

one

The Taming of Hospitality

Catherine had never felt accepted. You know the kind of kid; you went to school with a few of them. It was as if she had been selected the very first day of kindergarten to be always on the outside. Maybe she was wearing mismatched mittens one day, or she still had peanut butter on her breath from breakfast. Maybe she wore the same shoes her sister wore last year. Father Dan never knew the reason for her being the social outcast she was. By the time he met her on retreat, she was firmly in place as the target for the teenaged sport of ridicule.

Without knowing the details, you can be sure that Catherine spent a lot of very tough nights growing up. She must have wondered if her life meant anything and

wondered if anyone would ever listen to her. She probably did not dare hope that she would ever be loved. It is hard to imagine, if you've never been the one on the outside, what it can do to you. Just getting out of bed each morning becomes an act of courage.

On one of the worst nights of her life, Catherine called Mary Cummings, Father Dan's partner in retreat ministry for almost thirty years. She called Mary because once, when Catherine had dropped books and whatever else she was carrying, Mary stopped and helped. Mary extended the simplest of courtesies to this girl that had known only contempt. By taking a moment to look into her eyes, say a few words, and help in an awkward situation, Mary demonstrated to Catherine that she could be counted on to care. On the night when Catherine honestly did not know if she wanted to see another sunrise, she called Mary.

When we speak of hospitality we are always addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion. Each of us makes choices about who will and who will not be included in our lives. To make such choices is inevitable; we do not have time to be everyone's best friend. The reasons we include and exclude are very personal. You and I probably can't even say why we

become close to some people and have no interest in getting to know, or include, others. We only know that we prefer some, and others are harder to like.

Issues of inclusion and exclusion, while personal, are not just personal. Our entire culture excludes many people. If you are in a wheelchair, for example, you are excluded because there are places you can't go. If you are very young, if you are very old, you are excluded. In high school you can be excluded if you don't wear the right shoes or listen to the right music. Women are excluded, as are people of color, and those who practice a religion different from our own.

In our idealism about American life the poor are always excluded; they are our embarrassing little American secret. The American dream has failed the one in six children living in poverty. These children will, most likely, grow up to a lifetime of exclusion. Somewhere, sometime, you were excluded. Remember what that was like. Some people live with the experience constantly.

There was a common saying in Germany just before the Nazi reign: "The human body contains a sufficient amount of fat to make seven cakes of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, a sufficient

amount of phosphorus for two thousand match-heads, enough sulfur to rid one person of fleas.” The Nazi view of humanity reduced us to nothing more than the usefulness of our physical components, and when that was used up it was fine to cast aside the human being.

But you and I are much more than what we appear to be. We are more than what we do. We are more than a social or economic class. In the movie *Elephant Man*, actor John Merrick is chased through a train station and cornered in a bathroom by a mob who see only his deformity, his difference from them. He cries out, “I am not an animal. . . . I am a human being. . . .”

This is the sound of every single human heart. It is the cry we make against all that would make us less human, the cry of the darkest night of our lives, the cry of the abandoned and the misunderstood and the excluded. “I am not an animal. I am like you. I am human.”

I am not a street person.

I am not a token of my race or creed.

I am not a statistic.

I am not a divorcée.

I am not an AIDS patient.

I am not a sex object.

I am not a laborer.

I am not an “at-risk” kid.

I have a mind. I have a heart. I have a soul. I dream. I feel. I care. I am a human being.

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. All of our talk about hospitable openness doesn't mean anything as long as some people continue to be tossed aside.

In a 1982 report, one ethicist put it this way: “the opposite of cruelty is not simply freedom from the cruel relationship, it is hospitality.” Hospitality puts an end to injustice. But calling hospitality a moral issue does not tell us the whole truth about hospitality either. A moral issue can become bogged down in legalisms, and hospitality is no legalistic ethical issue. It is instead a spiritual practice, a way of becoming more human, a way of understanding yourself. Hospitality is both the answer to modern alienation and injustice *and* a path to a deeper spirituality.

As a culture, we are frightened people living behind locked doors, fashioning our homes as reclusive retreats from what we believe is a hostile world that

drains us of the energies we most cherish. The world at our gate is a fearsome thing. We lock the doors, click on the security system, put on headphones, and enter a place where we hope to be left to ourselves but always keep an ear listening for the sound of disturbance. It's no surprise that we are lonelier than ever before.

If thousands of people can be laughing with a friend, walking to work, or getting ready for an appointment at their desk when they are annihilated, how can we feel safe anywhere, anytime? We can't make light of this reality, but neither do we need to live in fear.

