

Room at the Inn?¹
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our first reading today was the poem, *Things to Think*, by Robert Bly,² which begins:

Think in ways you've never thought before.
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard...

About the Tradition of Posada³

In Mexico and the southwestern United States, there is a Christmas tradition called La Posada. For nine nights before Christmas, a procession goes through the neighborhood, reenacting the search of Mary and Joseph for a place to stay in Bethlehem. Two people, sometimes children, are dressed as Mary and Joseph, and others dress up as angels, kings, shepherds, and sheep. They knock at the doors of houses along the way. When they come to a house, the people outside and the people inside sing the alternating verses of the song of the peregrinos (the song of the pilgrims). The pilgrims are turned away from a couple of houses, but eventually they arrive at a home where Mary and Joseph are recognized and welcomed in. Everyone goes into the house, for that night's posada party—they sing Christmas songs, say some prayers, and have a star pinata full of treats.

The Pilgrims Song

Sermon

Sometimes I pity the poor innkeepers of Bethlehem. They've been turned into the bad guys of the Christmas story. Think about it. In the actual story of the birth of Jesus, in the gospels, there is only one line about an inn. Luke writes: "She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn."⁴ Okay, so all the rooms were already taken by other travelers—that seems understandable.

But this simple verse has inspired the storytellers of many cultures to weave a more complex narrative. The Mexican Posada celebration is just one of those. They tell of the humble carpenter, his pregnant wife on a donkey, going from door to door looking for a place to bear her son. They tell of the hardhearted innkeepers who turned them away, again and again. Finally, one innkeeper begrudgingly lets them use a stable, full of cows and sheep and chickens. In this humble location, the divine child is born. We are reminded that we should not be like the hardhearted innkeepers, but we should open our hearts to the strangers among us.

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2 From *Morning Poems*

3 Information drawn from <http://cnx.org/content/m12609/latest/>

4 Luke 2:7.

Other ancient traditions tell similar stories of the value of hospitality, about people who--by opening their doors to strangers--entertained gods or angels in disguise.

The Roman poet Ovid retold a story from Greek mythology, about an old married couple named Philemon and Baucis.⁵ One day, Zeus, the god of heaven, and Hermes, messenger of the gods, dressed as peasant travelers, and began walking through a Greek town, asking for lodging from the people of the town. They were turned away from house after house, until they came to the simple cottage of Philemon and Baucis. Although this couple was poor, they welcomed them in, and began to serve them food and wine.

After refilling her guests' cups several times, Baucis noticed that the wine pitcher was still full. She realized that their guests must be gods, and implored indulgence for their simple home and fare. Then the men revealed their identities, and thanked the couple for their hospitality. Zeus sent a flood that destroyed the rest of the town, and turned the simple cottage into a temple. He granted a wish to Philemon and Baucis. They asked to stay together forever, and be the caretakers of the temple. Upon their death they were changed into intertwining oak and linden trees.

Hospitality was a sacred virtue in the ancient world. I have heard that this was connected to the life or death nature of travel in those times and places. If there were no hotels or inns, the only way to survive was through the hospitality of other people. To turn away a traveler might be to contribute to their death. Almost every ancient civilization has a story about the stranger at the door who turned out to be a god in disguise.

Such a story is almost impossible to imagine in our own culture. If someone came to a private house and asked for a room, they would likely find themselves not only turned away, but arrested by the police. It is hard for us to imagine that kind of open-heartedness to strangers. Our society has created organizations and institutions to provide for travelers and other unfortunate strangers—hotels and motels for travelers, shelters for the homeless, hospitals for the sick, foster homes for orphans.

So what can we learn from the innkeeper's story today? Is there still a value to be found in hospitality to the stranger? If so, how might we practice it?

The first thing that comes to mind for me is the practice of hospitality in our church. I don't mean just the formal tasks that many volunteers do each Sunday—greeting newcomers, ushering, serving coffee. Those are wonderful contributions to our sense of community here. But I am talking about something more basic, an inner openness to the unknown. A church is a magical place where anything might happen. We never know whom the next guest will be, and what they might bring with them into our lives.

