

THE GRACIOUS ART OF HOSPITALITY
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 BOISE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP
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I love words. I love word origins, derivations, etymologies so much they practically become Holy Scripture for me. So, I want to share a word etymology that gave me chills when I first heard it.

In an essay on Hospitality, Catholic theologian Ana Maria Pineda wrote, “One New Testament word incorporates a profound truth: *xenos*, the word that means ‘stranger’ in Greek, also means ‘guest’ and ‘host.’ This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another.”

There is a reason that practices like hospitality and generosity lie at the core of the religious and spiritual life in many traditions, and especially so in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic desert traditions where our deepest roots lie. Hospitality and generosity are about the other, reaching out to others, giving of yourself to others. Yet the ultimate goal of both is your own growth and depth of connection.

It is the human condition to feel like a stranger, left out and lonely. We all feel that way at least some of the time, which is why it is so powerful to find a community like this one where you truly feel you belong. It is part of the basic covenant and purpose of this church to be such a home, such a Beloved Community. To welcome people who are yearning for connection, wanting link life with Life, lonely and desiring companions, vulnerable and still wanting to be touched, lost and aching to be found. To give them gracious space to sing, to speak, to dance, to leave and return again.

It starts with a recognition of that essential, existential loneliness we feel. It starts with a recognition of our own vulnerability.

In their book *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*, Daniel Holman and Lonnie Collins Pratt write, “There is a kind of gentle hospitality with the self that most of us fail to practice... We don't accept the stranger within. We dread the regions of ourselves we don't understand. By learning to value the otherliness of the actual stranger, we honor the mystery within us, too.”

We are all simultaneously stranger, guest and host, simply seeking a place where we will be welcome and where we can open ourselves to welcome others into our lives.

This is why hospitality is such a crucial spiritual practice. Because in a significant way it's not about the other person, it's about you.

Yet hospitality (and generosity, too) is not just about making nice and being a good person. It's about changing the way you move through the world. It can change your life. This is often why we resist, why we have to be conscious of how we invite people to join us, because it can be so easy to be unconscious unwelcome. Hospitality can be downright scary.

Holman and Pratt write, “When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That’s pretty frightening stuff. You can’t ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.”

Anyone who has been here more than a couple of Sundays will have noticed that we did not introduce our newcomers this morning. Some may be relieved, others alarmed. Counter-intuitive as it may seem, I deliberately chose to change the practice on this Sunday when I am preaching on hospitality. For the practice of such public introducing is not as welcoming as it is intended to be. Indeed for some it may be intimidating and actually *unwelcoming*.

Now that will take a little unpacking.

First, harken back to the first time you came through these doors. Did you enter a bit tentatively, wondering what this church would be like? Knowing what you didn’t want, hopeful this might be a place that would welcome your mind and your heart, Hopeful it could be the community you longed for. Yet fearful that it would be just a new take on an old message, using the language of faith to be exclusive and exclusionary of the mind and spirit.

Oh, I know how this fellowship hopes to be welcoming to just such people. And yet many do come here tentatively, needing to ease themselves in. To take it slowly. To slip in for the service and slip back out remaining relatively anonymous for a while. It’s not that folks don’t want to talk to anyone at all, just take it slowly, on their terms.

“The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free...” (from *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen.)

A public introduction is particularly hard on introverts, of which I number myself one. The more out-going don’t mind or even really like it. But for shyer folk, it can feel like highlighting their newcomer status. A public introduction also gives the impression that everyone else knows each other. It actually serves to set the newcomers apart from everyone else. More welcoming is a kind of “friendly emptiness” that makes room for others to move in.

[Anecdote about being 13 again.]

And this morning, it’s not that we didn’t greet and say hello to one another. The language of greeting has been changed carefully. “Please turn and greet your neighbors, especially our newcomers or people you don’t know very well yet. “

For many years now you have been a congregation where there are far too many of you for folks to all know each other. And yet people often still think they are supposed to. People are often afraid of asking, “Are you new here?” only to have the person reply, “I’ve been coming here for three years.” The embarrassment arises from the unspoken assumption that you are supposed to know everybody. Rather than embarrassment, a response could be something like, “Well then, it’s about time we met!”

The assumption that everyone knows each other or should is a culture in part arising from a time when you were much smaller and folks did know each other well. Yet that has not been true for a long time. The point

is not to make an assumption that someone is new or old, just that you don't know them well yet, and here's another chance to deepen human connection.

Another chance to be truly, graciously welcoming.

