

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis
Words of Inspiration, October 20, 2013

Hospitality as Transformation

We've been talking about hospitality all this month; we have talking about this practice which I believe is a foundational practice for this congregation. Hospitality is an essential spiritual vocation. Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle wrote:

Our conviction about the inherent worth of every person is the cornerstone upon which everything else in our theology is built. . . . Monarchs and priests considered people evil and sinful by nature to be suppressed and controlled. Slowly and painfully, the sacredness of human life has been wrested from spiritual tyrants and political dictators.ⁱ

Inherent worth and dignity is our first principle; we are called to welcome and to respect people. Nineteenth century Unitarians called us to engage in “self-culture,” what today we might call growing of the soul.

We grow our souls by having open hearts, open minds and open hands. We grow our own souls by welcoming other people into our life space. Ana María Pineda wrote “Hospitality” in *Practicing Our Faith* because authentic hospitality is a practice and it's not always an easy one. Talking about the Christian Bible, Pineda explains:

(T)he word that means “stranger” in Greek, also means “guest” and “host.” This one word signals the essential mutuality that is at the heart of hospitality. No one is

strange except in relation to someone else; we make one another guests and hosts by how we treat one another.ⁱⁱ

In the Christian Bible, the word for hospitality is

philoxenia, love for the stranger/guest/host. Philoxenia can also mean love of the whole atmosphere of hospitality and the whole activity of guesting and hosting. (Within this circle of mutuality) unexpected transformations can occur.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are changed when we are really open to others. I remembered this poem by May Sarton:

Lovers and friends,
I come to you starved
For all you have to give,
Nourished by the food of solitude,
A good instrument for all you have to tell me,
For all I have to tell you.
We talk of first and last things,
Listen to music together,
.....
No one comes to this house
Who is not changed.
I meet no one here who does not change me.

Pineda put it this way:

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves – indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own.^{iv}

To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our life world . . . strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can re direct our seeing and stimulate our imagination. The stories invite us to view the world from a novel perspective.^v

Two weeks ago, I referenced Nanette Sawyer's work, *Hospitality: The Sacred Art, Discovering the Hidden Spiritual Power of Invitation and Welcome*. I recommend I to you. Sawyer named three qualities of transformative spiritual hospitality: receptivity, reverence and generosity. Receptivity is an inner state of being open, prepared to welcome others into our hearts and into our communities. Reverence is a state of being truly with someone, honoring and respecting them. And generosity is a flowing out of physical, emotional and spiritual care.^{vi}

Practicing spiritual hospitality increases one's compassion towards one's self as well as towards others. It can increase your sense of gratitude and appreciation for all the gifts of life. It can help you to know that you have gifts to offer to others.

How does this transformation happen? Sometimes, it can come quickly as your awareness increases. Sawyer described an experience that she had:

When I was a newcomer to a neighborhood mediation center located in someone's home, I had an experience that transformed my understanding of hospitality. After the first meditation program that I attended there, we all gathered in the dining room, about fifteen of us, for tea and snacks. . . . People began chatting with people they knew. However, I didn't know anyone. I stood there

awkwardly, feeling a bit miffed that no one was speaking to me. . . .

Finally, one of the hosts notice me and introduced me to someone else. As I began to talk and visit, I began to see that the “regulars” felt just as vulnerable meeting me as I felt in meeting them. . . they didn’t know what to say to me. . . . I suddenly saw that I had the power to be hospitable and neighborly toward them . . . (This) was a shift from focusing on my vulnerability and the power of others to realizing my own power and the vulnerability of others. . . . This was immensely empowering because I saw that I have the power to be hospitable in any situation.^{vii}

We are all vulnerable and we can all offer hospitality, compassion and acceptance.

For this morning, I tried to remember something from my own life that felt like a sudden change, but I couldn’t think of anything. What I remembered was how being open, listening to and learning from others transformed me over time. Changed me from being a frightened, sometimes depressed young woman to being (mostly) unafraid, calm, confident and compassionate.

Lonni Collins Pratt wrote in *Radical Hospitality* that “Hospitality is the way we really learn to love; it is the way out of our own brooding fears and broken hearts.”^{viii} Giving and receiving love changes us.

I remembered my friend Keith. I met Keith when I was 17 or 18; he had a job with another friend and began to hang out with our group. I thought Keith was cute, smart, creative and funny. For a while, Keith dated my friend Carol. That ended and Keith approached me. I talked with Carol to see if it would matter to her if I went out with Keith. It didn't . . . So, we were a couple, sort of . . . A couple of years later, Keith came to me and came out as a gay man. I wasn't surprised. Although I didn't have a lot of experience with men, Keith hadn't pursued a physical relationship as other men had. When we kissed, there usually wasn't any passion in it.

I wasn't surprised, but Keith was my first good friend who was gay. I didn't know much of anything about the experience of being a gay man. Keith was a good enough friend to share his experience and growing knowledge with me. He also knew that I was studying counseling and wanted me as a counseling professional to be aware. I remember that he sent me a booklet about violence against gay men and women in Philadelphia. Keith later died in the AIDS epidemic.

I remembered my friend Mary. Mary is an African-American woman, a few years older than me. She was a professional counselor and we were co-workers. Sometimes we went out to lunch together. Mary taught me to see things that I hadn't known or seen before. At one lunch place, the cashier refused to hand Mary her change although he handed it to all the white folks. At a store, my tall, well-dressed friend was eyed suspiciously.

