

Radical Hospitality

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Our very act of coming together week after week, opens the door to our spiritual transformation. But it won't happen by accident, we each choose to be here and open ourselves to be transformed. How and when we come together always involves making choices. Who will we explicitly include and who will we implicitly exclude from our lives and our worship together. The surrounding culture excludes many people, for many reasons, in many ways, every day. If you are in a wheelchair, for instance, you are often excluded from some things because there are many places you cannot go. If you are infirm, or have difficulty with stairs, there are times and places you can't participate without the conscious help of others. If you are shy or introverted, you may be unable to reach out to someone new unless they bridge the gap to make you feel welcome. If you have been marginalized by the broader culture, or forgotten, or not seen as fitting in, you perhaps on your own cannot find the spiritual courage to claim your rights to be in community.

I served for several years on the Board of Common Cathedral, which provides, among many other programs, a weekly worship service Sunday afternoons by the fountain in Boston Common. Here many congregations from the suburbs, who support our work, come together to worship with the homeless, the poor, and the dispossessed. Each service includes a celebration of communion, where through sharing bread and grape juice, and passing of God's peace, we reaffirm under God our common humanity together. I am sometimes amazed at the effect of this communion service on its participants, the panhandlers and the destitute who may have spent the week being scorned and/or ignored, with people looking right through them as if they were undesirable and less than fully human, and the suburbanites, who may have many times, on their way to work or shopping, stepped around these same people as if they were just a lump on the sidewalk or an unpleasant distraction, now joined together in celebration of their goodness in community before God. I am amazed at the startled looks of recognition, and the tears of joy from recognizing and being recognized as human, and worthy of our love. Handshakes and hugs are passed around as the gathering is transformed through love into real community. Who we

welcome and include in OUR community has an inescapable moral dimension to it. Radical hospitality involves what it means to be fully human, who we become in community.

One of the classic teachers on the use of dedicated community to become fully our best selves through practicing radical hospitality, was the fifth century monk Benedict of Nursia, who in organizing several monastic groups developed the Rule of St. Benedict, how to be transformed through living in community. His 53rd rule says: “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself says: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me...* Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love.” Hospitality requires that we welcome the stranger, but if we remain unchanged by the encounter that in itself does not constitute Radical Hospitality. This hospitality does not require good manners or grand gestures so much as an open heart. When we embrace the stranger and welcome them into our heart, we create the opportunity to each be transformed by the encounter, to become our better selves through entering into community together with those who are foreign to us. Truly living into such hospitality allows and helps us to become one with each other and all of the larger world which we may encounter as hostile or alien to our sense of friendship and kinship.

A few years ago I was leading a lay meditation retreat for a group of UU’s at the Benedictine Monastery outside Harvard, MA. They are by Catholic standards a very conservative sect, so most of us UU’s would not agree with their articulation of doctrine or theology, but they are quite advanced in terms of spiritual practice. The monks’ spiritual practice there is to treat each guest as Christ and so to see in every guest a true manifestation of this divinity. The last night of the retreat our cars were buried by a heavy snow. Since we were to leave just after Sunday Mass with the brothers I broke our meditation session early so we could clear off our cars. When we went outside, we discovered our cars had been dug out already, with the windows scrapped clear, ready for our departure. I knew how busy the brothers were preparing for Mass so I went to the guest master to protest that this effort had been unnecessary. He spoke to me as if speaking to a child, and he said, “The Christ stayed here last night and so we cleared his many cars as is right!” Perhaps in the limited sense in which he meant it, I was a child: at least in terms of being able to see the divinity of every person, and recognizing every problem as an opportunity to serve this divinity.

Our UU first principle is to respect “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” But what if we took this one step further, like the Benedictines, and recognized the inherent divinity of a person. What would it be like if we each truly viewed every other being as aspects of the divine, incarnate in our lives and our very presence? This isn’t unique to the Benedictines or even within Christianity, for it is a basic premise of most mystical paths to the divine to recognize the actual divinity of all beings. Namaste in Hindu!

When Loretta and I were young parents twenty years ago, we lived for a year in Munich and discovered that they greet each other with “Grus Gott” which means I recognize and greet the divine in you! Such a greeting as you head for the subway or your morning coffee “Grus Gott”, what if we really saw the divine in each other? We might be able to see this enormous potential here in our midst.