How do we keep from fearing the stranger? How do you and I keep looking into the eyes of the stranger and conjure up acceptance for him? In the days following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, you may recall a lot of people talking about their nervousness and growing suspicion with the dark-skinned stranger, the one who talks a bit Middle Eastern, the one who has been their neighbor.

A couple months after the attack we visited Ground Zero. A man who lived in Dublin, but who had worked very near the Twin Towers for twelve years, told us that he hated the people "who did this terrible thing," and he wept. Then, in the next breath

he gazed up to heaven and said, “You see, we are all the children of God, made in his very own image, and that makes it unbearable. The hating has to stop. ’Tis sadder than words can say.” ‘Tis. And in the days that followed many sad things happened.

You may remember that in some instances the person with feared ethnic characteristics was removed from planes by passenger request, regardless of their innocence. People who were part of a community, who had been considered neighbors, suddenly became suspect, even if your kids went to school together and you bowled together on Tuesday night.

Two of the monks at St. Benedict Monastery are rather dark-skinned and would appear Middle Eastern to those who do not know their actual ancestry. Father Damien is Albanian; Brother Antony is from Puerto Rico. Often, they have been teased by their brother monks about looking like terrorists in their driver’s license pictures. It had been good-natured teasing, but it is no longer funny.

Imagine the difficulty these men will have getting on a plane, or the discomfort they will cause others. Two of the biggest hearts on the planet, two of the greatest spirits, and if either of them sits beside you on

an airplane your heart will probably fall to your stomach and your pulse will race. You will want them removed; at the very least you will want them double-checked. You could not find two safer human beings if you scoured the universe, yet they are suddenly suspect because of skin color and ethnic features. The events of terrorism have created a new, dark filter through which we view the world.

We comfort ourselves by thinking, “But it isn’t an unreasonable fear. Some awful things have happened and they have been done by men who look a certain way.” Contrary to the comforting lies we tell each other, this kind of fear *is* unreasonable. Every person of Middle Eastern descent is not responsible for the big, awful thing that happened. Timothy McVeigh did not cause people to fear every white male, not unless you already thought white guys were dangerous.

The horror of September 11, 2001, did not create bigotry against Muslims; it incited existing bigotry. It fed a silently held bigotry already alive in a dark corner of our hearts. It uncapped a quietly seething suspicion.

It is easier to fear a whole group of people instead of giving one person a chance. It becomes easy to hate and to turn away from people we have vilified. To live

courageously means giving up the fear and giving every single person a chance. “The home of the brave” is a wonderful ideal, but it is no easy thing to become. Brave people take a risk with the stranger. Brave people offer up their hearts, again, after they’ve pieced together the fragments of a broken heart. Brave people don’t let themselves off the hook when something has gone wrong inside of them.

Fear is a thief. It will steal our peace of mind and that’s a lot to lose. But it also hijacks relationships, keeping us sealed up in our plastic world with a fragile sense of security.

Being a people who fear the stranger, we have drained the life juices out of hospitality. The hospitality we explore here is not the same kind you will learn about from Martha Stewart. Benedictine hospitality is not about sipping tea and making bland talk with people who live next door or work with you. Hospitality is a lively, courageous, and convivial way of living that challenges our compulsion either to turn away or to turn inward and disconnect ourselves from others.

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. It addresses the

core loneliness that we avoid with the bustle and haste of our hectic lives. There is a big loneliness at the center of every person. It is universal. There's a reason for the loneliness. It is meant to lead you somewhere. Even if you are unconscious of it, the big lonely is driving you homeward.

Hospitality has two meanings for most people today. It either refers to hotels or cruise ships, or it is connected to entertaining friends and family in the warmth of candlelight with gleaming silver and ivory lace. One model makes it an industry, thereby assigning some productive use to it and making it profitable. The other model relegates it to the domain of entertainment and housekeeping, generally considered women's work. Thus it has become safe and cozy, even productive, rather than revolutionary, risky, and world-rattling.

Benedictine hospitality does not allow us to turn people into a profit-making venture, nor are goodness and graciousness deemed suitable only for the cozy small world of our private homes and feminine natures. Benedict finds God in people. You can't ignore people when God is looking out their eyes at you. In the tiresome, the invalid, the rebellious, we are faced

with God. It is our own failures to love that we have to deal with when we talk of hospitality.

Hospitality cuts through the sham of our excuses. Benedict is a realist about loving. He knows love comes only through effort and practice. It is costly. It is fatiguing. It is not some warm, fuzzy feeling Benedict wants us to conjure up; he wants the strength of respect and reverence to beat in the hearts of his monks.

