

**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
**Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis**  
**Words of Inspiration, October 6, 2013**

***Invitation and Welcome***

This morning, Annabel told evocative stories, stories that we can feel, of giving genuine hospitality. I wanted to think of stories of receiving hospitality.

I remembered the first time that my husband and I visited the Unitarian Universalist congregation which we later joined, the one where eventually I was able to speak of my call to ministry. Rick and I had experienced serious disappointment in our previous religious community, an unprogrammed Quaker community which became openly homophobic and much, much more conservative than it was when we first joined it.

I knew that theologically I belonged with the Unitarian Universalists, and there was new congregation in my community. They had just hired their first ministers (a couple sharing one position). But our involvement in the Quaker community had ended badly and I was skeptical of any community involvement when we went to the UU worship service.

We were warmly greeted at the door and when we sat down, people were happily greeting us. It was as if they had been expecting us and we had finally arrived. When I opened the grey hymnal and read our seven principles in the front of the book, I felt welcomed and knew again that I belonged, because here my values and aspirations were explicitly stated.

That welcome led me to decide to commit to Unitarian Universalist community, to stay and work through difficult times because I belonged and because I could be known.

As I thought about times of receiving hospitality, I remembered when I was first hired by this congregation. A search committee had hired me, a small search committee of four people. And I had talked to Harald Grote, then moderator (which means president) of the congregation. I learned later that there had been some distress and controversy about the hiring process. The controversy was not about me, I want to be clear!

So when I arrived, people were curious about me. Could I really be their minister? Would I be another disappointment? (Thanks be, for all of us, –that wasn't the case!)

Still, what I want to say about that time was that I was very warmly welcomed; folks here were very hospitable! I received a number of invitations to dinners in people's homes, to events that folks had purchased at the church auction the year before. People did want to know who I was; they were concerned about my well-being.

Some time shortly after that first worship service, I was in Fellowship Hall at our coffee hour and for a moment, not talking with anyone, I looked around the room at people of all ages talking with one another, laughing and sharing food. I saw little ones happily running around underfoot and flirting with the grown ups. I saw some of our elders sitting on the side but never sitting alone. I saw people getting coffee or food for some of the folks who were sitting. I looked around and saw the community and teared up at the simple beauty of it, of you. In fact, even as I write this, I can feel the tears

again.

I think this community is pretty good at authentic community, but it's still important to think about hospitality, to remind ourselves of the religious importance of hospitality.

I remember a congregational meeting at another congregation at which a member complained about the use of the word, "hospitality." For her, it referred to the "hospitality industry," hotels and restaurants, or perhaps to hosting parties. Creating nice space and good food is wonderful, and it can be part of hospitality. We've been working here to clean up our building, to maintain and to improve its attractiveness. We often have great food here. Still, those things are not what radical, religious hospitality is about.

Unitarian Universalist minister, Tom Owen-Towle wrote a wise and useful little book, *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. He said:

The mission of every Unitarian Universalist community is to offer an open door to all souls, then to lovingly attend to those who choose to join our household. (Visitors) are kindly welcomed and sensitively treated. . . . Mature church life begins with hospitality, the most ancient religious rite, . . . . We are accepted as we are even as we are challenged to grow toward whom we might become."<sup>i</sup>

In another place, Owen-Towle affirmed the essential importance of hospitality:

Hospitality isn't mere social grace; it's a spiritual vocation with an inescapable moral cost. It evokes our most basic religious (I would say human) need to know

and be known, to embrace and to be embraced.<sup>ii</sup>

My favorite spiritual writer this fall is Jean Vanier. In his book *Community and Growth*, he wrote about welcome;

To welcome is one of the signs of true human and Christian maturity. It is not only to open one's door and one's home to someone. It is to give space to someone in one's heart, space for that person to be and to grow; space where that person knows that he or she is accepted just as they are, with their wounds and with their gifts. . . . To welcome is to be open to reality as it is, with the least possible filtering.<sup>iii</sup>

So what does it take to offer that kind of open welcome, a welcome of open heart, open mind, open hands. First, it takes intention. It takes paying attention to one's own self.

It takes learning that you are invited, knowing that you are enough, that you are welcomed and that you are loved. Hospitality begins with learning to be hospitable, to be welcoming and accepting of your self. Vanier puts it this way:

(To give that space for another) implies the existence of a quiet and peaceful place in the heart where people can find a resting place. If the heart is not peaceful, it cannot welcome. . . . To be able to welcome means that our inner person and freedom have been strengthened; we are no longer a person living in fear and insecurity.<sup>iv</sup>

When you find that place in yourself, you are able to extend the invitation to another. Writer Lonni Pratt suggests

the question, “May I know you better?” is at the heart of invitation. Perhaps you have had the experience that I have had, an experience which has touched me: the experience of someone saying “I’d like to be your friend.” That is a moving invitation and it is one that often people fear to extend.

Hospitality is illustrated in the family movie that we showed on Friday night. *Babe* is the story of a piglet won by a farmer who doesn’t have any other pigs. At the beginning, the narrator says, “The pig and the farmer regarded each other and something passed between them. They knew their destinies were connected.” At the farm, the little piglet cries for his mom and is adopted by a sheep dog mom. Her puppies are all glad to have a new friend to play with.

Through the story various farm animals tell Babe who he should be as a pig. Despite that stereotyped instruction, the little pig comes to know himself and to know himself as a loving and welcoming animal. “The pig promised himself that he would never think badly of any other creature again. He becomes a sheep pig by being polite and courteous to the sheep, asking them to go to where the farmer wants them to go rather than barking orders and threats at the sheep. The pig inspires connection between the other animals and even the humans.

Hospitality takes intention and invitation and it takes practice. It takes that practice that helps you to be peaceful and free, that helps you to accept and love yourself. I call that spiritual practice. And giving hospitality is itself a spiritual practice.

Brenda Ridley told me about a book that she had found and I thank her for sharing this moving book with me. *Hospitality: The Sacred Art. Discovering the Hidden Power of Invitation and Welcome* by Nanette Sawyer. Sawyer wrote that the practice of hospitality begins with receptivity, a posture of invitation and openness. It is about awareness and acceptance. Again, this receptivity begins with one's self and then moves out to others. The next step in hospitality, Sawyer calls reverence, a posture of welcome. "In a state of reverence, we stand in the full presence of another while being fully present ourselves. Here is deep acceptance and love in this state as we encounter the image of God in each other."<sup>v</sup>

Finally, Sawyer says generosity completes the circle of hospitality. She affirms, "Receiving deep hospitality changes us; learning to offer it changes us even more. The practice of deep hospitality can help us to step into a more vital, vibrant embrace of this great adventure we call life."<sup>vi</sup>

So dear ones, let us continue our commitment to practicing deep hospitality, living fully and standing on the side of love!

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

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<sup>i</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Boston: Skinner House, 2004, pp. 9-13.

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<sup>ii</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom, *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 280.

<sup>iii</sup> Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p. 265.

<sup>iv</sup> Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989, p. 265.

<sup>v</sup> Sawyer, Nanette. *Hospitality: The Sacred Art*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Press, 2008, p. 4

<sup>vi</sup> Sawyer, *Hospitality: The Sacred Art*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Press, 2008, p. 3