

Radical Hospitality in a Small World

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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November 22, 2015

Reading

Perhaps I should have said it just between
The wine and grace, the wishing and the blessing.
That was a time for words, when the scene
Had just begun, before we passed the dressing.
Before the knife cut deep into the breast,
I might have paused, looked up and all around
Into the eyes of each of them.
A jest came easier, wit tossed into the sound
And lost. Between the stuffing and the pie,
Was yet another quiet moment when
I could have told them all. Instead, I sighed
and let it pass. Just once before the end
I should have cried, "listen, before you go.
I love you. I just wanted you to know."

- Peter Laforge

Sermon

I chose Peter Laforge's Thanksgiving poem for today's service first because it has for years spoken deeply to me. I am reminded each time I hear his words of the ways in which I/we often may hold ourselves too tightly, the ways in which we may hesitate to expose our softness, our vulnerability, the ways in which we may often be reluctant to drop down from the quite natural social niceties into a deeper, richer conversation – a reluctance which is understandable enough, yet in the end not enough.

So Laforge's words remind me to speak my love and to live more fully from my love.

Further, this Thanksgiving season in particular his words remind me to seek ways to speak and live my love that extend well beyond the Thanksgiving dinner table.

We could, you see, rewrite his poem a bit, perhaps not terribly artfully, but truly – and it might go something like this:

I might have said something in between the morning news and my cup of tea.

Or it could have been between the report of the latest suicide bombing in Ankara and the one in Beirut, or between that one and the attack in Paris, or before the bombings in Nigeria or the attack in Mali.

Then it was I might have spoken up, spoken out, found something to say or do from my heart that would speak from and to the broken heart I feel.

The difficult reality, of course, is that many, perhaps most, of us are at a great loss when it comes to how... beyond naming our broken hearts and torn spirits... how to respond to the terror attacks, to the refugee crisis, to the political posturing from all corners.

Yes, as I said last week, to begin with and essentially, we can and ought to remind ourselves to seek to touch the deepest wellsprings of our true selves, our true selves that know and experience our unity with all life; and then from that heart's centeredness to continue to strive to live our daily lives with as much kindness and compassion as we can.

Yes, we can and must do this much at least.

But as human beings and as citizens we also quite naturally wonder how we can best participate in the larger world through our responses, our thoughts, our opinions, our actions.

Indeed, questions these days may plague our nights and our days: What are we to do as a nation and as a global community of nations in relation to terrorism that claims the mantle of Islam? How are we as a nation to respond to the needs of those fleeing war and terror in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere? (And, underlying these sorts of questions another: how is our nation complicit in having contributed to some of the conditions that have given rise to this religiously inspired – as the perpetrators portray their motivations – terror? And what can we do about that?)

Well, you may be disappointed to learn that I have no pat or simple solutions when it comes to how our nation and the world community ought to respond to terrorism or to the refugee crisis. But I sense that at least part of the response in our small world must have to do with what some call “radical hospitality.”

I hardly need point out that this is world's apart what the loudest voices have been proclaiming. But in this ever-smaller world it seems to me that it must be part of how we move forward.

What is “radical hospitality”? To answer that question, I'm going to draw from a book by that title which describes the ideal of hospitality as Benedictine monks aspire to live it (*Radical Hospitality*, by Lonni Collins Pratt and Father Daniel Homan).

But as preface those remarks, I would affirm that these ideas could just as well be teased out from our own Unitarian Universalist Principles, principles which affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” paired with “respect for the interdependent

web of all existence of which we are a part,” with additional affirmations encouraging us to support one another spiritually and to seek justice and peace in the world community.

Sounds like ground for “radical hospitality” to me.

This said, this beautiful little book *Radical Hospitality*, subtitled “benedict’s way of love,” puts warm flesh on the dry bones of such affirmations.

At the heart of it all is the idea that hospitality is not just about social niceties, but is rather a moral imperative rooted in spiritual reality, the spiritual reality I speak of often, the reality of who we most deeply and truly are: woven together in one web of life, each of us created in the image of God, all of us children of God, at one with one another and with all life...

Choose your language or metaphor, but the idea is that when we experience our true nature, we cannot but welcome the stranger, open our hearts to our neighbor, and know that everyone is our neighbor, even those we might ordinarily consider our opponents (or even our enemies, as Jesus taught).

Why? Because they are us.

Of course, sadly, we don’t always see others with eyes that recognize ourselves in the other’s eyes.

As the authors of *Radical Hospitality* put it, “The biggest obstacle to hospitality is not the state of the world. It is the state of our minds and hearts. It is the comfort we crave so badly that we will do almost anything for it.” Comfort... or we might also say, using the byword of our times: security.

So, how do we become more hospitable, to begin with just in our daily lives, or, for example, here at Old Ship, and then maybe have a chance of extending hospitality more broadly?

