

# “The Art of Hospitality”

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## Meditation

“Red Brocade” – From *19 Varieties of Gazelle* - Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,  
When a stranger appears at your door,  
feed him for three days  
before asking who he is,  
where he's come from,  
where he's headed.  
That way, he'll have strength  
enough to answer.  
Or, by then you'll be  
such good friends  
you don't care.  
Let's go back to that.  
Rice? Pine Nuts?  
Here, take the red brocade pillow.  
My child will serve water  
to your horse.  
No, I was not busy when you came!  
I was not preparing to be busy.  
That's the armour everyone puts on  
to pretend they had a purpose  
in the world.  
I refuse to be claimed.  
Your plate is waiting.  
We will snip fresh mint  
into your tea.

## Reading

“The Fine Art of the Good Guest” by Jeffrey Lockwood from *A Guest of the World*

The most important thing that I've learned in traveling to more than twenty countries

is the art of being a guest. And I'm a particularly fine visitor at the supper table. I've consumed live fish in Inner Mongolia, not-quite-coagulated blood sausage on the Tibetan plateau, shredded pig's ear in China, grilled lamb fat in Uzbekistan, horse steaks in Kazakhstan, vodka made from fermented mare's milk in Siberia, vegemite in Australia, goat in Brazil, and snails in France. I don't have an iron stomach, by any means, but I do have the will to be a virtuous visitor.

We are all visitors—even when we are home. Our time in any relationship or place is ultimately limited. We are passing through; nobody stays forever. How might we act if we consider ourselves guests in the lives of friends and family? Being a good guest is rather simple in principle but occasionally challenging in practice.

One begins by demanding nothing more than the bare elements of life and dignity, which every host is more than delighted to exceed. The good guest then simply allows the other person to be a good host—to share his gifts, to play her music, to tell his stories, to show her places, and to serve his foods. Finally, a guest should cultivate and express genuine gratitude. It need not be effusive or exorbitant, only sincere. We might also think of ourselves as uninvited, but not unwelcome, guests of the planet. And I think the rules for being a good guest of the world are just the same: Ask little, accept what is offered, and give thanks.

### **Sermon: “Radical Hospitality”**

Genuine hospitality is sometimes harder than it seems.

Many summers ago, before I arrived here,  
and while I was in seminary,  
I lived in Ohio for six weeks.

On accepting a fellowship to be the summer minister  
at the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland,  
I had to scramble to find a place to live.

As it turns out, six weeks is an awkward length of time:  
too long to live happily in a hotel and too short to lease an apartment.  
Unfortunately, this was before the advent of Airbnb.

I looked into subletting an extended-stay apartment,  
but none of the options was all that compelling or comforting.

Because I had massive amounts of reading and studying to do,  
I thought of calling upon the Benedictine monastery a short distance away.

As I thought more and more about it,  
I grew excited at the idea of turning my stay into a six-week retreat,  
a change of pace from the rhythms of my life back at home.

I fantasized about living out the daily schedule of a monk,  
turning my full attention to a life of quiet contemplation and study.

I imagined long blocks of silent meditation  
interrupted only by a tolling bell calling me to dinner or my daily chores.

Now, to make clear how overly-romanticized my thinking had grown,  
I should confess that I've generally failed to find enlightenment  
by taking deep delight in cutting up carrots or mopping the floors at home. . .

Still, somehow, I just knew that life  
would feel so much more spiritual in a monastery.

And while I might not find nirvana,  
I thought I might just gain some insight into what it means to be  
a Unitarian living around the clock  
in a religious community, dedicated to spiritual practice.

I also figured I could handle anything for six weeks.

So, I wrote a letter to the abbot, explaining my situation,  
and expressing my desire for an environment in which I could study  
while contributing to the daily work of the brothers in the monastery.

A few days passed, and I received a phone call from the abbot.

He told me he knew of this church where I'd be working.  
He then said, "as you well know, you all are more liberal than we are."

In that moment, hearing the tone of his voice,  
I knew I wasn't going to be spending the summer in a monastery after all.

Now, if he'd just said "no," it would have been easier to take.

But, instead, he felt compelled to tell me his community  
was very welcoming and appreciated people from other faiths,  
but, in the end, he said he just didn't feel comfortable  
having a UU seminarian around.

At first, I thought, well, it's better to learn this sooner than later.

But, our conversation gnawed at me for days.

And not just because I'd been rejected for my faith,  
which was small potatoes compared to what some of our forebears endured.

