

Radical Hospitality – Slogan or Aspiration?
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Responsive Reading: “The Depth of Hospitality”

When we speak of the depth of hospitality, we are proposing something scary and radical.

But it’s worth the risk. We need to connect and feel the deep acceptance of another human being. Locks and firewalls can never do for our tired souls what friendship and companionship do.

Acceptance. Now there’s a word loaded with meaning. Acceptance is not about condoning; it is about embracing.

When we accept, we take an open stance to the other person. It is more than merely piously tolerating them.

We stand in the same space and we appreciate who they are, right now at this moment, and affirm the sacred in them.

Hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human, both my humanity and that of the stranger.

On life’s journey each of us is a pilgrim. We aren’t sure where we came from, or where we’re going. We are vulnerable, and we need each other.

Hospitality requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me.

When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything.

Hospitality is the overflowing of a heart that has to share what it has received.

Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue.

Hospitality involves what it means to be human. Hospitality puts an end to injustice.

But calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell us the whole truth either.

It is a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, of understanding yourself.

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

Daniel Homan & Lonnie Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality* (2002), intro. & ch. 1, selected and edited

Reading: “A Bowl of Chili for Les”

Many years ago, Lonni and her family lived across the street from a little log cabin. The place was abandoned and in rather rough shape. One autumn, a man moved into the cabin. Lonni’s husband, David, being the outgoing type he is, went over and introduced himself. Lonni, being the introvert she is, did not. Upon his return from the first visit with their new neighbor, Les, David reported that Les was going to fix up the place and sell it.

Lonni didn’t think much more about Les until a few nights later when screaming suddenly cut through the peace of the neighborhood. Horrible screaming, the kind that drives you into a fetal position if you hear it for too long. Lonni got out of bed and went to a bedroom window that was opened just a bit. The screams were coming from the little log house. They were not actually all that loud -- loud enough to hear, but not ear-piercing. It was the suffering that was so loud. They were the screams of a grown man.

The next night, Lonni woke up to his screams again. And the next. Then silence for several nights before the screams happened again.

One day, Lonni came home from the office for lunch. It was a cool October day. She took a bowl of chili and a thermos of coffee and some apple cake to Les. She introduced herself. He was a soft-spoken man who looked a bit like Willie Nelson with less hair. Lonni didn’t ask him about the screaming and he didn’t bring up the subject either.

He talked about a marriage that failed and said he would never marry again. He told her that he had fixed up quite a few old houses. He lived in them, repaired them, sold them to “nice young families for a good price,” and then he moved on. And finally, as he drained the last of the coffee, he talked of Vietnam. He said, “I’ll never get out of those fields.”

Les never said the words, but he asked Lonni to understand his screaming. He asked her to give him a chance to repair the house and move a nice family into it. He asked her to be the kind of neighbor who will smile at you in the morning after you have spent the night screaming against the dark. He took a chance by telling her his story and asking her to accept him and live for a season with his suffering. But he never said any of that.

Daniel Homan & Lonnie Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict’s Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), pp. 209-11

Sermon

I heard a story recently. It’s about a man who had decided to kill himself. It’s a true story, at least it was represented to me as a true story. In retelling it, I may change it some. It was a Sunday morning, an unseasonably cold November morning. The man -- let’s call him Phillip -- was in despair and deep depression. Phillip lived in Boston. That’s important.

Boston, you see, has a subway. And the subway trains get their power from the third rail. The third rail -- that's not just a metaphor -- the third rail is real, and it's dangerous. Phillip's plan then was to go down into the subway, and throw himself onto the third rail. He would be electrocuted. His wretched life would be quickly terminated.

As it happened, the subway station that he picked was right next door to a church. The church was King's Chapel. King's Chapel -- an unlikely name for a church in the United States, an unlikely name, you might think, for a Unitarian Universalist church, but that's what it is. It's the practice at King's Chapel for an usher to stand outside the church, greeting people as they enter. On this Sunday morning, the usher was there, bundled up against the wind and the snow that had started to fall.

The usher sees Phillip and invites him into church. Now, it's not clear whether the usher mistakenly *believed* that Phillip was coming to church, or just had a sense that Phillip *needed* to be in church that morning. In fact, it's not clear whether the usher was actually inviting Phillip to come in, or was just being friendly to someone passing by, a fellow sufferer from the cold.