As we pass through our lives we are forever categorizing that which is friend or foe, comfortable and reassuring or dangerously different, and choosing who to include or exclude from our lives in the process. What would happen if we drew these lines differently, welcoming into our lives the stranger, the infirm and those needing wheelchairs, the cranky or shy, the dispossessed and the unloved? How would we be changed by this encounter with the stranger, and how can we expect their encounter with us to change them as well? Radical hospitality is, consciously choosing to connect with those who we do not already know, to welcome them into our lives. But you will tell me that it is unwise or dangerous, we each learned early “don’t talk to strangers for it is unsafe”, and this is a sort of wisdom for the young and vulnerable, but it also limits our growth. What we each need most is to connect with and to feel the deep acceptance of another human being. We cannot accomplish this within our hardened shells of safety, we must chance the encounter with the other, the stranger, and wildly invite them into our midst.

The UU minister Rev. Don Southworth, who wrote our first reading, also writes “I have had the experience of visiting ten to fifteen Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country since I have become a UU. At almost all of them words were said from the pulpit and in the order of service that proclaimed how glad they were to have me there on Sunday morning. But my experience has almost always been different than the words. In all of the congregations I have visited only one gave me what I consider a truly welcoming, radical hospitality greeting. Only once have I

felt that my presence was really important, really valued in that community. In fact most of the time my presence wasn't even acknowledged, and nobody even talked to me, including one congregation where I had been working for a week!" He writes, "I cannot assess the hospitality of our congregation because when I came into this congregation the first time on a Sunday morning everyone knew who I was and they were doing their best to welcome me with open arms – which y'all did very well. I have spoken to people who have told me that they felt very welcome here and I have talked to people who felt as if nobody cared if they were here or not." How much is our UU congregation like Rev. Southworth's UU congregation?

Like Rev. Southworth I have felt truly welcomed here as your new co-minister. If everyone who came through these doors received the welcome that you have extended to Rev. Martha and myself, we would be a radically welcoming congregation that would put even the Benedictine's to shame. And I have heard stories from some of you about how people reached out and welcomed you when you first arrived here, and why you chose this for your spiritual home. Yet I have also heard stories from other recent guests about feeling unwanted, unnoticed, and unappreciated when they came here. The most disappointing one was a UU Andover Newton seminary student looking for a UU spiritual home, who told me afterwards that she tried to do what we asked. Following the service she greeted Martha and myself, and then went and took a striped mug and positioned herself in various parts of Lyon Chapel during coffee hour. She approached no one and no one approached her, despite standing alone in various parts of Lyon Chapel while groups of people who obviously knew each other swirled around her. To my knowledge, she has not returned and is still seeking a UU spiritual home, in which she can feel truly welcomed and wanted. I wish that we could be that spiritual home for this young woman, as I do every spiritual seeker that visits us.

I am told that this community is radically more hospitable than it used to be. I am told that you continue to want to become more so, to reach out to encounter and welcome the strangers who come through our door each and every Sunday of the year. If every Sunday, each of us approached and engaged just one person we did not already know, this congregation would be transformed over the next year! This is not solely for the sake of the stranger, true community can never be so one sided, but rather it is so that we are all transformed by our engagement with the other, by including more people into our community, our community is transformed into a more

vibrant and welcoming community for us all, a great gift upon our own spiritual path. I want to deeply affirm the work of the Welcoming Congregation Committee, by engaging with them on the journey towards wholeness, we can be spiritually and socially transformed. Over thirty of us grappled Friday evening with the first film in their Welcoming film series. Please participate in their films and workshops throughout the coming year. I want to deeply affirm the work of the Accessibility Subgroup, both architects and lay leaders, by engaging with them on the journey for all to have easy access to our community spaces, we can be spiritually and socially transformed. I want to deeply affirm the work of the Interiors Committee, by giving our spiritual home a facelift and sprucing up, by adding signage both to our interior spaces and exterior spaces, we can collectively make this a place all would love to call home, where all are truly welcome. I want to particularly deeply affirm the work of the Membership Committee, which works so hard to help newcomers find their place here. Radical Hospitality is not their work alone, but rather it is the ongoing transformative work of the whole community. Welcome the stranger, whether obviously divine or not, they each hold a potential key to our mutual transformation. But to truly gain the benefits of radical hospitality, we must be prepared and willing to be transformed by the encounter. And so may it be! Amen.