As a therapist, I was privileged to hear so many stories, so many stories. I remember an Iranian American young woman. She had been an elementary aged child in Iran

during the Iranian revolution. She was taken to a camp, taught to shoot and told that she should be prepared to shoot her parents if they weren't loyal. So many stories. Thomas Ogletree said:

To offer hospitality to a stranger is to welcome something new, unfamiliar, and unknown into our life world . . . strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can re direct our seeing and stimulate our imagination. The stories invite us to view the world from a novel perspective. ^{ix}

Stories change us. They can help us to know, deeply know, that we are all vulnerable and that we all have inherent dignity and worth. Stories can redirect our actions. Lonni Collins Pratt wrote in *Radical Hospitality*:

When we speak of hospitality, we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. . . . Hospitality has an inescapable moral dimension to it. It is not a mere social grace; it is a spiritual and ethical issue. It is an issue involving what it means to be human. . . Hospitality is not optional to a well-balanced and healthy life. It meets the most basic need of the human being to be known and to know others. ^x

As the practice of hospitality increase our wisdom and openness, we tend to become more aware of the deeper implications of hospitality. . . . What you do, as one person, to receive others does matter. Hospitality, however, involves us not only as individuals but also as our entire culture. In a culture that excludes others, prejudice and hatred are common. . . . ^{xi}

So, hospitality can change us. It can help us to be more loving and compassionate, to be wiser and to be less afraid. Practicing spiritual hospitality, genuine receptivity and reverence can lead to dismantling internal racism and internal oppression. Practicing hospitality can help us to know that we have gifts to give and that we have the power to respond to others; we can have a genuine generosity. Pratt wrote, "Hospitality is a way to counter the thousands of times another human being has felt less than human because others didn't listen."^{xii}

Sawyer told another story of her own experience, a time when putting hospitality into practice was difficult for her. She was walking home with a friend from a wonderful dinner out. They were both carrying leftover boxes. Sawyer had been talking about how good the leftovers would be later.

As we left the restaurant, a man came up to us on the street, asking for money. I felt very nervous, as I often have when approached on the street, wondering whether this person would let me go by peacefully or become confrontational. We said we wouldn't give him money, and I started to walk away. But my friend said to him, "Would you like some food?" His eyes lit up and he said emphatically, "Yes." She gave him her take away box.

They both turned and looked at me. I looked down at my take out box and thought about the delicious food in there. It was from my favorite restaurant. I hesitated. I was unprepared to let it go. My friend saw the hesitation in my face and turned to the man and said, "Enjoy that. God bless you." . . . I admired the openness and the gracious giving that she had shown the man and to me.

This was compassion in the sense that she didn't try to change me and didn't seem to judge me. . . . She simply offered what she had. I had never seen this kind of respectful love in action in that way, and I was changed by seeing her respectful, reverent heart. I saw her awareness that she was connected to the unknown man on the street – in fact, I saw that he was known because she looked at him with "knowing" eyes, eyes willing to take him in, see him deeply and greet the holiness in him. . . .^{xiii}

Sawyer goes on to say that she went to that same restaurant another time with another friend and again left with take-out boxes.

A different man came up to us, asking for money. We told him that we had no money to give him, but I remembered my earlier experience and blurted out, "Would you like some food?" His eyes lit up and he said emphatically, "Yes." . . . This changed me.. It changed my heart. . . . On a fundamental level I realized that I am in relationship with this man . . .

Sawyer found herself changed and changing; she took a very concrete action and realized her connection to all.

Today, we have an opportunity to support actions to extend our hospitality into the wider world, by working to change racism and other oppressions. The Justice Council and the board are encouraging two actions:

1. Voting to support an 8th Unitarian Universalist principle that explicitly names oppressions and asks

us to be accountable in dismantling racism and other oppressions.

2. Voting to become a sponsoring congregation for UUPLAN, the Unitarian Universalist Pennsylvania Legislative Advocacy Network which works to counter oppressive laws in Pennsylvania.

The practice of transformative spiritual hospitality begins internally, then connects with other people and then extends outward in loving, hospitable actions in the world.

I invite you this week to pay special attention to making eye contact with people that you don't know, greeting and listening to them. Pay attention and notice what happens internally and externally. We work to build bridges and to tear down barriers. The 8th principle and support UUPLAN are both about tearing down barriers.

So may it be. Amen and Ashe.

ⁱ Owen-Towle, Tom. *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 276.

ⁱⁱ Pineda, Ana María. "Chapter 3, Hospitality" in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p.32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pineda, Ana María. "Chapter 3, Hospitality" in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, pp. 33-34.

^{iv} Pineda, Ana María. "Chapter 3, Hospitality" in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p.38.

^v Ogletree, Thomas from *Hospitality to the Stranger*. Quoted in "Chapter 3, Hospitality" by Ana María Pineda in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 35.

^{vi} Sawyer, Nanette. *Hospitality: The Sacred Art*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008, p. 1.

^{vii} Sawyer, Nanette. *Hospitality: The Sacred Art*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008, p. 72-73.

^{viii} Pratt, Lonni Collins. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002, p. 30.

^{ix} Ogletree, Thomas from *Hospitality to the Stranger*. Quoted in "Chapter 3, Hospitality" by Ana María Pineda in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 35.

^x Pratt, Lonni Collins. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002, pp. 3-9.

^{xi} Pratt, Lonni Collins. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002, p. 27.

^{xii} Pratt, Lonni Collins. *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002, p. 215.

^{xiii} Sawyer, Nanette. *Hospitality: The Sacred Art*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2008, pp. 115-116.