In any event, Phillip feels invited to church. And on an impulse, he decides to go on in, just briefly. Phillip comes in; he receives an order of service. He is amazed at the beauty of the place, and it feels good to be warm. Just as he is about to go back outside, to keep his appointment with the third rail, the service begins, and he decides it would be impolite to leave. You know how the story comes out -- I wouldn't be using it otherwise -- by the end of the service, Phillip has abandoned his plan of suicide. In due course, he becomes a faithful member of the congregation. And he lives happily ever after. No, that last part I made up. His life is no happier than anyone else's, and if he decides he doesn't need his anti-depression meds any more, he's in trouble.

Here's another story. I'm not sure how much of it is true, but it's part of the foundation story for how Universalism got started in America, it's part of our lore. We're in the late 1700's. There are two characters in the story.

First is Thomas Potter. He's a farmer on the New Jersey shore. He's a strange old guy. He's built a chapel on his farm. And he's been waiting for a preacher to come and preach the message of universal love that Potter found in his Bible and yearned for in his life.

Second is John Murray. An Englishman, Murray was a Methodist minister who became a Universalist. But the death of his wife and imprisonment for debt led him to decide to abandon ministry and seek a new life in the New World. Murray worked his way across the Atlantic, serving as the ship's purser. And when the ship got stuck on a sandbar off the Jersey coast, he rowed ashore for provisions. There he was greeted by Thomas Potter. "Come, my friend," Potter said to Murray, "I have longed to see you. I've been expecting you for a long time."

Now I don't know if we can use that as our script when we greet newcomers here, "Come, my friend, I have longed to see you. I've been expecting you for a long time." Potter

was speaking from his heart, in his own way. And it's better if we speak from our *own* hearts, using our *own* words.

"Come, come, whoever you are," we sang this morning. "Come, come, whoever you are." [*Singing the Living Tradition* #188] Whether you're Les, from the reading, the Vietnam vet [Daniel Homan & Lonnie Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002), pp. 209-11], whether you're Phillip in Boston, or John Murray rowing ashore, our doors are open to you: sing with us, share your stories with us, break bread with us.

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My topic this morning is radical hospitality. What is it, radical hospitality? We all know what *ordinary* hospitality is. We invite our friends to join us, for a meal, for an evening together. We invite those we're comfortable with, those who are like us. Radical hospitality takes a step, a dangerous step, a trusting step, into the darkness, into the unknown -- radical hospitality takes a step beyond ordinary hospitality. We invite those, we welcome those, who make us uncomfortable, those who are less socially acceptable, less respectable, those you wouldn't choose to sit next to on the bus, those who aren't dressed properly, even those whose presence would bring scorn on the congregation. Radical hospitality is welcoming our *boggarts*, to use my Harry Potter analogy. [J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), ch. 7]

In their book *Radical Hospitality*, which was the source for our readings, Homan and Pratt provide numerous examples, but here's one that especially touched me.

Some of the most moving stories of hospitality, [they write,] come out of the Holocaust. One Dutch woman, who now lives in a small Michigan town, told of growing up in a household that sheltered a Jewish family. All such stories are inspiring and remarkable, but hers was especially so because her parents kept the secret so well that their four children did not know a Jewish family was sheltered in their home. The parents risked everything to protect strangers, literal strangers, whose presence threatened them and their children. [p. 12]

This kind of sacrificial hospitality, [they continue,] is almost more than we can imagine. We will probably never be called on to give ourselves for the sake of a stranger -- but can we give some small part of ourselves to a stranger? . . . can we carve out a small place in our hearts for others? This is the true meaning of hospitality. [pp. 12-13]

I was reminded the other day of the story of Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese. They were baseball players, back in 1947, for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson was the first African American in the modern era to play in Major League baseball. It's hard to imagine, and painful to remember, the abuse he suffered that rookie year -- from the fans, from opposing players, from his own team mates. "With Robinson receiving death threats and heckling and taunts from the crowd in a ballpark on the road," I'm reading from the *New York Times* [Nov. 2, 2005, D5], "Pee Wee Reese" the shortstop, from Kentucky, Pee Wee Reese "walked over to him on the

infield” -- in front of thousands of people, including, most importantly, the players on the field and in the dugouts -- Reese walked over to Robinson and put his arm around him -- “a quiet but significant gesture of friendship and comradeship.”

