

Welcoming the Stranger and the Strange: Radical Hospitality
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“Welcoming the Stranger and the Strange: Radical Hospitality”

by The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

How do we open our hearts and minds to the stranger, to the visitor to our fellowship, to our fellow Unitarian whose religious beliefs differ greatly from our own?

“How shall we live?” asks Mechtilde of Magdeburg, a 13th century Christian mystic. Her answer: “Welcoming to all.”

First, a church welcoming story.

I attended Grace Lutheran Church in a Chicago suburb with an old friend from high school. Communion time came, and the minister invited all who believed they were part of the loving and justice-seeking community proclaimed by Jesus, to come and receive the symbols of faith. I remained seated, and Mickey asked if I was taking communion. “Mickey,” I answered, “I don’t believe in Jesus as the Son of God, or as my Lord and Savior. I can’t take communion” I protested. “Well, of course you can!” Mickey responded. “You believe you’re a part of a community of love and justice, don’t you? Come on, then!” And with that open-hearted, open-minded welcome, I received communion for the first time in years.

A true welcome to this stranger.

In my family home I don’t remember our ever having a stranger over for dinner. Visitors were exclusively members of the family.

We did not entertain strangers.

But then there was my Aunt Toni – my godmother, and my favorite relative. Aunt Toni opened her home to foster children. And when she went traveling – as she did more frequently in her later years – to Windsor, Ontario where she’d done basic training with the Polish branch of the Canadian Royal Air Force; and then to England, where she had been stationed during WWII; and through France where we have a few relatives; and in Poland, where we have many more relatives.

As Aunt Toni travelled she talked with everyone – relative and stranger alike. And she told everyone – “if you’re ever in the Los Angeles area, come say hello & stay for a visit!” And come they did. The young man she met on a bus in Lincolnshire. The older couple she dined with in Gdansk.

My Aunt Toni was the person who introduced me to the idea of radical hospitality – the art and practice of welcoming the stranger.

Now, it is actually very human and very normal to be wary of the stranger. The contemporary moral philosophers Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson observe that for centuries, and millennia, “we lived in small, close-knit groups, working hard with primitive tools to scratch sufficient food and shelter from the land. Sometimes we competed with other small groups for limited resources. [And] thanks to evolution, we are supremely well

adapted to that world, not only physically, but psychologically, socially and through our moral dispositions.” [“Moral Enhancement” in *Philosophy Now*, Issue 91, p.6]

We are adapted to stick with our own kind, to protect our immediate circle of friends and family; to be wary of the outsider; to avoid the stranger who somehow comes in our midst.

But, we have done a bit of growing in our 150,000 years of human life on this earth. Times have changed. Technology has changed. Societies, to some extent, have changed. Our morality has, maybe, changed.

Starting at least 3,000 years ago moral philosophers, wise men and women, sages and seers have invited us to see the unity in our diversity. The Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed and more – these moral teachers have invited us to consider the stranger as – not so much strange, as he or she is a different version of ourselves.

We are called to open our minds and hearts, and our doors, to the stranger.

In the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Bible, we read [19:34]: “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: [I am the Lord your God].

In the Epistle of Paul to Titus [38], Paul writes: “Be hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.”

In the Acts of the Apostles [28:2], the author [Luke the Evangelist] tells us that “the native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.”

In the Epistle to the Hebrews [13:2] the unknown author tells a Hebrew/Christian congregation: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology associates hospitality with aliens or strangers in need, who were particularly vulnerable in the ancient Middle East:

“The plight of aliens was desperate. They lacked membership in the community, be it tribe, city-state, or nation. As an alienated person, the traveler often needed immediate food and lodging. Widows, orphans, the poor, or sojourners from other lands lacked the familial or community status that provided a landed inheritance, the means of making a living, and protection. In the ancient world, the practice of hospitality meant graciously receiving an alienated person into one’s land, home, or community and providing directly for that person’s needs.”

In the Koran, we read:

“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... Surely God loves not the proud and boastful such as are [miserly] [niggardly], and bid other men to be niggardly, and themselves conceal the bounty that God has given them.” *Qur’an* 4.36-37

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v11n1/hospitality.html>; accessed 20 September 2012.

In Buddhism, Hospitality (*sakkāra*) is the act of being welcoming and helpful to guests (*atithi* or *pāhunaka*), strangers (*gantuka*) and travellers (*addhika*). providing **food**, accommodation and help to guests (*atithibali*) [is] a practice the Buddha approved of and encouraged. The *Milindapañha* [a [Buddhist](#) text which dates from approximately 100 BCE] said that, if a guest turned up at a person's house after all the food had been eaten, more rice should be cooked in order to feed him and allay his hunger (Mil.107).

We don't ask: "Are you Buddhist? Are you Christian? Are you theist or, God-forefend, non-theist?"

Tibetan Buddhist monks greet strangers in their temples with the question, "Welcome, friend, from what noble spiritual tradition do you come?" They listen to the answer. And then they feed their noble guests.

And in Hindu culture, offering hospitality is fundamental. A traditional duty of the householder is to provide food and shelter to the needy stranger.

Hospitality is based on the principle *Atithi Devo Bhava*, meaning "the guest is God." This principle is shown in a number of stories where a guest is literally a god who rewards the provider of hospitality. From this belief stems the Indian approach of graciousness towards guests at home, and in all social situations.

Hindu tradition teaches that, no matter how poor one is, one should always offer three items: sweet words, a sitting place, and refreshments (at least a glass of water).