What really got to me was that I had just been shunned  
by a religious order that holds up hospitality as their core spiritual practice.

The famous Rule of St. Benedict, written more than 1,500 years ago  
and still guiding Benedictine monasteries today says:

“All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.”

Well, so much for that.

In fairness to the abbot, six weeks is an odd length of time,  
and perhaps he was wise to recognize the chasm between our beliefs.

But, as A. Powell Davies put it:  
“How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!”

Shortly after this experience,  
over dinner with a group of friends,  
I told my tale of woe.

One friend, who is Buddhist, said I hadn't tried hard enough.

He told of the practice in Zen monasteries of how potential initiates  
are repeatedly refused admittance  
as a way of testing the depth of their commitment  
for taking up Buddhist practice as a monk or nun.

In approaching a traditional Japanese Zen monastery to begin practice,  
you are expected to have left behind all that you hold most dear,  
that you may find the courage to face yourself unencumbered.

And, so, you would arrive with a small bag  
with only a few personal necessities.

As you approached the front of the monastery,  
there would be a high wall with a large,  
an imposing entrance called the Mountain Gate,

because beginning Zen is like climbing a mountain.

But before starting off on the full-time path to enlightenment,  
you have to get your foot in the door.

And so you knock.

Eventually, you'll be greeted by a very mean monk,  
who will tell you that the monastery  
is too full or too poor to accept another student.

And then, for good measure,  
he'll probably suggest you wouldn't like it there anyway.

If you haven't been scared away, you try again.

And so does the monk, who will return to berate you  
for not understanding what he's already told you.

Adding insult to injury,  
he'll likely swear and swat at your head.

And then close the door.

You knock again. And again. And again.

The door remains closed.  
Darkness falls.  
Doubt sets in.

Maybe, you think, you really aren't cut out for this, after all.

But if you somehow decide that you are,  
you draw yourself together on the stoop,  
sitting with your arms wrapped around your knees  
and your face buried between them.

Whether it's obvious or not, you're being carefully watched.

But, if the monk reappears, it's only to chase you off.

You might remain seated on the steps until dawn,  
or you might finally be allowed into the monastery to sleep in a hallway.

In any case, the next morning will find you out on the steps again, going through the same ordeal all over.

On the second night, you might be allowed to stay overnight in an open courtyard.

The next day you'd be expected to sit in the lotus position, should anyone happen by.

This excruciating and lonely experience is called *tangaryo*.

At the end of the day, you might be introduced to a monk, who would question your motives and your background.

If you're found to be sincere, you would be given a probationary place in the Zendo and shown how to begin meditation.

Still, it might take weeks or months before you'd be introduced to the Teacher of the Zendo and allowed to begin to actually practice Zen.

Hearing all of this reminded me of my experience with the Benedictine abbot.

But, hearing all of this also reminded me (and maybe some of you) of a typical Unitarian Coffee Hour—you know, back in that distant day, when we once met in person...

The fact is that our communities have not always been as welcoming to the stranger as we might have imagined them to be.

On any given Sunday, in most UU congregations, newcomers were likely to find a bit of Benedictine hospitality, as well as a few closed doors not unlike the Mountain Gate.

As we move ever so slowly towards life beyond the pandemic, we have ongoing work to do as a community to truly practice the art of hospitality.

Especially as we prepare to move and settle into a new neighbourhood.

For we may soon find ourselves “strangers in a strange land.”

And in need of hospitality ourselves.

But the beauty of hospitality  
is that it has a way of flowing in both directions.

It is our shared vulnerability in this world  
that makes such reciprocity so essential.

In ancient times, there was a moral mandate to welcome the stranger,  
as though their life depended upon—because it just might.

Such hospitality has always hinged  
on the recognition of the sacred in the other.

It is what is at the root of the Golden Rule around the world.

It's what Jesus meant when he said  
we are to love our neighbours as ourselves—  
that by doing so, we might come to see all those  
who journey with us through this world  
as having inherent worth and dignity all their own.

Yet, in our time, this sense of responsibility to the stranger,  
or even to our neighbours,  
can seem to be in short supply.

Especially now, a year-and-a-half into this pandemic,  
as so many of us have lived—  
at least to some extent—  
closed off from the world and from those around us.

With our faces so often masked, there's a real risk  
of treating our neighbours, quite literally, like faceless automatons,  
be they delivering our dinner or bagging our groceries.

Perhaps you've found yourself, like me, overcompensating at times.

