

RADICAL HOSPITALITY: Welcoming the Stranger
by Rev. Kit Ketcham
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Sing with me if you remember this old hymn, and if you don't, just let us sing it to you:

There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier place in the dale;
No spot is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale.

*Come to the church in the wildwood,
Oh, come to the church in the dale,
No spot is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale.*

What a good old hymn to use as a springboard for talking about hospitality and the welcome that we extend to those who come looking for a place of peace, acceptance, and beauty. Thank you for indulging me!

It was just a normal Sunday, with the normal familiar smiles and greetings as people passed by me before joining others in the sanctuary. There had been the normal "hi, so nice to see you today!

and.....how's your mom?

and.....what do you hear from so and so?

and.....welcome to our UU congregation! would you like a nametag?

and.....yes, I think there is a plan to go out for a meal after the service; I hope you can come.

and.....how are you feeling these days?"

UU congregations are always on the lookout for visitors and this congregation was no different. We want to be able to say hello, offer a friendly smile----and a nametag!-----and demonstrate the best welcome we can offer to someone new, someone who was perhaps hurting, perhaps lonely, perhaps unfamiliar with UUism, or----perhaps a longtime UU looking for a new church home. It's our normal Sunday routine.

On this particular Sunday, however, members of our small congregation took one look at the visitor coming through the door and did a double take. No, it wasn't President Bush, coming to see how we liked his environmental policies or disaster response; it wasn't some glamorous movie star or bedraggled reality show survivor; it wasn't the mayor of the small town or any other well known local personage.

This visitor's appearance was startling in itself, and I could feel my own apprehensions rise up. Why would anyone choose to look the way this person did? I quickly began to think about how best to approach this individual; how would others in the congregation respond to him?

And then, I saw one of our greeters step forward toward our visitor and the two ordinary looking people who had come in with him. I saw a friendly smile on the greeter's face and then a handshake; I watched as the greeter helped them prepare nametags and gave them orders of service; and when the three visitors came to where I was standing, outside the sanctuary door, I had been given a clear model for how we were going to welcome our unusual visitor.

“Cat”, as we came to know him that day, is a Native American who has adopted the unusual practice of changing his appearance to resemble that of his totem animal, a tiger. Cat is tattooed with tiger-like markings; he uses special contact lenses to give his eyes a catlike shape and color; his nails are shaped into claws; his face has been surgically altered to a more feline shape and his teeth are sharp and fang-like.

Cat is not your typical visitor. Wherever he goes in the community, people stop and stare and perhaps walk the other way. Now, I don’t know all the reasons Cat looks the way he does. There are lots of questions in my mind about how he has chosen this path.

But on that day, my task and that of the rest of us attending that service was to welcome Cat and his friends, to make a place for them among us, to offer them the simple hospitality of our sacred space, of our worship time, to invite them to have a cup of coffee and a cookie after the service, to go with our group to the Chinese place for a meal after church.

This was not necessarily our first gut reaction, as you might expect! We humans are almost automatically suspicious of anyone who doesn’t look or seem like us.

And hospitality can be tough when we are faced with offering acceptance and welcome to someone very different, someone who may appear a little frightening or unusual.

We are protective--of our children and ourselves, we are concerned about how we may look to others, we are leery of being conned or taken advantage of, and we may worry about the effect of a stranger on our children or on our quiet lives..

What is hospitality? We often associate it with “the hospitality industry”, meaning hotels and travel agencies and restaurants and tourist attractions. We may think of it as greeting guests in our home, inviting friends to join us for a gathering,

My dictionary says that to be hospitable means to welcome guests or strangers with warmth and generosity. So then, what is radical hospitality? Again, my dictionary says that radical means “carried to the farthest limit or extreme.” So to provide radical hospitality seems to mean that we welcome the least welcomed, the one who is most different from us.

Over the past months, we have seen our country challenged by the need to be radically hospitable in many ways. We have seen millions of strangers who need radical hospitality; some of them have received it, some have not.

We have cringed as we watched hordes of people on rooftops crying out for help; we have heard horror stories about how many were rejected or told to wait and we have heard heart-warming stories about how many were rescued, taken in, cared for by people who were radically different in culture and in circumstances.

What does it feel like to be a person in need of hospitality, radical or otherwise? We have probably each experienced this need in mild ways. I remember a moment many years ago, traveling with my significant other, and being told late at night after 16 hours of driving that we needed to find somewhere else to sleep, because we were not married and would not be welcome in that home.

What does it feel like to be hundreds of miles from home, without familiar belongings, perhaps separated from children or parents or pets, having to set up housekeeping far, far from one's homeland with little or no hope of going home again soon? To be dependent upon another's willingness to offer radical hospitality?

One of the most poignant passages in the Hebrew scriptures is the verses in Psalm 137, where the psalmist writes, after the destruction of Jerusalem: " By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "sing us one of the songs of Zion" and we answered, "how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

In one of his famous parables, the teacher Jesus tells of a king who is rewarding his faithful servants for their loyalty.

The king tells his servants, "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was sick and you took care of me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was in prison and you visited me."