⁵ From Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII, from the year 8 A.D.

When strangers come through our church doors, we have the chance to welcome them with warmth and openness. We have permission to say hello and introduce ourselves, and strike up a conversation with someone we don't know. What might a god think of us, if he were to come to our church in disguise? What would she say about us after she left?

Would it be one of those days when people outdo themselves to make sure the guest knows where to sit, and has a program, and coffee or tea afterwards? Or will someone get annoyed because the guest sits down where they usually like to sit? Would it be one of those days when four or five people go over in turn to chat? Or will everyone be busy trying to organize some sort of project, and not take time to say hello? Will it feel like a burden to reach out to someone new? Or will we imagine—"This might be someone who has good news that will change my life? This might be a God come to visit us today?"

And speaking of God coming to visit, there was a traditional Christian who said to a Unitarian Universalist, "I hear you deny the divinity of Christ." "Oh no," said the UU, "we don't deny the divinity of anyone!" So every guest might really be a god in disguise! How do we open our hearts to the stranger? How do we keep our hearts open? What stops us from living like that?

I am reminded of the time when I was a volunteer in the Catholic Worker House of Hospitality. I have talked with you before about my time there. We offered shelter to homeless people. You would think that would be a wonderful opportunity to practice openness to the stranger. But in reality, the phone would ring, sometimes 20 times a day, with a person on the line looking for a place to stay. And once our seven beds were full, we would have to say, "I'm sorry we have no more room." We could say it kindly, but the answer was still no. Just like the innkeeper.

I know for me—one thing that stops me from being open, is being filled up. When I have a lot of people on my mind, I stop being eager for a new person to come through my door. When I have filled up my time with important projects, I don't want to hear about any new projects. When I have filled up my day with appointments and meetings, I don't want anyone to call. So it seems like one part of this question is to recognize the limits of what one person can do. I ask myself, given the limits of being human, how do I honor those limits, and also cultivate spaciousness? How do I stop before I get too filled up?

But then I had a deeper realization about all of this. I notice in myself that when I get too filled up with doing—I begin to look upon everything as if it were a task to do. Have you ever done that? You make up a to-do list, and on it are things like, "shop for the groceries, pay the bills, clean the garage," and thrown in at the end, "spend time with my friend." If I fill my time with tasks to do, my mind gets oriented to the task list, and starts thinking of people as tasks. Then, it doesn't want to be interrupted by a person at the door. Sometimes, I have to stop doing, stop the task lists in my mind, in order for my heart to open up.

As Robert Bly says, the person at the door might have something large to tell you: "that it's not necessary to work all the time."⁶

I am reminded of another story about hospitality in the life of Jesus. It is written that he went to the home of Mary and Martha. Martha busied herself with all the duties of hospitality—preparing a meal, setting the table, and so on. But Mary sat down next to Jesus and just listened to him. Martha came in and expressed her annoyance that Mary was leaving her to do all the work. But Jesus defended Mary, and said she had chosen the most important thing.⁷ Just being open-hearted and listening was the most important thing.

Many people I know get cranky after hearing that story—especially if we are the ones who take responsibility for all the tasks that need to get done. But how did there get to be so many tasks that need to get done? Anne Wilson Schaef has written that we live in a profoundly workaholic society.⁸ Our value is constantly being measured by what we do. When asked, "How are you?" it is a righteous answer to say, "I've been really busy." And so our days are filled with tasks, and our minds are weary—often too weary to want to answer the phone, much less the door. Isn't that why we have answering machines?

So, what would happen if Joseph and Mary came to the door, looking for a place to birth the child? Is there any room in my heart? What would happen if Zeus and Hermes were looking for a place to stay? Is there any room in my heart? What happens when we hear about the struggles of the immigrant and refugee in our country? Is there any room in our hearts? What happens when we hear about the struggles of people without a job or a home? Is there any room in our hearts? There is an African proverb that says, "The house of the heart is never full."⁹

The house of the heart is never full. Maybe that means most of the time we are not living in the house of our hearts. Maybe we are living in our work, or our minds, or our tasks, or our fears.