When we are filled with prejudice, suspicion, anxiety, or jealousy, we have no room for welcoming, for listening or receiving. The monastic life allows the monk to empty himself of the darker impulse, not that he is ever completely rid of it, but he actively resists in the sharing of the table and the embracing of strangers.

Hospitality did not begin with Howard Johnson's and *Good Housekeeping*. Hospitality, as it has been practiced from ancient days, protected people from the dangers of traveling alone. In Saint Benedict's day there were no safe and cheap shelters for travelers. Along the way people could be brutalized, robbed, wounded, lost.

Monasteries saved lives when they opened their doors to strangers. It was not about comfort and entertainment—it was about saving lives. A little

dramatic? Well, it seems that way today when we have a Marriott on every corner, shelters for the homeless and the battered, and hostels around the world.

This spirit of saving lives is still at the root of monastic hospitality. To receive others is to expose myself to all sorts of frightful dangers of attachment and rejection. Hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human, both my humanity and that of the stranger. Travelers, too, (Benedict called them pilgrims), are prone to all sorts of dangers. On life's journey each of us is a pilgrim. We aren't sure where we came from and where we are going. We are vulnerable and we need each other.

Some of the most moving stories of hospitality have come out of the Holocaust. One Dutch woman, who now lives in a small Michigan town, told of growing up in a household that sheltered a Jewish family. All such stories are inspiring and remarkable, but hers was especially so because her parents kept the secret so well that their four children did not know a Jewish family was sheltered in their home. The parents risked everything to protect strangers, literal strangers, whose presence threatened them and their children.

This kind of sacrificial hospitality is almost more than we can imagine. We will probably never be called

on to give ourselves for the sake of a stranger—but can we give some small part of ourselves to a stranger? We probably will never have to build a secret room in our homes to save the lives of people we don't know—but can we carve out a small place in our hearts for others? This is the true meaning of hospitality.

Monasteries are increasingly making room for strangers, by planning their lives to allow room for guests. This hospitality is included in the Benedictine rule, but it is also the current reality of monasteries. People are knocking on the door. People of all faiths or no faith at all are drawn to something about monasticism. The challenge for Benedictines is to preserve their monastic distinction, their way of life, while continuing to welcome the stranger. It is similar to the challenge you face as you attempt to keep time for yourself and your closest relationships while developing an open attitude.

The walking dead stand at the gates of the monastery. If life doesn't kill your wonder, it will at least wound your spirit. The monastic way is sometimes called the path of life, and life is what we seek. People go to the monastery in search of life. Today, Benedictines are not physically saving lives by their tradition, but they do continue to save lives. The spirit

of monastic hospitality gives us something healing and rejuvenating. So, while practically speaking, hospitality has changed since Benedict's day, the lifesaving spirit of it has remained.

Those of us who don't live in monasteries have lost both the practice of hospitality itself as well as an open spirit that welcomes others. Not only our homes, but also we, like the monastery, need to become a place of solace and safety. Benedictine spirituality insists that if you want to be whole, you have to let the other in.

The missing virtue of our era has been turned into a social grace that neither disturbs nor transforms. That is not what Benedict meant when he shaped a way of life that would value at its deepest core, then and now, a life of hospitality.

Today, we take to ourselves only those we have met at work or in our neighborhood. We eat with our family. We lunch with our friends. If we ever include a stranger, it had better be a stranger that someone can vouch for. The outcast, the foreigner, the unacceptable person, these we avoid with a tight fear that chokes the life out of what it means to be hospitable.

You protest. There is very real danger in the stranger. Open the house and open a threat to my

sleeping children? Open the door and violence enters. What about all the kooks with a knife? You read the countless horror stories with tragic endings. You aren't making all this stuff up, it is real and only a fool would ignore the dangers.

In this culture, is it possible to recover the gentle art of hospitality? Is there a way to enliven it, a way to recreate it so that personal safety is not at risk, but still the stranger is welcomed and honored? A lofty goal? Probably, but worth the effort we think. It is worthwhile for no other reason than this: When I consider the stranger I am faced with my worst fears. I can't deny that I am afraid and that I don't even always like people.

Many years ago Lonni was considering a vocational change that would put her, a fierce introvert, into constant contact with others. Lonni does not talk to strangers easily. She has a deep cynicism that prevents most people from getting too close. It was a service vocation, and she would have been unable to escape people.

