

Religious Hospitality

A Spiritual Practice for Congregations

Peter Morales

Think of a time when you have felt truly welcomed. Maybe it was coming home after a long time away. Maybe someone took you in when you were far from home. Relive those feelings for a moment. Feel that warmth again; see those smiles and feel those arms embracing you. What a gift it is to be welcomed.

Hospitality, true hospitality, is emotionally powerful. It touches something very deep in us—our profound human longing to feel accepted, to belong, to be loved, to feel safe, to be valued and respected.

Hospitality is not something to be proclaimed; it must be lived. Hospitality is both a spiritual discipline and an expression of spiritual health. If I feel angry, hurt, unloved, or alienated I cannot offer a warm welcome. Conversely, if I am at peace, filled with joy at being alive, aware of those around me with compassion in my heart, then hospitality flows naturally and inevitably from the depths of my being.

What is true of an individual is also true of a community. A congregation in which people do not genuinely love each other is not likely to exude warmth. A congregation that is self-absorbed and disconnected from its community cannot offer religious hospitality. Hospitality is love in action.

The world's great religious traditions have long affirmed the link between religion and hospitality. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures admonish us to welcome the stranger as a guest. Hebrew scriptures, recalling the oppression the children of Israel suffered as foreigners, teach us to love the stranger, the outsider. The Book of Leviticus instructs the people, "You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

The teachings of Jesus extend this tradition. Jesus and his followers went beyond welcoming the foreigner to the more radical practice of welcoming the marginalized: children, women, tax collectors, the poor, lepers, prostitutes, even enemies. In Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, there are no foreigners. We are all God's children and we are all loved.

The Buddhist tradition arrives at a similar place by a different road. In some ways the Buddhist perspective is the most radical. Buddhism teaches that the very distinction between one group and another, between insider and outsider, between citizen and alien is a dangerous illusion.

The renowned Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that in Buddhism there is no such thing as an individual. His point is that we are so profoundly connected by history, culture, biology, and our interdependence that the very notion of a separate individual is false. A deep awareness, a spiritual and cognitive enlightenment, reveals that we are part of a greater unity.

In the Buddhist tradition, our connections are real; our separations are an illusion. When we believe in the illusion of separation, not only do we deceive ourselves but we follow a path that will bring us great suffering. If you and I are ultimately connected, you cannot be other. You cannot be an alien, a foreigner. If I do not know you I do not yet know a part of my self. When you and I are separated, neither of us is whole.

Hospitality, true hospitality, is not an obligation. It is not a duty. True hospitality is a spiritual practice, a religious practice. Like meditation or prayer, hospitality connects us with a deep truth and compassion that transcend our selves. Our sense of isolation and individualism is an illusion that cuts us off from what is real, true, loving, and sacred in life.

There are a thousand ways to practice hospitality. First, we can begin by being open and loving with those we already know, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and extending ourselves to others. But we can not and must not stop there. If we stop there we draw a circle that keeps others out, a circle that disconnects us. We must go much further.

A true religious hospitality reaches out to those we do not yet know. This can be as simple as greeting those seated near you on Sunday morning and working up the courage to talk to a stranger during coffee hour. It means warmly welcoming those who come looking for a religious home. As Unitarian Universalists, we respect each person's search for truth and meaning. And as stewards of hospitality, we can stand ready to look at each other face-to-face, to see the divine in each person.

But we must also take the spiritual practice of hospitality beyond the safety of our own religious communities. Our practice must extend to opening our hearts to strangers throughout our lives.

The real challenge for us, the spiritual heavy lifting, comes when we encounter people who appear to be different from ourselves. People we perceive as different test our spiritual development—and help us develop spiritually. We need to practice openness to people who make us uncomfortable: people who come from a different ethnic group; people a lot older or younger; people who are gay, straight, or conservative; people who believe crazy things or are mentally ill. When we welcome what is uncomfortable, we grow.

The best reason to reach out isn't to help another person; it is to make ourselves whole. Reaching out frees us from the prison of the self. Reaching out with love frees us from individualism and narcissism.

With love comes understanding, and with understanding comes love. *Ultimately, love and understanding are one.* The enlightenment the Buddha spoke of and the God that is love in the Christian tradition are one. When we make true connection we touch what is holy. Hospitality is the start of the journey; it is the enactment of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

The hunger for true religious community, for connection and commitment, is pervasive in our time. Our future depends on whether we can connect with people at the level of their deepest longings and highest aspirations. We are called to feed the spiritually hungry and to offer a home to the religiously homeless. And in the process, we are enriched in spirit.

Someone, a long-lost relative of the human family, is coming into our lives. It happens every single day. At church it happens every single Sunday. May you and I be there, with anticipation in our hearts, warm smiles on our faces, our eyes ready to truly meet the eyes of another, and our arms extended, saying, "Welcome, welcome."

For Further Reading

Full Circle: Fifteen Ways to Grow Lifelong UUs, by Kate Tweedie Erslev (Boston: UUA, 2004).

Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation, by Tom Owen-Towle (Boston: UUA, 2004).

Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love, by Lonni Collins and Daniel Homan (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002).

The Safe Congregation Handbook: Nurturing Healthy Boundaries in Our Faith Communities, edited by Pat Hoertdoerfer and Fredric Muir (Boston: UUA, 2004).

Welcoming Children with Special Needs, by Sally Patton (Boston: UUA, 2004).

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