

Three Cups of Tea
A sermon given by Rev. Frieda Gillespie
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There is no greater spiritual practice than hospitality. This is true because of what hospitality calls out from us, because of what we have to overcome in order to practice it, and because of the relationships it builds based on love and friendship. We can be dutiful and open our doors to strangers but that's just the beginning. Hospitality, ultimately, is a state of being that requires us to open our hearts whether we are guests or hosts. To open our hearts we must let go of our fears and prejudices and greet the stranger in our midst as though they were a sacred messenger. We have to learn to see the best in people and forestall our tendency to judge them.

There was a time in human history when the same word was used for 'host' and 'guest'. The Indo-European root of the words 'host', 'hospice', 'hospitality', 'hospital' and 'guest' is the word ghosti. Ghosti also meant 'stranger' and conveyed the sense of the mutual and reciprocal duties of hospitality. In our reading, the sacred nature of the stranger comes from the recognition that we are in the same situation as our guest because we are 'guests' of the earth. By sharing the gifts of the earth that we enjoy with others we are giving thanks to the source of those gifts.

There are so many unconscious barriers to being open to the stranger. It's very hard to see past our grasping for what we want and think we need enough to really encounter the other.

If you want to try a powerful spiritual practice – choose a topic that interests you and plan to write about it as deeply as you can. You may find as I do that all sorts of strange events occur related to that topic once you commit to it.

On my day off this week, I went to the gym and after my workout, I headed for a favorite breakfast spot in my town. It was about 11:00 and there were many empty tables in the room when I arrived. I took one that could seat four but had only two place settings. The small tables that only seat one or two were all taken except for one in a dark corner with no place setting. As I was getting settled, the waitress came over and asked if I was alone. I said yes and she asked me to move to the small table in the corner because, she explained, people would be coming for lunch soon and they would need the space for a bigger group. Fair enough. But I wasn't happy about it. I am a frequent customer and I expected somehow more of a welcome attitude. The waitress wiped off the little table and then moved on to clean other tables in the room. When I sat down, I saw that the table was very wet. She was close by so I told her that it was wet and asked if she could dry it off. She said something like all the rags were wet. She was pleasant but not helpful. This just felt wrong and I guess that her unresponsiveness again clashed with my expectation of a welcome. Rather than making a further issue of it, I decided to leave. I picked up my coat and left quietly. I then decided to go to a coffee place that also served some food.

As I was driving the lane I was in merged with the lane to the left. I held back until there was a space and started to merge. At that moment an SUV moved aggressively into the space from behind forcing me to come to a dead stop to avoid being hit. The woman driving the SUV didn't look my way as she passed—a common way we objectify other drivers. I was astonished. It was such a blatantly hostile move, I thought.

I made my way to the coffee place and was pleasantly surprised by the delicious breakfast sandwich and jasmine green tea that I was served. As I enjoyed my food, thoughts of hospitality ran through my head. I marveled at how I was having one experience after another of inhospitality. Then I remembered the idea that hospitality is a mutual and reciprocal experience. The irritation I had been feeling was telling. If hospitality is a mutual experience, then it isn't a tit for tat. That is to say, I will be hospitable if you are first, but rather mutuality occurs simultaneously. And then I realized what the question really was: how hospitable was I to that waitress? The waitress who seems to be there every day of the week, who works on her feet all day, who makes very likely less than minimum wage and is expected to make up the rest with tips, the one who is unlikely to make anywhere near what I make. I expected her to cater to me, which meant that far from mutuality, I felt entitled and viewed her as my servant. She was not playing that role. She didn't recognize me as the celebrity I imagined that I was, the Customer with a capital C. She was getting ready for the lunch crowd or perhaps following her own standard of how to do her job.

Then I reflected on the incident with the woman in the SUV. Clearly she was determined to keep me from merging in front of her. What did I know of what motivated her to do that? Nothing. Was it meanness, entitlement, a lack of awareness, or some need she was fulfilling by saying a resounding 'NO' to someone slowing her down, getting in her way? Did my car represent some oppressive force in her life that she was fighting to overcome? I have no way of knowing. What I did know was that I was intolerant of whatever she was doing and feeling. How dare she? In my imagination, she was supposed to cater to my request to merge. She was had no right to a different priority, no right to say 'no'. And, if there is no right to say 'no', there is no freedom, no mutuality.

In Afghanistan, it is said that when a stranger arrives at someone's home they are offered a cup of tea. The next time they arrive, they are offered a second cup of tea and are regarded as a friend. The third time, the third cup of tea and the stranger is stranger no more but family.

Benedictine sister Joan Chittister wrote, "Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn our prejudiced world around one heart at a time."

How often do we welcome strangers without an ulterior motive? We want them to contribute to our cause or join our group or church for our benefit. As understandable as that is, we lose out on a deeper connection outside of ourselves. When we help those in difficult circumstances – do we approach them with a spirit of mutuality or are we enjoying the power of being charitable and feeling superior in the process?

Paul Jordan Smith writes: “We are now, of course, very out of touch with the presence of the sacred: which of us now believes in the literal possibility that among the homeless may be that sacred Guest with whom we refuse to share our bread? We have replaced that inner disposition..., with social obligations, as if the words of pulpit and press could legislate hospitality in the absence of the innocent generosity we are called to develop in ourselves.”

Lao Tzu taught people to give without expectation as in this poem:

Bountiful life, letting anyone attend,
Making no distinction between left or right.
Feeding everyone, refusing no one,
Has not provided this bounty to show how much it owns,
Has not fed and clad its guests with any thought of claim;
And, because it lacks the twist
Of mind or body in what it has done,
The guile of head or hands,
Is not always respected by a guest.
Others appreciate welcome from the perfect host
Who, barely appearing to exist,
Exists the most.

We were taught by the Bible that we are the masters of the earth and all of its creatures. We know now that instead we are her guests and if we keep imposing on her hospitality to the point of her destruction we will be evicted and in large numbers. It is strange that the more we let go of our ego in relation to the world the more real power we have to develop dynamic mutual relationships with all of life.

The extremes of hospitality are holding hostage and parasitism. We hold another hostage by overstaying our welcome whether as a visitor or as a speaker. If we do not pay attention to the people we are speaking to and do not give room for them to respond or initiate another conversation we are holding people hostage. There are of course bigger real world examples of hostage taking that are much more sinister. .

The other extreme is being too dependent on others for our life. We suffocate the relationship by our neediness. Independence or as family systems would call it, differentiation from others is an essential ingredient in healthy hospitality.

Like the wet dog, we are imperfect hosts and imperfect guests but that shouldn't stop us from doing our best to fulfill our roles with sensitivity and openness as much as we can. The irony is that if we do this, we needn't worry about getting people to join in our cause or church because our openness creates a bridge that others can cross without fear of being trapped. How do we develop this “innocent generosity” that Jordan-Smith talks about? It has to be in dialogue with the other. We have to risk

extending or accepting the invitation and give attention to our ulterior motives, our prejudices, our inhospitable habits of relating. In dialog we can learn to relate more deeply. Naming what is going on frees us to be generous with ourselves and the other.

Lao Tzu writes:

If the sign of life is in your face
He who responds to it
Will feel secure and fit
As when, in a friendly place,
Sure of hearty care,
A traveler gladly waits.
Though it may not taste like food
And he may not see the fare
Or hear a sound of plates,
How endless it is and how good!