

Our Mission, Should We Accept It

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"To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves - indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own."

--Ana Maria Pineda

Meditation

Quieting our minds, our sometimes very busy minds...

We seek here a deeper stillness...

An inner stillness...

Stillness among us...

Stillness becoming presence...

Presence... here... now...

Presence for ourselves... presence with and for one another...

Presence becoming caring...

For one another... for all beings...

for life... for this earth we share...

Quiet... still... present... caring...

As we enter the silence together...

Readings

From *Radical Hospitality*, by Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt:

When we speak of hospitality we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion...

...you and I are much more than what we appear to be. We are more than what we do. We are more than a social or economic class. In the movie *Elephant Man*, actor John Merrick is chased through a train station and cornered by a mob who see only his deformity, his difference from them. He cries out, "I am not an animal... I am a human being..."

This is the sound of every single human heart. It is the cry we make against all that would make us less human, the cry of the darkest night of our lives, the cry of the abandoned and the misunderstood and the excluded. "I am like you. I am human..."

I have a mind. I have a heart. I have a soul. I dream. I care. I am a human being.

Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue... involving what it means to be human. All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn't mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.

Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice *and* a path to a deeper spirituality.

Leviticus 19:33-34

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do the stranger wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.

Sermon

A story:

An Amish farmer had noticed that every Sunday when he returned from church services someone had drained some gasoline from the tank he was permitted to have on his property for his farm machinery.

One Sunday he stayed home from church, and confronted the man in the act of siphoning the gas. Did he call the police? Did he shout and scream?

No, he invited the thief to their family dinner on the following Thursday.

Much to the farmer's surprise, the thief arrived in his old pick-up truck for Thursday dinner.

Dinner was eaten in silence.

Afterwards, the Amish farmer walked out to the pick-up truck with the thief. At which point the poor man broke into tears, and shared his hard-luck story of job loss, grief, and on and on.

Healing tears. Healing hospitality.

Why healing? Because we are all wounded in one way or another. Hospitality and tears can heal.

Hospitality. Could this be our central mission, if you will, as human beings? Giving, and also allowing ourselves to receive, deep hospitality?

Some of us are old enough to remember the Cold War-era television program "Mission Impossible." Each program began with "IMF" agent Phelps listening to a tape recording beginning: "Your mission, should you decide to accept it..." And at the end of the recording, the tape self-destructs in order to maintain the secrecy of the mission.

Well, today I'm talking not about a mission impossible, but a mission *possible*, indeed a mission that it seems to me is *essential* to a life well-lived, to a community of kindness and compassion, to a society of civility (remember that word?), to a world of greater peace and justice. And threading through all of this, essential to our spiritual well-being as well.

Yes, the mission of hospitality.

This was *not* part of agent Phelps' mission – but it *must* be part of ours, just as it so clearly was woven into the life, bones, and heart of that Amish farmer.

Now these days there is, as you know, something called the "hospitality industry." But if there is anything that cannot and ought not to be "industrialized" it is hospitality, not if "industrialized" means shrink-wrapped and mass-produced. For an institution – whether hotel or church – can only be hospitable if each clerk, employee, or member is hospitable. Because hospitality is not mass produced, but is up close and personal, one hand offered to another, one heart open to another, one set of ears listening to another.

And we don't need to seek far for opportunities to be hospitable or to be open to the hospitality of others. Indeed most days we have many opportunities to offer or to accept (or to decline) hospitality.

But here's the catch: Sometimes we have but a moment to offer or accept hospitality – and when the moment passes the opportunity has passed. So we have to pay attention – to the situation and to one another.

Some of you may recall my speaking of an offer of hospitality I experienced some forty years ago in Afghanistan, several years before the coup that then cascaded into the decades of violence Afghans have known since.

I was in Kabul for a month with my father, who was volunteering with CARE Medico. One day, when my father was at the hospital I set off on my own to climb the steep hill near the center of the city up to the noon gun, an ancient canon fired each day to mark the noon hour.

It was a cold day and I encountered just two others up at the gun, a boy, perhaps 12-years old, and an old man. They spoke no English. I spoke no Farsi. But I could see that the boy had cold hands and had his eyes on my gloves. Which I gave him.

Then he motioned for me to follow him down the hill in another direction, into narrow, winding alleys, and he said a word practically universal in Asia, now around the world: *chai!*

He was inviting me to tea. He was offering hospitality.

I hesitated. Out of a combination of fear and shyness, I shook my head in as friendly a way as I knew... but I shook my head.

They went their way. I went mine.

I have always regretted my refusal of this offer of hospitality. In that long ago time of peace, there was probably nothing to fear. But my fear and my shyness closed my heart enough that I missed the opportunity in that boy's offer.

I think of him from time to time. I wonder what has become of him during all these years. If he has survived this long, he'd be about fifty. Did our encounter shape his view in some small way of Americans?

A contrasting story from the same part of the world is the story with which most of you may by now be familiar, the story of Greg Mortensen recounted in the book *Three Cups of Tea*.

A number of years ago, mountain-climber Mortensen was rescued from certain death in the mountains of Afghanistan by local villagers. In his debilitated condition he pretty much had no choice but to accept the offered hospitality (which likely came with plenty of tea). As he recovered his strength he decided that one way or another he would turn the gift of healing hospitality around, and give the village a school. He had access to few resources, he didn't know how he would manage this... but after years of struggle he succeeded in bringing a school to this remote village, and since then has built dozens of schools in the so-called tribal regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He has been living the mission *possible* of hospitality in the most improbable of circumstances.