Hindu scripture also enjoins that one should treat visiting enemies so well that they will forget their animosity

<http://hinduism.iskcon.org/lifestyle/810.htm>; accessed 20 September 2012.



It is said, there was a time when the head of the household would stand at his doorstep at every mealtime and ask loudly, not once but thrice, "Is there someone who needs to be fed?"

"Is there someone who needs to be fed?"

<http://www.lassiwithlavina.com/faith/hindu-hospitality-the-gods-amongst-us/html>; accessed 20 September 2012.

Hospitality involves showing respect for one's guests, providing for their needs, and treating them as equals.

Hospitality is an essential spiritual practice.

In the book *Spiritual Literacy* we read: “[Hospitality] begins with an open mind, generous and receptive to others. It means looking for the positive in people, ideas, dreams, and social schemes.... Hospitality means that in the name of the Eternal Womb we hold the world in an embrace.”

“This spiritual practice goes against the grain of the postmodern world where there is still great fear, distrust, and hatred of strangers.”

Benedictine nun Joan Chittister writes: ‘Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time. Start with your own situation and those who are close at hand. Share who you are and what you have. Then extend the practice to your neighbors and the world.’

‘Hospitality,’ Chittister concludes, ‘binds the world together.’ “Open your door.” *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* by Frederic & Mary Ann Brussat, pp 196-97

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, was recently interviewed on the radio show, *On Being*, hosted by Krista Tippett. Rabbi Sacks talked about how each of us is enlarged by people who are different from us. The stranger, the strange, ought not threaten us. The stranger, the strange, is a singular outpouring of that Great Unity from which we all spring. The stranger is a gift, to be treated with grace and care.

14 billion years ago the cosmos sprang into existence. From that first stardust, those first particles and that Original Energy, we all came.

In this congregation we might call that Great Unity the Big Bang. Or the Great Radiance. Or the Cosmic Creation. The Eternal Womb. Some of us might call that Original Unity God, or Goddess. Some of us may have no name, or see that Original Energy and its Creation as unnamable. But, for us Unitarians, the idea of Oneness lingers.

In that idea of Oneness are the seeds of our great faith tradition.

Unitarians – historically we arose believing, proclaiming that God was One, however many different ways God might be seen or named.

Universalists – historically we believed that God was a Supremely loving Being. This loving God could not, would not, condemn any of God’s creation to eternal hellfire. A vindictive, a wrathful God was too petty, too self-involved, too human – if you will – to be worshipped. Only a God of love and compassionate justice was worthy of adoration and worship.

In contemporary times, Unitarians proclaim the unity in diversity. At our best, we both appreciate and relish the diversity of beliefs in our world, and in our faith community, and we recognize our essential unity. We are all connected in an inextricable web of interdependence.

Universalists proclaim that all creation deserves a place at the bounteous table of life. And we realize that it is our calling to provide and protect that place for all those folks – two-legged & four-legged, finned and feathered, earthy & airy & watery – it is our calling to work – with love, and for justice – on behalf of our fellow humans and our earthly home.

“Welcome, friend, from what noble spiritual tradition do you come?”

Folks come here. We come in from the cold, the coldness of a self-absorbed culture, a culture devoted to having and getting.

We come in from the dark, the dark of loneliness, grief, loss.

Folks come here. We come in as a refuge from wandering, as a place of comfort, of respite.

We come in wonder – the “Oh, my word, how wonderful” variety of wonder. The “I wonder what this is all about – birth, death, and the time in between” kind of wonder. Both sorts of wonder are welcome here.

We come to a Unitarian congregation because here we can wonder; we can support others and be supported in our faith journey; we can comfort and be comforted. In our faith we sing the words of the Sufi mystic Rumi: “Come, come, whoever you are – wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.” Come as you are: gay and straight, theist and non-theist, quester and questioner.

Father Daniel Homan writes in *Radical Hospitality*: “By our best and worst attempts at hospitality we say to ourselves and to the whole world:

Everything matters.

You are not alone.

You are more than you know.

The awful thing is not the final word.

Today is all we have and today is enough.

We need each other.

It matters that we remember that each one of us walks this chilly world in some way as a stranger.

It matters that we

welcome the stranger in from the cold.

“Welcome, friend, from what noble spiritual tradition do you come?”

We ask: “How shall we live?”

“Welcoming to all.”

We open our doors and ask: “Is there someone who needs to be fed?”

Your plate is waiting.

We will snip fresh mint into your tea.

Amen. Blessed Be. Namaste. So may it be. May we make it so.

Reading #1: “When a Stranger Appears at Your Door” by Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say

When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking him who he is,
where he's come from
where he's headed.

That way, he'll have strength enough to answer.
Or by then you'll be such good friends
you won't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve your horse water.

No, I was not busy when you came.
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone puts on
at the end of the century to
pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint into your tea.

Reading #2: from *Reaching Out* by Henri Nouwen

At first the word "hospitality" might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, a general atmosphere of coziness. Probably this has its good reasons since in our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power... But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.

It is one of the richest Biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships ... Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host.

(In Genesis) When Abraham received three strangers at Mamre and offered them water, bread, and a fine tender calf, they revealed themselves to him as the Lord announcing that Sarah his wife would finally have a child...

When the two travelers to Emmaus invited the stranger who had joined them on the road, to stay with them for the night, he made himself known in the breaking of the bread as their Lord.

When hostility is converted into hospitality, then fearful strangers can become guests, revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them.