The vocational counselor listened to her concerns, and then said with unhidden bewilderment, "I know you're sincere in pursuing this path, but I really don't understand what makes you think you'd be good at

this—you don't even like people all that much." It was said with kindness and a twinkle in the counselor's eye. Hyperbole sometimes makes the point best. For Lonni, learning to like people would be the work of a lifetime.

Once you get over linking hospitality to the travel industry and dinner parties you still have to deal with that awkward reality of strangers. Hospitality involves accepting responsibility to care for the strangers, the ones at our gate, but also those a world away. The biggest obstacle to hospitality is not the state of the world. It is the state of our minds and hearts. It is the comfort we crave so badly that we will do almost anything for it.

Benedictine hospitality prevents us from living either desperately or indifferently. Hospitality requires not grand gestures, but open hearts. When I let a stranger into my heart, I let a new possibility approach me. When I reach past my own ideas, I begin to stretch myself open to the world, and this opening of my heart could change everything. That's pretty frightening stuff. You can't ever be the same if you start doing that kind of thing.

How we do this is an individual matter. It is the door of *my* heart that these strangers are knocking on.

Once you hear the sound at the door, you know a response is required. My response will be different from yours and different from a monk. Relating to others always involves the patterns you have learned in other relationships. Hospitality comes easily for those who have known mostly acceptance and love. For other people, it will come harder.

A friend told us a story from his recent illness:

When I was very ill, it was necessary to receive frequent intravenous treatments, injections, blood tests, and many intrusive medical treatments. At first I had the courage for it, but day after day I lost courage, until the day a small Korean woman, the head nurse, walked into my hospital room after several failed attempts to find a vein. I glared at her, pushed her hand away, and said, “I can’t take this anymore.”

She nodded and held my hand, and we sat in the quiet for a minute or so. Then, she said, “I just finished injecting medication into a permanent port in the belly of a twelve-year-old boy who will probably die before the year is over. I could not take what I do if it weren’t for the fact that sometimes

what I do saves a life.” I extended my arm and gave her my vein.

No, it is not easy to give your vein. Even when you know it is for your own good, you also know there’s going to be pain involved. The things we’ll do to avoid pain. There is a lot of pain that goes with relationships and from some of it, we never quite recover but, the pain you’re carrying around, it can be used to save a life. It is not needless or pointless pain. No, you would not have volunteered for it. But it could save a life, and that’s worth it.

Maybe you are one of the fortunate people who find hospitality easy. If so, you can probably look back to definite times you felt connected to others and well loved. If you have experienced abiding and strong relationships, hospitality comes more easily. One of us asked a student to write about a friendship she remembered:

I remember my first loss of a friend, but it isn’t the loss that has stayed with me, it is the friendship. My best friend Terry and I were seven. She lived next door, but next door was down the street a little

ways. You walked through a maze of brush, a maze carved out by my brother and his pals who liked to play fort in that brush. The brush was a jungle to the boys, but to us it was the enchanted forest where our friendship grew. Terry and I shared everything, our toys and books, our rooms and our families. We shared our dreams, too.

We promised that when we grew up, we would have houses next door to one another in the mountains we had seen in pictures. She would have a big barn for her horses; I would have a big library for my books. It was the summer of our seventh year and I was sure that, no matter what, we would be friends. I didn't see circumstances beyond our control approaching.

Her father was in the Coast Guard and he was being moved. No matter how much I wanted it, she could not take me with her and I could not keep her with me. Years passed and I have never seen Terry again. And while she hasn't told me a joke in fifteen years, the laughter remains. We haven't held hands to walk past the bully, but the strength lives on. We haven't raced and danced in our enchanted forest but life has seemed enchanted ever since. We never

built those houses in the mountains, but I think of her when I see a mountain. When you have a friend, you have the best this life has to give.

A friendship like that will make you the kind of person who is able to be hospitable. Hospitality is born in us when we are well loved by God and by others. Hospitality is the overflowing of a heart that has to share what it has received. It takes a whole person to open up, it takes a secure person to be available, it takes a strong person to give yourself away.

It is possible to serve meals in a nursing home, to cook in a homeless shelter, or read stories to children at an inner-city library and never let others into your heart. It is possible to do the good thing and end up feeling satisfied with yourself and even just a bit superior. It is possible to do the good thing and not be changed for the better by it. Hospitality includes cooking the meal, and reading to the kid, but it demands that you let the people you are serving into your heart. Only in opening yourself wide to another are you transformed by the power of love.

If you are already thinking of ways to be more hospitable, just slow down. Do not worry just yet