Welcoming does not stop when people are publically introduced but in some subtle ways it can. It needs to be taken up as a practice of on all on Sunday and beyond. As such it's a holy task for everyone. Welcoming the stranger and the not-yet-really familiar takes an open-hearted, welcoming attitude not delegated to official (and often unofficial) welcomers, a but woven into the fabric of the culture – this tapestry of love called community. It means that everyone who has been here a few weeks to months to years is part of this culture of hospitality.

It can become a profound spiritual practice

Indeed it is a practice in just about every religion in the world. Welcoming the stranger. The gracious, graceful, grace-filled practice of welcoming the stranger.

For religion speaks to our deeply felt human need to be seen and known and touched.

Hospitality as a human vocation is heard in all the world's religions.

From a Hindu sutra:

The husband and wife of the house should not turn away any who comes at eating time and asks for food. If food is not available, a place to rest, water for refreshing one's self, a reed mat to lay one's self on, and pleasing words entertaining the guest -- these at least never fail in the houses of the good.

From a Winnebago Father's Precepts:

See to it that whoever enters your house obtains something to eat, however little you may have. Such food will be a source of death to you if you withhold it.

Yet the call to hospitality is perhaps most vivid in the desert religions. In the harsh desert environment, failure to offer hospitality to strangers could be a death sentence.

Keith Carey, of the Global Prayer Digest, writes, in desert culture "Traditionally, a stranger could arrive at the door and expect three days' hospitality before being asked any questions. Among the Bedouins, whoever sees a stranger coming from afar and exclaims, "Here comes my guest!" has the right to claim him. The host will then prepare a generous meal for him even if it means that his family goes without."

Thus, we have from the Qur'an:

Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbor who is of kin, and to the neighbor who is a stranger, and to the companion at your side, and to the traveler. "

Hospitality is a matter of survival, a humble acknowledgement of our interdependence upon one another. But that is only part of the religious call to hospitality.

This welcoming is not simply for the guest. The stranger brings gifts as well. Gifts that may change us, help us recognize our need for one another.

Saint Benedict who founded the Benedictine Order of monks knew this. “Guests are crucial to the making of any heart,” and so he “instructed his monks to welcome the Divine in the stranger.” He knew that “if you want to be a person of great spirit, you can’t do life alone. If spirituality matters to you, you can’t do spirituality alone either. To really grow as a human being you need other people.” (*Radical Hospitality.*)

And in the words of the chapter 13 of the Letter to the Hebrews in Christian scripture:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

And still, this kind of radical welcoming can be a little scary. Start inviting people into this church and it will not be the same. Every time a new person enters the church, every time someone decides to officially join – bringing their gifts and talents, their short-comings and their doubts – it becomes a new community. Changed not beyond recognition, perhaps, but changed all the same.

So here are a few Sunday morning practices that can help each and everyone to be more consciously welcoming.

I have read statistics – I don’t know the source – that say that something like 70 or 80 percent of Unitarian Universalists are introverts. If so, this does make welcoming and hospitality an interesting proposition. In one church I’ve served, folks tried to make it a practice for the first three minutes of coffee hour to talk with the people they didn’t know very well yet. Resisting the inclination to turn immediately to their friends. Even the most introverted can usually manage three minutes.

Another practice could be a moratorium on talking church business for, say, the first ten minutes of coffee hour. This is one even I find challenging. Sunday morning can be the place where you finally see the three people you need to check in with about a meeting, about who’s going to set up for the next Saturday potluck, and so on. Yet turning to your friends and jumping immediately to church business absolutely leaves out newcomers. Reinforces to them that everybody really does know each other, and can make them wonder if there is a place for them in this community.

So let everyone here take up of the holy task of hospitality. Let everyone feel it is theirs to make connections. Don’t assume that everyone knows each other or is even supposed to. Reach out. Let yourself be a little vulnerable.

This is a place that welcomes all, not based on what you do for a living, how old you are, where you live, what degrees you have mastered or not. Here we welcome the angel inside of each of us. We create this place through real human encounters that arise from a hospitality of spirit. That arise when we seek the angel within everyone.

So come to this community knowing that we are all simultaneously guest and host.

Honor the stranger, the mystery, within you even as you seek to know it in others.

Know that you found this place at time when you were seeking, questioning, wondering, perhaps lonely and lost. Know that you found welcome, you found a home here. Reach out your hand to others who follow.

Hospitality is our human vocation.

We seek to find the angels of our own nature, and it can hard. I suspect most of us don't feel particularly angelic most of the time. Often it is actually easier to see the angel in others.

May you seek to entertain all the angels in your life. Perhaps if you do, you will see others recognizing the angel in you. You will see your own angelic nature reflected in their eyes.

Hospitality is our human vocation.

May it ultimately reveal the angels in us all.

Amen

And Blessed Be.