Reese might have explained, “we’re all persons of worth and dignity, we’re all made in the image of God.” But he didn’t. He wasn’t a theologian; he wasn’t a Unitarian or a Universalist, as far as I know. He was just a baseball player -- a baseball player with a sense of right and wrong, a baseball player who felt his kinship to another player.

Today, fortunately, to offer hospitality to a person of a different race is socially acceptable, it’s the norm of polite society. You don’t get extra credit for it.

But when you put your arm around a homeless woman, declaring to the world, or at least to the good people of Cumberland, that she, like you and me, like Jackie Robinson, is a person of worth and dignity, that she is made in the image of God -- that is an act of hospitality, that is an act of courage. [Melissa Riggleman-Lafferty, Reader Commentaries, Cumberland *Times-News*, July 22, 2005, p. 4B; August 30, 2005, p. 81]

Less dramatic, but equally necessary, is our response to those left homeless and stranded by a disaster such as Katrina. We can be proud of this fellowship’s role in the community response to the victims of Katrina, and especially to the leadership of our president, Elaine Keane.

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In his book *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), Jim Wallis, a left-wing evangelical, tells the story of Mary Glover. “Mary was like a self-appointed missionary in our poor community,” Wallis writes, “and she was a regular volunteer in our weekly food line. So poor that she, too, needed the bag of groceries passed out each week, Mary often said the prayer before we opened the doors each Saturday morning. . . . Here’s what Mary Glover always prayed, ‘Lord, we know that you’ll be comin’ through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well.’” (p. 217)

There, in that short line of a prayer, you have what I feel is the best short summary of Christianity that I can imagine -- at least of a Christianity that I could relate to -- and there also you have the theological foundation for radical hospitality. That could be Jesus standing in that line of poor folks waiting for a bag of groceries. Now Mary Glover doesn’t mean that literally. She doesn’t believe in reincarnation, and she hasn’t lost her marbles. She’s speaking metaphorically, though she probably wouldn’t use the fancy language.

And if the image of Jesus doesn’t do it for you, imagine that it’s your long lost brother in the line, or Rosa Parks or a Vietnam vet.

Here’s another way to look at all this. The late John Rawls is generally regarded as the greatest American moral philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. I feel fortunate to have heard him give a lecture once, when I was an undergraduate. He is best

known for his theory of justice. [John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971)]

Imagine that we're just getting organized. It's like Philadelphia in 1776, but on a more universal scale. We want to create a system of justice; we all need to agree on it. What kind of system should we create? Here's the twist that Rawls adds. We don't know what our position in society will be. We don't know if we'll be rich or poor, black or white, live in the United States or Bangladesh, if we'll be male or female, gay or straight, live in the 20th century or the 22nd. We're behind the "veil of ignorance," to use Rawls' language. What Rawls argues, and seeks to demonstrate over several hundred pages, is that, if we're rational, we'll choose a system that treats well those at the bottom. Rawls doesn't opt for equality, but he contends that departures from equality can be justified only if they benefit those who are the worst off.

As I see it, whether you take the abstract philosophical approach of Rawls, the liberal Christian approach of Wallis, or the feeling-in-the-gut approach of so many who instinctively reach out to those in need, you can end up in roughly the same place -- the place of radical hospitality.

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With my background as a student of philosophy and, more recently, of theology, and as a committed Unitarian Universalist institutionalist, and with my years of experience as a lawyer, my natural inclination at this point is to move on to the topic of boundaries. Who would want to accept our hospitality? What is our identity? How is someone to know whether they belong here or not? What if someone who accepts our hospitality misbehaves? What if they abuse our hospitality? How can we be both hospitable *and* safe?

These are all important questions. You now have my agenda for December and January.

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But let's return to hospitality. Let me offer three points.

First, just as we're instructed before each airplane flight, to put on our own oxygen mask, before assisting others with theirs -- has anyone here ever actually had to use an oxygen mask while up in the sky? -- so should we become well practiced in hospitality *to each other* before we consider ourselves ready to greet the stranger at our door. What does this mean, being hospitable toward each other?

