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I was a stranger and you welcomed me

HOSPITALITY AS
A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Paul Bramer

Doug and Vera had a large family—seven children in all. Doug was a shopkeeper and lay minister. Finances were tight and second-hand clothes and furniture were the norm. But their modest means did not stop them from welcoming people into their home. The children's friends were invited over for lunch or dinner several times a week; visiting preachers, missionaries, and out-of-town friends always got a meal and a bed. The house being small, overnight guests meant the younger children would sleep under the dining room table, though they considered it an adventure.

As the children became teenagers they kept up the habit of inviting friends over. Some of the teens took to calling Doug and Vera "Dad and Mom." It seemed to meet some need in their lives—they would stand in the kitchen with Vera and help wash dishes just to talk with her. When six young children in the neighborhood became motherless, the household expanded to fifteen for a while. Somehow one bathroom sufficed.

A small anonymous cash gift would sometimes appear in the mailbox, but the cost of hospitality was mainly squeezed from the family budget. At one point a visitor taped on the refrigerator, among the magnet pictures of missionaries, a small saying that read, "A house with love has elastic walls."

Doug and Vera's children are all grown now, and each is an active lay-leader or in full-time Christian service. I'm the eldest of those seven children. Doug and Vera are my parents, and their example showed me the profound impact of the practice of hospitality on the lives of guests and hosts.

The Greek word *xenos* can mean "guest" or its counterpart, "host" (like in Romans 16:23, NRSV, "Gaius, who is host to me"). It can also be understood to mean "stranger" as in Ephesians 2:19, "You are no longer strang-

ers . . . but members of the household of God.”

Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:35, “I was hungry and you gave me food . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” combine these ideas of stranger, guest, and host. Jesus understood hospitality and being an outsider. He was born in a stable when there was no other room; during his ministry, he depended on the hospitality of others; he spent the last day before his arrest in a borrowed upper room where he shared a meal with his disciples and spoke to them of the home he was going to prepare for them. He knew how it felt to have his feet washed, the common courtesy of hosts in Jesus’ time—and to have such hospitality withheld. He identified with the homeless, the refugee, the traveler, the vulnerable, the deprived, the needy, the stranger.

Our word *xenophobia* means a fear of strangers or foreigners. Fear of the unknown or those who are different is a nearly universal phenomenon. But Christians are supposed to have *philoxenia*—love for the stranger—a desire to extend a hand, make a place, meet a need. We are to welcome strangers, making them instead honored guests.

Hospitality says, “there’s a place for you here.” In its traditional meaning, hospitality is the free and cheerful provision of shelter, food, and friendship to a guest in our homes—whether we know them or not. This welcome may be extended to any number of situations, such as church, work, or a public space. It may be as simple as giving a smile when someone arrives, moving further into a row at a meeting so that latecomers can find a place, or giving people a ride. Hospitality also represents an attitude and way of life so our thoughts and language, rituals and institutions are shaped by a compassionate and inclusionary spirit.

Why be hospitable? Primarily, because our God is hospitable. Deuteronomy 10:18 tell us that God loves stran-

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ers, and gives them food and clothing.” Just as the Hebrews were to love the stranger because they had been strangers in the land of Egypt, we who were without a spiritual home know what it is like to have been completely taken in by God.

The gospel itself is the good news of God’s hospitality—free provision of our eternal needs through Jesus Christ and our full inclusion in the household of God. We are to be hospitable because hospitality is an act of love. And we are to be hospitable because sometimes and somehow, in the stranger or person in need, Christ comes to us.

In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henry Nouwen presents hospitality as a primary indicator of the healthy and genuine Christian life. But the transient nature of modern life has made most of us strangers to one another. Our fears, self-suffi-

ciency, busyness, privacy, desire for comfort, hurts, and hates have made us unwilling to taking each other in.

We also neglect hospitality because it is difficult. It requires cooperation, forethought, intentionality, and prayer. So how can we develop the spiritual discipline of hospitality?

First, we have to realize that welcoming people into our homes affects our spouse, children, roommate, relative—anyone who lives there. Be respectful of the needs and boundaries of the household, and build up a spirit of cooperation so that hosting can be shared and enjoyed by all.

It also helps to think ahead. Keep a supply of easily-prepared food for meals and basic provisions for overnight guests. You are not “entertaining” or “impressing”—you are making a person feel welcomed and included.

Be intentional. Strangers don’t just stop by much in our society, so we need to deliberately seek out those who might benefit from hospitality. Prayer

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helps prepare our hearts for hospitality. It helps us be ready to listen, learn, and laugh—to be people that others want to be around.

Reviving the practice of hospitality can break down many of the barriers, such as race, age, and class, that divide us. Once someone has been our guest, they are no longer strangers. They are friends. In our church, for example, welcoming a group of Sudanese refugees has made us more aware of what is happening in their country because now it affects our friends.

Those who extend hospitality usually find themselves gaining more than they give. Taking in those from other cultures and subcultures is a way of traveling and learning. Your guests will open up windows to other worlds and meanings and people. Bonding occurs when table and story and laughter are shared. And when, in the context of hospitality, you pray or converse about things of the Lord with a fellow believer or share Christ with those who have not yet understood what he has for them, there will be a blessing, a sense that Christ himself is present. May we commit to a lifestyle of hospitality for the sake of others, ourselves, and Christ and his kingdom. □

RECOMMENDED READING

Practicing Our Faith: A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growing, Dorothy Bass

Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, Henri J.M. Nouwen

And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity, Amy G. Oden, editor

The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life, Parker J. Palmer, Foreword by Martin E. Marty

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition, Christine D. Pohl

Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, Marjorie J. Thompson, Foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen