

## Welcoming the Stranger

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Our service today came about because of a request I received a few months ago from our Membership Committee. They asked me whether I would do a service designed to explore two inter-related topics of special interest to them: 1) the values/benefits of growing the membership of our Fellowship; and 2) the importance of assuring that all visitors to the Fellowship feel very welcomed whenever they come here. These are clearly inter-related, since if we want to grow, that will only happen if newcomers feel welcomed and at home, and as a result, decide to stay and join us.

I'm going to spend most of my time this morning talking about that second topic: the importance of welcoming the stranger. Doing so can certainly be considered part of a strategy for growing, but it's much more than that. It gets at our very identity and purpose as a religious community. Hospitality – that quality of being authentically welcoming – is a spiritual quality, and a spiritual practice, that arises out of our core principles of inclusiveness, the importance of human connection, and the conviction that all people have inherent worth and dignity.

So, about the only thing I want to say about the value of growing our membership is that having a larger congregation can serve us and the world in two basic ways. First, there is the benefit for each individual member of a place to explore our values and our convictions, to remind ourselves and each other to let our best selves manifest in day-to-day life. The more people who do that, the better off we all are. And second, most of us want to do what we can to make the world a better place. And when it comes to struggling for social justice in our community and in the world, the more people involved, the more effective those efforts will be. And while I still maintain that there are even more basic reasons to practice radical hospitality, if one of the side effects is congregational growth, so much the better.

So let's talk about hospitality. One day Pooh Bear is about to go for a walk in the Hundred Acre wood. It's about 11:30 in the morning. It's a fine time to go calling – just before lunch. So Pooh sets out across the stream, stepping on the stones, and when he gets right in the middle of the stream he sits down on a warm stone and thinks about just where would be the best place of all to make a call. He says to himself, "I think I'll go see Tigger." No, he dismisses that. Then he says, "Owl!" Then, "No, Owl uses big words, hard-to-understand words." At last he brightens up! "I know! I think I'll go see Rabbit. I like Rabbit. Rabbit uses encouraging words like, 'How's about lunch?' and 'Help yourself, Pooh!'" Yes, I think I'll go see Rabbit."

Someone once asked a well-known Washington hostess the secret of her success in getting so many rich and famous people to attend her parties. She said it was all in the greetings and the good-byes. As each guest arrived, she met him or her with "At last you're here!" And as each left she expressed her regrets with: "I'm sorry you have to leave so soon!"

These two vignettes illustrate several of the essential ingredients of the art of hospitality – that wonderful quality of welcoming guests with warmth and generosity. In Pooh's experience, Rabbit was always generous in identifying and meeting the needs of guests. The Washington hostess had figured out the gift of making guests feel warmly welcomed, of clearly valuing their presence.

Our reading this morning began by asserting that "Hospitality is an essential spiritual practice." After elaborating, it then concludes that "Hospitality binds the world together." And I

would say that it is that very quality of binding the world – and individual people – together that makes hospitality an essential spiritual practice.

*Parabola*, the quarterly “Magazine of Myth and Tradition” devoted a whole issue to the topic of hospitality some years ago, which included some interesting and valuable spiritual insights. For instance, there was a recurrent theme among most of the magazine’s contributors that “hospitality is a form of exchange, not a one-sided beneficence.” The editor went on to say:

The soup kitchen, though necessary, isn’t in itself hospitality; maybe the lack of real hospitality in our day is the reason why people are homeless and soup kitchens exist. The exchange we speak of requires another level, and seems to correspond with a human need even deeper, and far harder to satisfy than physical hunger.

This notion of hospitality as a two-way exchange is reinforced by the common root of the words guest and host. Guest and host are in fact, as well as in etymology, in close relationship, each playing a role, which may lead to the possible enrichment of both. Authentic human connection includes receiving as well as giving. Indeed, a part of what we receive is a direct result of, and in direct proportion to what we give. As we often sing, “From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share, and from this we live.”

Before I move on to how we as a congregation practice the art of hospitality, and how we might do so even better, I’d like to take a look at the dark side. Yes, even hospitality has a dark side, and can become distorted. This happens when one side or the other in the host-guest relationship abuses the role. For instance, when a house-guest becomes a parasite, long overstaying his or her welcome. Or when a host enlists his guests in major household chores or projects which, by rights are the host’s own responsibility.

It is not always easy to strike just the right balance. That is why hospitality is an art. When generosity and respect obtain on both sides of the relationship, the odds are good that all will benefit in a win/win situation. But as in any relationship, there will be times when one or both parties, through ignorance or selfishness, takes undue advantage, disturbing the precious balance and marring what could have been a mutually satisfying experience.

Another side of hospitality - not necessarily dark, but decidedly non-spiritual – arises when it is simply part of a business arrangement. If you go on the Internet and Google “hospitality,” nearly all the hits will be related to the hospitality “industry.” This doesn’t sound nearly as lofty as what we’ve been talking about so far. The hospitality industry - meaning restaurants, hotels, resorts, and the like - involve a different kind of relationship. Here, we pay for the privilege of being welcomed, served, and fed. We usually have no illusions that those serving us do so because they particularly care for us, for who we are. It’s enough that they act as if they do - that they make us comfortable and meet our physical needs. This is *not* the kind of relationship we are primarily considering this morning.

True hospitality, in the spirit of good-will and generosity, occurs in many forms, sometimes even in a business-like way. There are organizations such as the “Hospitality Exchange,” which publishes a directory of friendly, travel-loving people who offer each other the gift of hospitality in their homes. Members take their turns being both guests and hosts. There are guidelines designed to maintain the kind of balance I talked about before so as to make the experience as positive as possible for all parties.

Another form of organized hospitality is Global Connections, formerly known as the International Hospitality Council, affiliated with Penn State. That organization works with international students, employees, and recent immigrants, assisting them in their adjustment to life in Centre County, and promoting international cultural exchange. As in all cases of true hospitality, all parties benefit from the resulting relationships.

That brings me to hospitality as a practice of our Fellowship. I think most of us have the generosity of spirit that leads us to want to be truly welcoming to all those who find their way through our doors. There are a number of outwardly visible signs of that spirit. We have greeters in the lobby to meet newcomers, answer their questions, guide them to the coffee and into the sanctuary, and otherwise make them comfortable. Our order of service includes an explicitly welcoming statement to all. A member of the Sunday Services Committee offers an oral welcome at the start of the service.

Then there's coffee hour, a time for conversation, and more chance to get acquainted. One congregation was having trouble getting people to make coffee. Someone said, "Well heck, if no one wants to make it, we just won't have it any more." Another person said, "Hey, I don't even drink coffee; let's just not have it."

But then the minister pointed out that <gasp!> the coffee wasn't for them. The coffee isn't primarily for the members. The idea is that we put out our Sunday best for our members, friends, and especially newcomers. After all, a church is a group committed to serving someone other than just ourselves. We are here to serve whoever comes through those doors to be with us.

The more inclusive we can be in our welcoming, the better. Having participated some years ago in the Unitarian Universalist Association's Welcoming Congregation program, we explicitly express our welcome to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, who are not welcome in many churches both here in State College, and elsewhere. I consider that a natural part of our ministry of hospitality. Ours is a radical hospitality that welcomes all who come with an open mind and an affectionate heart.

That someone is different from us in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, educational level, or sexual orientation is no reason to close our hearts or our doors to them. I've shared before a story told by United Methodist minister Jack Gilbert, but I think it bears repeating. A woman friend of his who owned a condominium in a rather exclusive building in a big city, telephoned him in a panic. "What am I going to do?" the friend cried. "The condominium right next to mine was just purchased by a family from Southeast Asia. Everyone in the building says the value of my condo is going right down the drain. What can I do? What should I do?"

Rev. Gilbert's answer was something like: "Why don't you bake some of those marvelous chocolate chip cookies and take a big plate of them to your new neighbors? Visit them a bit. Get to know them. Better yet, why not have a party and invite all your friends and make the new neighbors the guests of honor so everyone in the building can get to know them too?"

The friend responded by saying, "I should have known better than to ask you what I should do," and she hung up. She apparently didn't get the answer she expected, or wanted. Perhaps she really already knew the answer, but found the right, hospitable thing just too hard to do. The cost of hospitality may have been high; she might have lost a few friends. But the payoff could have been so much higher, for the new neighbors, for the atmosphere of the whole building, for the state of her own soul.

One more story from a church in Portland, Oregon back during the Vietnam War era. One Sunday a university student with long, unkempt hair and tattered pants arrived after the service had begun. Not seeing any open seats, he walked down the aisle and sat right down on the floor. There were a few stifled gasps, and tension filled the sanctuary as a white-haired pillar of the church, in his three-piece suit stood up and slowly made his way down the aisle toward the young man. People held their breath, not knowing what was about to happen. When he reached the front of the sanctuary, the old man lowered himself to the floor with great difficulty and sat right next to the young visitor. That welcoming act of hospitality changed the young man's life, and I imagine it served as quite an example for many congregants that day as well.

More recently in Portland, the Rev. Marilyn Sewell spoke on the topic of radical hospitality, which she defined as receiving the stranger with a presence that is not just polite, but receiving them with revolutionary generosity. Sort of like the old man who plopped himself down on the floor in a radical act of hospitality and solidarity.

In her message, Sewell pointed out that such hospitality doesn't always come naturally. "[W]e are human beings, and we have the same challenges that all human beings have. We feel more comfortable when we're with people we know. We come to church, we gravitate to people we know. We feel less comfortable when we are with people who have different ideas and interests, different cultural assumptions." She asks us to consider "some people who might actually visit our church, and imagine to what extent they might feel welcomed."

- a Native American with long dark hair comes in
- a man from a Pentecostal background waves his hands in the air during the singing of "Spirit of Life"
- a young woman, with an infant in her arms. When the baby starts to whimper during the service, she begins breastfeeding
- a beautifully bedecked woman in a flowered print dress, with matching high heels and purse—she is 6'4" tall, and clearly transgender
- a person who speaks out of turn and can't follow the hymns—he seems to be mentally ill
- a well-dressed couple—the man has an American flag in the lapel of his suit—and they have their Bibles with them
- a homeless man who hasn't bathed in a week
- a woman with a guide dog
- a service man back from Iraq, in uniform, visiting with his aunt and uncle

Each of those persons has inherent worth and dignity, and is worthy of our respect and our spirit of hospitality. Think about what you might do or say to make them feel truly welcome among us.

Someone once said that the test of being a good host is how well the departing guest likes him or herself. But that, too, works both ways. I leave you with this final story:

As a part of his work on a doctoral thesis, a young man spent a year with a group of Navajo Indians on a reservation in the Southwest. As he did his research he lived with one family, sleeping in their hut, eating their food, working with them, and generally living the life of a twentieth-century Indian.

The old grandmother of the family spoke no English at all, yet a very close friendship formed between the two. They spent a great deal of time sharing a friendship that was meaningful to each, yet unexplainable to anyone else. In spite of the language difference, they

shared the common language of love and understood each other. Over the months he learned a few phrases of Navajo, and she picked up a little English.

When it was time for him to return to the campus and write his thesis, the tribe held a going-away celebration. It was marked by sadness since the young man had become close to the whole village and all would miss him. As he prepared to get up into the pickup truck and leave, the old grandmother came to tell him goodbye. With tears streaming from her eyes, she placed her hands on either side of his face, looked directly into his eyes and said: "I like me best when I'm with you."

How welcoming do we want to be to people coming through our doors? How welcoming do we want to be to the single parents with small children? How welcoming to the unemployed high-school graduate? How welcoming to the disabled person confined to a wheel chair? How welcoming to the lost, the suffering, the confused? Where will be the limits of our hospitality?

May we all seek to hone the art of hospitality, opening our doors and our hearts to friends and strangers alike, so that we and they both may sincerely say, "I like me best when I'm with you."

So may it be.