house was shut mainly to keep out flies; and when we acquired a screen door, was shut only at night or when we went away from home (even then it was never locked - I don't think anyone would have known where to find a key...).

Slamming a door was forbidden in my house. My mother had three reasons it wasn't allowed. First, each time the door slammed, it made a shock for the door itself, the door's accessories (latch, hinges, panels), the door frame and other structural components - those nearer getting a worse shock than those afar. My mother was an accomplished carpenter and was most sensitive to the effects of human activities on the longevity of wood furniture. (I didn't think before now of a door as furniture, but so it is). Second, Slamming a door made noise far above our ambient low-technology-lifestyle levels. Bermuda was a quieter place in those days than now, and far quieter than most other places. A slamming door could be heard by all the neighbors for some distance. My mom didn't like hearing their doors slam either.

The third reason was that the noise and shock of a slamming door was made use of by some wishing to display their anger. After slamming a door to vent such feeling, one could claim it was an accident or that the wind had shut the door before we could stop it. Have you ever tried to stop a door being powered shut by the wind? I can see the sequence of events so clearly in my mind. The door, standing fully ajar, catches some portion of the passing breeze and, like

a filling sail, begins its movement. Imperceptibly at first, then gathering speed and force, it rushes ever faster to a crashing closure. If one spots the motion early enough, one can attempt to intervene; but too often the attempt is aborted for fear the door will eat one's fingers as it snaps shut. My mother knew these games - no doubt having played them herself. There would be no slamming of doors accidentally on purpose in her house. All doors were to be shut gently, noiselessly, at all times.

When a door is shut, one can but imagine what goes on beyond. Are there people, are they lovers or combatants, are they awake, asleep or dead; is there great treasure or monsters waiting to pounce, or is there but an empty room? Before a door opens, one cannot be certain that beyond its portal lies the universe, or the great nothingness....

An open door extends one's sight into the vista beyond, be it out into the world or in into a room. Through an open door, out-of-doors becomes real and welcomes me into the freedom of doorlessness. Through an open door, a room once hidden assumes a reality which was otherwise held up only by remembrance, or imagination, or faith. Doors have this power of magic.

Doors hold every shape and every rank. There are cupboard doors, closet doors, doors to medicine cabinets, trap doors, attic doors; doors flimsy and solid, doors great and small. There are doors to compartments like those in the car purporting to hold gloves but crammed full of old and poorly folded maps; doors that hide the fine-tuning dials of the VCR; tent doors that zip open and shut. Doors of elegant fashion stream the lines of a car; doors of massive function close the bank's vault. Leaden doors obstruct radiation; damped-motion doors gently yield a cassette on my tape deck. There are creaky doors spreading fear; shuttered doors shedding light and air while blocking sight; sliding doors saving space.

As an extension of human capability and complexity, doors may not rank with other technology such as the telephone, computer or automobile. However, as low-tech and very simple machines, doors are ubiquitous. They are found in every facet of virtually every human community, representing a binary boundary - open or shut.

Perhaps the evidence of their importance in our lives is the way doors are used as metaphors for events of progression in life: doors of opportunity; carrying a new bride across the threshold; the portals of death; the ultimate of human aspiration: the stone rolled away - the triumph of resurrection.

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