My colleague, Rev. Sylvia Stocker, found a story about open-hearted hospitality deep in the dusty archives of the Harvard Divinity School library. On Christmas morning, in 1939, the minister serving the Unitarian church in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, stepped into the pulpit, and made a special request.

"Just this morning, I received word that a ship carrying refugees will be docking in Boston within the next few days, he told the parishioners. The refugees will need temporary homes. Would you take them in?"¹⁰

6 Robert Bly, *Things to Think*, from *Morning Poems*.

7 Luke 10:38-42.

8 Anne Wilson Schaef, *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much*, 1990.

9 From the book, *The House of the Heart is Never Full and Other Proverbs of Africa*, by Guy T. Zona. (Title page)

10 I learned about this story from my colleague, the Rev. Sylvia Stocker, who discovered the story in the archives at Harvard Divinity School: Robert C. Dexter, "What One Parish Did for German and Czech Refugees," *The Christian Register*, January 24, 1940. All quotes are from that article as well.

The ship carried 87 refugees, all but one or two of them Jewish. "Almost all the men [aboard] had spent some time in concentration camps." The congregation answered the call, and took in 34 of the men. Other Boston area people sheltered the rest. The minister was the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, who with his wife Martha, was honored in 2005, posthumously, by the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial in Israel. The Sharps were designated "righteous among nations" for their rescue work during the holocaust. They traveled to Europe in 1939 and again in 1940, rescuing hundreds of people from the advancing Nazi threat, despite great danger to their own lives.

What must it have been like for their congregation? To send their minister and his wife over to the dangers in Europe, and also to welcome into their homes these refugees who were fleeing for their lives? How must it have changed their own Christmas season that year? How must it have changed their congregation and their lives?

It is easy to look back, and praise the heroes of another time—but at the time when they opened their hearts, it wasn't yet clear what was going to happen. It wasn't yet clear the full nature of the horror that people were facing. The Wellesley congregation was taking a risk, was opening its doors to the unknown.

Who are the people knocking on our door in these times? Who are the strangers and outsiders, the refugees? I cannot help but think about the undocumented immigrants who are being vilified and scapegoated in our country for trying to find a way to survive. The media paint them as law-breakers, and stir up fears that they are taking away our jobs, and our scarce resources. Politicians get points for being tough on securing the borders—closing the doors of our country. No wonder we find it confusing. I am looking forward to our program this afternoon with Beth Stickney from the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project.¹¹ She will be addressing the myths and realities of immigration today.

The first step might be to open our hearts to listen more deeply to the stories of people who are immigrants and refugees. Why are they traveling far from home? What dangers are they facing there? What losses have they suffered? Why would they risk humiliation, homelessness, and abuse to come to this country? What role has our own country played in what is happening to their homelands?

We need to understand the larger picture that the stranger brings, to move outside of the limits of our own perspective. When we open our hearts to the stranger, something changes inside of us. The gods who traveled among the people in the old myths were there to bring change, to transform the people. This is what strangers do as well. When we open our door to the stranger, our lives change. Maybe that is why it was easier for a poor couple to open their door. They weren't so attached to the way things were. They had some emptiness inside.

¹¹ See more at www.ilapmaine.org.

It is not an easy thing, to keep our hearts open. Especially at this time of year, our hearts get full with family and old friends, with all the tasks of the holiday. Some of us might feel overwhelmed with a family problem or difficult job. But when our hearts shut their doors, we are the ones who lose. Who knows when the new person we meet might become the friend who brings new joy to our lives? Who knows when the kind deed done for a stranger might come back around to transform and heal our own sorrows?

I am always amazed by the love and welcome I see here at Allen Avenue. I continually encounter people who are hungry for what they see in this community. But more than what hospitality offers a newcomer, is what it offers to us who are already inside. To live with an open heart is to live fully alive. May this season help us to remember to create an empty room in the house of our hearts. May this season help us to keep an open door, a welcoming spirit, so that we don't miss the miracles.

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