The title of his book? As I recall, it comes from the custom that in the part of the world in which Mortensen has been working, you must share at least three cups of tea before any business can be transacted. In other words, your "business" is held in the warm, human context of hospitality given and received.

Hospitality. The word is derived from the Latin for host; and we hear it echoed in the words "hospital" and "hospice" – places of healing; and of course in the word "hospitable" describing someone who is cordial and gracious to guests, as the dictionary puts it.

What beautiful, open-hearted words.

And as we know, hospitality is a high virtue in the Middle East; so it is no surprise that the three Middle Eastern religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, likewise emphasize the virtue of hospitality.

Yet lest we imagine Middle Eastern hospitality solely as a tableau of family and friends sharing an abundant board of hummus, eggplant, olives, multiple courses... the *virtue* of hospitality has to do pre-eminently *not* with how we treat our families and friends – which can after all sometimes be hard enough... – but with how we treat, welcome, accept, the *stranger*.*

Indeed, the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which literally means “love of strangers.”

(*from Miriam Schulman and Amal Barkouki-Winter in their article on Middle Eastern hospitality, “The Extra Mile”.)

And as we heard in the reading from Leviticus, in the Middle Eastern religious traditions we are enjoined as a *moral responsibility* to treat the stranger hospitably.

Why? The text says because *we* were once strangers in Egypt.

Which is a clever way of reminding us of the ways in which we all have at one or another time been dependent upon the hospitality of strangers, those to whom *we* were strangers. In other words, reminding us that this is an essential circle of our lives, this giving and receiving of hospitality sometimes amidst the risk of crossing what may be quite daunting barriers of strangeness and difference.

So yes, most of us have probably never been literally strangers in Egypt, but the wisdom of the text is that we have all known the experience of being an outsider, a stranger at one time or another. We move into a new community, we start a new job or begin at a new school, we are ourselves stranded travelers in a place or land foreign to us. Or we hold views which differ from those around us – maybe we’re a believer amidst atheists or vice versa; or a Republican amidst Democrats or vice versa... on it goes.

Don’t we all know those feelings that come with being the new guy or gal in a situation where it may feel as though everyone else is already at home, already friends, or the feeling of being the person who is (or at any rate we imagine ourselves to be) a little different from everyone else?

So, unless we are among that small number of folks who seem congenitally comfortable in any situation... we may feel hesitant, perhaps even fearful... until someone extends a hand, a kind word, an offer of welcome, acceptance... hospitality.

It can be as simple as our experience as a newcomer at the Old Ship coffee hour. All these people must already know each other! They have no need of me. They don’t even see me...

Then, I hope, someone offers what to me is the most important coffee hour gesture... stepping back from a closed circle of conversation, and spreading an arm of welcome to someone, perhaps a newcomer, a “stranger,” standing nearby alone.

Not a word need be said. But the person, the heretofore stranger, has been welcomed, included, accepted.

The mission of hospitality has been lived for a moment at least, through a gesture that far transcends a church coffee hour, that represents a way of being in the world.

It is of course not always easy.

That new person may appear very different from us – maybe they dress differently from the rest of us, maybe they speak with an unfamiliar accent; maybe they have *really* different political or religious views from ours, or perhaps they’ve spent the night on the streets, perhaps they look disheveled and unkempt to us.

It is not always so easy to step back and open the circle of welcoming hospitality.

But it is I believe our mission as human beings – certainly as *humane* human beings.

Today we are near the confluence of two important holy times on Middle Eastern calendars, the calendars of two great religions: The end of the month of Ramadan for Muslims, and Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Days of Awe for Jews.

During Ramadan believers are meant to be even more charitable than during the rest of the year. During the Days of Awe leading from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Jews are meant to consider the ways in which they have fallen short in their lives, particularly in their relationships during the past year, and to resolve to do better in the year to come.

Clearly, seeking to live the virtue of hospitality is woven into these sacred observances. In this spirit, can we imagine Israelis and Palestinians opening the circle of hospitality? Tomorrow is the International Day of Peace. Can we imagine this?

And, in like manner, hospitality was woven into the life and teachings of Jesus, who consorted with all kinds of outcasts, and who affirmed that even as we treat the so-called least of those among us: the hungry and homeless and imprisoned, even so do we treat him. Since, after all, as the Quakers put it, there is that of God in each of us.

Now I've shared some dramatic stories today. The Amish farmer's story; Greg Mortensen... And of course stories of hospitality given and received – or refused – in the Koran and the Bible are often dramatic stories.

But as I've said, we each have daily more modest opportunities, don't we, to open the circle, to open our hearts, our doors, our lives to one another, discovering we're not really so different from one another after all, all part of one stream of life?

What a shame, what a tragedy really, if we squander these opportunities – because our open circle, open heart, open door... opens other hearts and doors rippling with no end in life's stream.

How else would we wish to live?

It is, you know, a spiritual practice – the practice of hospitality helping us to deepen to that place where we *know* because we experience that we are part of one another and of the great fabric of life, of cosmos, of God.

And whatever else might be necessary to the creation of a more peaceful world, isn't the virtue of hospitality part of the recipe?

Could it be on our shrinking planet that more depends on a kind word, an open-handed gesture, an open-hearted invitation... perhaps a cup of tea... or two or three... than we might have imagined?

How I would like to go back in time and accept that Afghan boy's offer of tea... chai...

I can't do that, but I can move forward in time resolved to be more hospitable and more open to the hospitality of others. We all can. *Mission possible*.

This offer stands. This message will never self-destruct, must not be secret. But it is up to us to carry it out: in each of our lives, in this beloved community of faith... and everywhere.

For the sake of our souls.

For the sake of the world.

So may it be.