Trying awkwardly to somehow convey a smile through my mask  
as I negotiate the narrow sidewalk with other pedestrians  
or try to navigate my buggy through the aisles of the grocery store.

As a wise thirteen-year-old said to me earlier this week,  
when I asked how she was feeling about the return to in-person classes at school,  
"I'm going to have to learn how to act around other people again."

I suspect that to be true for many of us.

While the pandemic has in so many ways brought out the very best of our humanity, it's also revealed, at times, just how very human we can be—which isn't always a compliment.

Maybe we've forgotten our manners.  
Or maybe we've forgotten our shared humanity.

Whatever the cause, hospitality calls us to pay attention.

Maybe that's why the Benedictines have made a practice of hospitality, for it surely takes sustained effort to learn how to pay attention.

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I've recently had yet another monastery story on my mind.

Maybe this one you've heard.

I've updated and adapted the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield's version. It goes like this...

Deep in the forest, there was a monastery that had fallen on hard times.

Once thriving, things had now become so bad that there were only the abbot and a few monks left.

The monastery seemed well past its better days.

In despair, the abbot decided to seek the counsel of a wise rabbi.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot and listened very carefully.

But when the abbot finished his tale, the rabbi only shook his head and said, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone from the people. It's the same here; almost no one comes here anymore."

The two men wept together and spoke of many deep things.

Eventually the abbot had to leave.

As they embraced, the rabbi said,  
“I’m sorry I had no advice for you.  
The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

The abbot returned to the monastery and sadly told the monks,  
“The rabbi couldn’t help.  
We just wept and read the Torah together.  
The only thing he did say was that the Messiah is one of us,  
but I have no idea what he meant.”

The monks pondered.  
What did the rabbi mean?  
Could the Messiah really be one of them?

Maybe it was Abbot?

Or, Brother Thomas, who is so clearly a holy man?

It’s surely not Brother Michael? He’s too crotchety.

But, when you come right down to it,  
Brother Michael is always right about things.

Sister Margaret? No, she’s so quiet and passive.  
Still, when you really need someone, she has a way of magically appearing.

They thought that maybe the rabbi meant  
one of the visitors who came there from time to time.  
Had the Messiah come and they had missed him?

And they thought to themselves: surely the rabbi didn’t mean me!  
I’m just an ordinary person....  
But...what if he did mean me?

As all of the pondering continued,  
the monks began to treat each other with great care,  
just in case one of them really was the Messiah.

They began to treat themselves with great care, too—just in case.

Occasionally hikers coming through the forest would visit the monastery,  
sometimes stopping to pray in the old chapel.

They began to notice something strangely compelling about the monastery.

For one thing, the monks radiated love and respect.

People began to make special trips to the forest,  
just to be in the presence of the monks.

They brought their families and friends to show them this special place.

Some of the younger folks began sitting together in a group  
to hear the teachings of the older monks.

Then one young man decided to join;  
and then someone else joined, and another, and another...

Within a few years, the monastery was thriving again.

Thanks to the rabbi it became a vibrant centre of light and love.

The seed he planted called them to risk  
living as though the sacred dwelt among them.

That vision helped turn their concern into care  
and their faith into action.

And in it they found the common ground  
from which to change their corner of the world:  
they had met their calling in radical hospitality.

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The promise of reciprocity—  
of being cared for and the obligation to care for others—  
has always been behind the religious practice of hospitality.

In ancient times, the kindness of strangers  
was very often the only buffer between life and death.

A cup of water.  
A safe place to sleep.

Though much has changed about the world we live in,  
our need for this ancient covenant has not.

The late, great Unitarian theologian Henry Nelson Wieman said,  
love “opens the way for a creative transformation  
which will vastly magnify the good of life beyond anything else.”

With all of my being, I believe in that transforming power of love.

I believe it can change the world.  
And that it must.

But it is only by recognizing the love  
that dwells within, between, and beyond us  
that we approach the transforming truth in those words—  
as we slowly become like those monks,  
finding ourselves in the presence of something truly sacred,  
and being changed by it in the process.

To speak of the fragile art of hospitality—  
is to speak of such a love, a love that goes the distance.

As Unitarian Universalists, this is our gospel.  
This is our good news:  
that in building up communities of care  
that transcend our petty differences,  
that actively reach beyond the walls  
that separate us one from another,  
that we speak through our lives  
to the transforming love that can change our world—  
and even ourselves—for good.

So may it be.

Amen.