

“The Hospitable Spirit”

Rev. Sara E. Ascher

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There is something magical about potlucks. It might be that there is a god of potluck or maybe it's just our desire to eat well that ensures that there is always enough and usually (at least here at the BUUC) tasty morsels. And though there is sometimes that nagging feeling in the back of the head that wonders “will there be enough, will there be something I want to eat,” potlucks quite often come off perfect with no one organizing who brings what and how much. This is where the magic begins to work, because yes, there has always been enough and I've never walked away hungry and I am a picky eater.

But potlucks are not just about food, because we come hoping that what we've brought to share, even if it is a bag of pretzels, will be welcomed. We come with our offering in our hand and hoping it is enough. We come hoping we will be welcomed and that the talents and skills we hold are enough to be a part of things. We come thankful for those with culinary talents greater than ours and for those who always bring extra. We come hoping to find a place at the table.

The life lessons of potlucks are not only comprised of the very real human traits of competition or contempt or even our capacity for cooperation and compassion. There is also the art of hospitality: the ability to welcome others to your table and be welcomed by another to their table.

Hospitality seems to be a hot topic of late. For those of you who stay current with the latest from our denominational publications and news you may have heard the term ‘radical hospitality’ within the last year or so. At this summer's General Assembly nearly every speaker was dropping the phrase, at nearly every workshop I attended. On the surface the term was confusing and awkward to me and I found myself wondering what

the heck did radical hospitality look like. Is that where we pounce on every new person we see and weigh them down with pamphlets and brochures and the latest newsletters and sermons and ask what committee they'd like to serve on and when can they join the governing board? That couldn't be it. That doesn't seem very radical since in some congregations that is exactly what it feels like to be new. Or maybe it is where we ignore new people altogether, now that's something radical! We act like we don't want you and if you stick around long enough we give up ignoring you and accept you as a part of the community. That couldn't be it either, because that doesn't seem hospitable in the least. Or maybe it was just another catch phrase created by our denominational leadership to get us to pay attention to long-standing issues of welcoming new people to our congregations.

Recently however, I have discovered that the term 'radical hospitality' comes from a book entitled *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* by Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt. In which they discuss the essence of true hospitality as not being polite or civil or only having good manners; but rather as mutual reverence and respect. Homan and Pratt call religious communities to recognize the need of those coming to their communities for connection and being known; the longing to be welcomed for who one is rather than how one might fit in.

“Once the Mullah, the Muslim cleric Nasrudin, was invited to a dinner party by a wealthy patron of the town. When evening came, the Mullah appeared dressed in his usual tattered robe and shabby turban. His host, startled by Nasrudin's disreputable appearance, turned him away at the door. The Mullah thereupon went to another wealthy friend of his and, borrowing from him much more respectable attire, returned to the party, where he was welcomed with lavish cordiality.

Sometime thereafter, some of the other guests were puzzled to observe the Mullah sitting by himself in the corner, occasionally mumbling something into his sleeve and then dropping delicacies into it. One of them drew close and, overhearing Nasrudin mumble ‘and this is for you,’ into his sleeve, inquired after the meaning of this strange behavior. The Mullah replied, ‘It is only right that I should do this; after all, it is this robe and turban who were really invited.’”

Thus the need for the art of hospitality. Many of us may see both sides of this tale. The lesson clearly emphasized is not to be judgmental of those who look different than you, who have less than you, but I think the tale is more complicated than that. I can see that maybe the host saw the appearance of his guests as a sign that they understood and respected the occasion and he could have been insulted that the Mullah thought no more of his party than he would have of sitting in the town center having tea. And on the other hand, Nasrudin, like the rest of us, only wanted to be welcomed as he was, for who we was; to not have to change into something else to be welcomed.

Helen M. Luke writes in her article ‘The Stranger Within,’ that the words ‘host’ ... ‘hospitality’ ... and ‘guest’ all share the same root. And further comments that the meaning of this root also includes ‘stranger.’ She suggests that these words imply a link to one another that, properly understood, refers to the relationship between host and guest/stranger as “someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.”

Reciprocal duties have never been something I would have associated with the word hospitality. The host having duties certainly, to offer welcome and food and drink and anything else that might assist in providing comfort, but what could be required of the guest?

“The Mullah was visited by an old childhood friend from his own village, who brought him a chicken as a gift. The Mullah had his wife prepare the chicken with rice and vegetables, and when the meal was over, the guest declared it the most delicious he had ever tasted. Then the two friends passed the evening pleasantly, exchanging stories.

When Nasrudin’s friend returned to his village, he told his neighbors what a fine host the Mullah had been, and the following night a man appeared at the door whom the Mullah had never seen before.

“I am an old friend of your childhood companion, with whom you visited last evening,” the man explained, and the Mullah welcomed him and invited him in to dine. The two passed the evening in conversation, and presently the meal was served, consisting of a rich soup made from the remains of the chicken his friend had brought.

When his guest returned to his home, he quite naturally corroborated the account of the Mullah’s hospitality, and the next evening another guest appeared at the doorstep.

“I am a friend of the friend of your childhood companion,” the man said, and the Mullah invited him in. Again a pleasant evening was spent, followed by a meal consisting of a somewhat thin broth, made from what had remained of the previous night’s rich soup. The guest, with many thanks, returned home, and the next night yet another stranger appeared at the Mullah’s door.

“I am a friend of the friend of the friend of your childhood companion,” the stranger declared. The Mullah, never refusing to give hospitable welcome, invited him in. In due course, the meal was served, consisting of a bowl of warm water with just a hint of chicken broth mixed in.

“But what is this?” asked the stranger.

“It is the soup of the soup of the soup of the chicken!” answered the Mullah.”

As host, hospitality asks that we welcome those into our homes and community as they are and as the guest to not expect more than what can be honestly offered. In radical hospitality this relationship is more dramatically emphasized because it is more about building connections with one another rather than what we can get from or give to the other. As there is no shame in being who you are, there is also no shame in offering what you truthfully have, little though it may be.

“Hospitality,” writes Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, “is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world.” This art of hospitality is what we come together to practice. It is here within this religious home that we do the hard work of welcoming and being welcomed, of building connections and taking time to know one another. Where we learn to let go of our need for everyone to be like us and look forward to the lessons we will receive from one another’s difference. To offer what we can and who we are at the Feast of Existence and to trust the magic of potluck that we shall be provided with an “infinite variety” and as always with something to sustain and nourish us.