But the servants are confused and ask when this all happened, because they don't remember such events. And the king says in reply these memorable words: "inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me." meaning that every effort they made to make another person comfortable and at home was as important as if they had done it for the king.

In our current society, the struggle about who deserves hospitality and who does not is intense and far-reaching. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have recognized their own need to increase the level of hospitality they extend and have undertaken the work of becoming a Welcoming Congregation, a task our congregation is currently engaged in, because gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender men and women are among those to whom hospitality is often denied.

Ironically, one of the chief bulwarks of homophobic religious denominations is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Hebrew scriptures.

This story is about two angels in human form who visited a man named Lot, a citizen of Sodom, to warn him that the city was about to be destroyed by God. An angry mob of men saw the two angels arrive at Lot's home and descended upon the house, demanding that Lot surrender the two men to them, that they might "know" them, a word which occasionally, in Hebrew, refers to sexual intercourse, though infrequently.

This story has been misconstrued to say that the sin of the city of Sodom (from which the word sodomy comes) was homosexual behavior. However, according to many Bible scholars, the real sin in this instance (in addition to the sexual violence implied) was the mob's destructive behavior toward two strangers who were receiving hospitality from Lot and his family. It is important to note that hospitality has always been an important religious principle in most world religions.

A small book entitled “Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love” written by a Benedictine monk, Father Daniel Homan and his associate, Lonni Collins Pratt, has been on my reading list recently. I acquired it not long after we met Cat and started to think about what a miracle it had been to receive him and his friends on that Sunday last spring here at the UU Congregation of Whidbey Island.

In this book, the authors discuss a triad of relationships that need to be in balance, if we are to offer our best selves to the world. These three relationships are 1st, “solitude or cloister”---our relationship with ourselves; 2nd, “community”--our relationship with our closest friends and family; and 3rd, “hospitality”---our relationship with the world beyond our community.

Let’s consider these three sets of relationships. First, we need enough time alone, in silence and stillness. When we are alone in silence, it’s hard to ignore ourselves. We are separated from most of our normal sources of approval and enrichment, such as work and socializing.

When we are alone in silence, we are not serving and nurturing others; we have the opportunity to look straight into our own hearts and minds, to face who we are as individuals.

But it can be scary to be alone-----we are likely to want to turn on the radio, get in the car, go find people. If we can stick it out beyond our initial desire to end the solitude, we can find that solitude is our friend and we may learn to welcome it as nourishing and as an opportunity to see ourselves in a clearer light.

When we are ready to be with people again, we rejoin our community, refreshed by our time alone and with a deeper well of reserves to offer to those we love.

The second kind of relationship is with our companions in life, our dearest ones, who give us the support we need to go on in life. They provide the tenderness of friendship and are a source of stability, wisdom, and awareness. Some of our companions we choose----our friends, our mates. But we are also born with a built-in community, one we don't choose-----our families of origin, and we all have members of our families that we might not choose!

But all these other people, these chosen and not-chosen loved ones, are lessons in the making. In our relationships with our community, we learn more about ourselves, we have more opportunities to grow and change than we can find in solitude.

Third, we also need others, people who are not close to us, for the simpler, less complicated yet often more challenging relationships they offer.

Though we may offer hospitality---warmth and generosity---to ourselves on occasion and to our friends and family when we are together, it is the moments spent with those we don't know well who offer us our greatest opportunity to be hospitable, to offer radical hospitality-- warmth and generosity and welcome to people who may scare us, make us uncomfortable, challenge our complacency and give us opportunities to grow.

There is another piece I'd like to offer here-----what does it mean to receive another's hospitality? This can be harder than it seems. We often like to see ourselves as the giver of hospitality and may feel self-conscious if others offer it. When we receive hospitality, we are in an unfamiliar place. The one who offers it to us may be very different from us, in beliefs, in appearance, in abilities, in culture. We may feel very rejecting of some of the values of the one who is offering hospitality.

An example: we are the recipients of Trinity Lutheran Church's radical hospitality, for we UUs are very different from them, even though we share religious roots. They have invited us to use their sacred space and we pay rent so that we can share the costs of this space with the Lutherans, the Seventh Day Adventists and other community groups. This sanctuary reflects their presence and some of the symbols and items which are important and holy to them, even as we have our own symbols and items displayed.

Among us, there are some whose past experience with some of these symbols and items has been unhappy. This is one of those occasions when we are challenged to grow in ways that may seem uncomfortable and unwelcome. When we wish to experience hospitality extended in its fullness, we take stock of our discomfort and use it to grow into a new understanding and appreciation of the goodness of our hosts. It can be very hard, but it can also be very rewarding.

This discomfort, by the way, is one of the classic issues for UU churches which rent space from Christian churches.

Radical hospitality is a two-way street: we extend our welcoming warmth to all who come into our lives, offering our generous spirit and hoping it will be received with warmth and friendship; we receive that welcoming warmth from others with gratitude for their generosity and a commitment to understanding and appreciating those who extend it.

Let's pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

HYMN #123 SPIRIT OF LIFE

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that our response to others reflects our values and our beliefs. May we offer radical hospitality to all who need it, and may we gratefully accept the hospitality offered to us by others. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.