We can, first, pursue whatever spiritual discipline in solitude nurtures our loving, hospitable hearts.

But also and at least as importantly we become more hospitable the same way you get to Carnegie Hall or the Wang Center: practice. Opportunities abound, opportunities arise in every encounter with another person. Will we take the time to listen, really listen? To another’s trouble, to another’s feelings, no matter what is next on our “to do” list? And will we listen, really listen to another’s opinion no matter how at variance with our own? Will we move toward, rather than away, from someone we perceive as irritating... or different...?

Might take some effort sometimes – probably will. But it *can* become close to second nature... which is, after all, about discovering or uncovering our true nature.

Okay then, all this said, what does any of this have to do with larger matters of national and international policy and responses to terrorism and the overwhelming flow of refugees?

Well, here are two lines from *Radical Hospitality* that it seems to me are particularly relevant to our situation in the world today:

“Hospitality is the answer to hostility.”

And: “...if we close ourselves to the stranger, we close our doors to the Sacred. If we lock our doors and bolt our gates, we are forbidding God to come to us.”

Hospitality as the answer to hostility?

Hospitality to terrorists?

Well, I really don't know exactly how we ought to respond directly to ISIS. But I do agree with those who believe that an all-out military campaign, hostility answered by hostility at the most extreme level, probably plays right into their hands, heightens the conflict they want, draws thousands more recruits into their ranks; for such a military campaign, to their eyes, would just prove the point of Western and American hostility to their values and hatred for them and their religion.

What then? Well, whatever else we do we must at the same time be widening circles of hospitality through humanitarian aid, through programs that lift the lives of the world's poorest, and by withdrawing blanket support for oppressive regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Today we have been invited to play our part in enlarging circles of hospitality through the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's "Guest at Your Table" program. It is not by any means trivial to contribute to global human rights efforts in this way. It is in fact essential to the long term, generational project of creating a world of greater justice and compassion and peace – a more hospitable world.

As for the question of refugees? Well, I can't even begin to address the wealth of misinformation being tossed around by politicians seeking to curry favor with one or another voting bloc by loudly proclaiming we should close our doors and bolt our gates against the stranger. Some of what has been said is quite simply appalling and shameful.

By contrast to all of this is the reality is that we are likely in more danger from homegrown violence in our nation awash with guns, more danger just driving down a busy highway, more danger from all sorts of things than we are from a terrorist attack by someone who arrived here as a refugee after a two year vetting process. The UUSC notes that since 1980, the US has welcomed millions of refugees, including hundreds of thousands from the Middle East, each of whom has gone through an extensive process of background checks and interviews. Not one has committed an act of terrorism in the United States.

Further, closing our doors to refugees from Syria or anywhere else not only closes our collective heart, but once again reinforces the negative narrative that groups like ISIS have about us.

And after all, those of us of European descent trace our lineage to those who arrived as strangers in this land, fleeing from oppression or hardship of one kind or another. And we would close our doors in this time of extreme trial for others?

The border cannot of course be wide open – I know that. In a better world I like to think it could be. But can't we at least, with all necessary care welcome those who, whatever their national origin or color of their skin or religion, are really so much like us and like our forebears in this land?

For we must quite humbly keep in mind that unless you are Wompanoag or Iroquois or Seneca or Navaho... this wasn't our land to begin with anyway!

Finally this morning, the authors of *Radical Hospitality* write that "Hospitality is a way to take the gift of life seriously."

You see, if we experience life as a gift, we are quite naturally grateful for it, not just on Thanksgiving Day, but every day. And what ought we do with a gift? Well, turn around and share it, pass it along. That is the hospitable thing to do, is it not?

Jesus, echoing Jewish scripture, said to love your neighbor as yourself.

Mohammed said, "Emancipate the captive, feed the hungry, visit the sick."

The Buddha said, "hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can."

Well, I don't claim to know all the ways in which such ancient wisdom in the spirit of "radical hospitality" can be applied on the level of national and global policy. I do, though, know that our world would be a better place if such words of wisdom were posted on the walls of all the leaders of all nations... since it seems all too clear that such sentiments are neglected too much of the time.

Even so, this shouldn't stop us from posting such spiritual wisdom on our walls and branding it in our hearts. To encourage us even or especially in dark and troubled times, whether personal or global, to live lives of greater hospitality in relation to one another, to friends and neighbors, to strangers in our midst, and through the ways we speak up and speak out – around the Thanksgiving table and in the marketplace of ideas wherever we are – on line, off line, letters to the editor, and above all face-to-face with our neighbor... who is everyone.

I do wish the world were in many ways different than it is.

But wishing won't make it so. Living will. And loving. Which is, whatever the circumstances in our lives and in the life we share, a very good way to live.

So may it be.