You can probably think of better examples than I, but here's what comes to mind for me. We need to recognize that we don't all think alike on theological or political issues, on the Iraq war, for example. Debate among us can be healthy, but we should treat each other with respect, whether or not we are in agreement. Indeed, we don't think alike about how we spend this hour and a quarter together each Sunday morning, or about how best to bring up our children. My goodness, how boring it would be if we did all think alike -- or how small our group would be.

We need to recognize that some of us are better acquainted than others, and we need constantly to seek to include those who may feel they're still on the periphery here, who may feel left out.

Secondly, we tend to think of hospitality as going in one direction -- that's how I've been talking about it. But it's always mutual, though perhaps not evenly balanced. Here's another story from Homan and Pratt.

We're in a waiting room at Children's Hospital in Detroit. The children are waiting their turn for chemotherapy.

Matthew is a year old. He's very thin, with sticks for arms and legs. He has the largest eyes you will ever see on a child. He's bald. Most of the kids are bald. Chemo.

Across from Matthew is a teenaged girl, probably fourteen or fifteen. She, too, wears a stocking cap. She's curled up in her chair, in something like a fetal position.

Matthew's mother puts him on the floor. He pulls himself up to standing, using one of the orange plastic chairs to balance, and then he lets go and just stands there wobbling. He has our attention. When a child like Matthew does something as ordinary as take his first steps, it is good news in a place like this, a sign of hope.

The girl is watching. She doesn't want you to notice, but she's untangled those long, skinny arms and legs of hers and is slouched in the chair now, peering at wobbling Matthew from under her stocking cap. Matthew's sky-blue gaze fixes on the girl. He waves his arms and he's off -- walking, really walking, while his mother beams at this never-before-seen event.

He bumps into the girl's bony knees, slaps his hands down on her legs, and looks up at her with a great big grin and grunt of triumph. Magic. Her face is changing, transforming into a smile that reaches her young eyes and makes her pretty again.

She scoops up the baby into her arms, "Well, Mr. Matthew, aren't you something!" she says softly and snuggles him tight to her caved-in chest. He relaxes against her, tucks his head under her chin, and spreads his arms wide open around her shoulders. He takes a deep breath and exhales. He goes limp. They sit there like that, the two of them. It's hard to tell who is holding whom. [pp. 230-32]

As we give hospitality to another, we are also receiving hospitality from them.

If, by the way, you were to check the etymology of the word *host* and then check the etymology of the word *guest*, you would discover that they come from the same Indo-European source: *ghos-ti*, which means someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality.

Third, while I believe it's important for a congregation to practice hospitality for its own sake, and because it's good for all those involved, I want to see the bigger picture as well. What

kind of society do we want, and how do we achieve it? Speaking for myself, I would like to see, I would like to live in, a society that practices hospitality -- that provides shelter for the homeless, that feeds the hungry, that educates the children, that cares for the sick. One way that we as a congregation can help reach this goal is to model the behavior we would have society adopt. We can be a beacon of hospitality in a world of closed doors; we can be a place of trust in a world of fear; we can promote a culture of generosity in a world of selfishness; we can be a welcoming congregation in a world of prejudice.

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A fairly popular name among Unitarian Universalist congregations is *All Souls*. Three of our most prominent congregations are All Souls Church in Washington, DC, All Souls Church in New York City, and All Souls Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This name, *All Souls*, provides about as good a two-word summary of Unitarian Universalist theology as you could hope to find.

It captures our first principle, that we all, all of us, are persons of worth and dignity. It incorporates the traditional Universalist message of love, that God loves everyone, that no one can escape from the love of God, no matter how hard they may try. It reminds us that we are all in this together, and that we cannot be satisfied with a society, with a world, where some people are discarded, where some children are considered not worth the bother of educating, where so many are second class citizens because of their -- well, there's a lengthy list of characteristics.

Some churches, some congregations, if they were to be honest, if there were a truth in naming requirement, some churches would be called the Church of Some Souls, the Church of *Some* Souls, not the Church of *All* Souls.

May this congregation always be known as a place of hospitality, as a welcoming congregation, as a community of all souls. Amen.