

Practicing Hospitality

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Most of you know I moved here from Northern Pennsylvania. I lived in a very small town that was below the Finger Lakes of New York and just north of the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. The area I lived in is poor, the economy struggling, there are lots of run down homes and businesses. The human creations were often hard to look at up there!

But the natural scenery of that area is absolutely stunning especially in the spring when so many trees bloom; and in the fall when even more trees turn a spectacular array of colors.

Up until this past week, I have been disappointed that the natural world in Eastern Carolina seemed to offer so much less in comparison to the natural beauty I was awed by in Pennsylvania. But I can say that in this last week, I have been just stunned by Greenville's trees. I can't get enough of just walking and driving around to see the marvelous display of fall splendor that is happening right here. It seems so fitting to me that nature in Eastern Carolina is going all out right at Thanksgiving time!

One of my "spiritual practices", my way of being lifted out of my own ego, out of my daily routine, my way of creating a space to be touched by what is sacred and holy and makes my life worth living is looking at the natural world. It has been wonderfully easy for me to see beauty this past week. It has been easy to respond to this beauty with deep gratefulness. It has been easy to allow myself to be touched by what, for me, is a vision of the divine.

With nature so gorgeous, I get in my car and just drive, my heart fuller and fuller of gratitude with every stunning tree!

Perhaps Thanksgiving has always been a time when people have been moved to express their gratitude; not just that the plentitude of harvest time has given them a full stomach, but also because of all the beauty that fills the eyes...this time of the year.

Our human ancestors, no matter what their religion or culture, or on what continent they were, have been expressing their gratitude for what has appeared to be the work of the divine during the fall season for thousands of years. Our human ancestors have been moved for centuries to believe that something, or someone, beyond themselves is responsible for providing what makes life worth living...and they have given thanks...

Gratitude is the soul's response to the divine.

It has been easy for me to be lifted beyond myself this past week! ...to view Eastern Carolina as "sacred space" ... and to now be thankful that I live here.

I was in the car by myself when I first noticed the splendor of Greenville's trees. I wanted to get out of the car and make sure other drivers were seeing what I was seeing! I couldn't get back home fast enough to get my partner so she could see what I saw...feel what I felt...to pick her up and take her on the same path through Greenville I had drove.

I acted quite evangelical about it! I was so grateful for having been touched by something beyond myself that re-oriented me, I wanted to create the space for her to feel what I felt! I wanted her to feel the same way I was feeling about Greenville at that moment.

This desire to invite others into a space that has lifted us from the ordinary and set us back down transformed; to invite others into communion with the divine, is the motivation behind "hospitality".

Yet, I find practicing hospitality takes more than evangelical enthusiasm!

When I took my partner for "the drive", I was eager to hear if she felt what I felt. She assured me her feelings were similar, but not exactly the same! Where I saw only the autumn colors, she saw the contrasts of the blue sky and the trees that are ever green. We didn't see exactly the same. We didn't feel exactly the same.

I have been reading about the "First American Thanksgiving". There are certainly differing interpretations of what happened, of who did what when. The one thing that is sure is that the Native Americans, who had been ritualizing their thankfulness for autumn for centuries, and the Pilgrims who knew how to

praise their own God, miraculously came together with all their differences enough to share sacred space for a time. They did this by setting a table for each other.

The Pilgrims and the Wampanoags practiced hospitality, for a time.

They set the table with food. They said their thanks. But eating and being grateful for eating wasn't their only aim. Filling their bellies was not the only reason they came together. Perhaps the Pilgrims were attempting to convert the Indians. Perhaps the Indians were trying to show the Pilgrims a different way to be touched by the sacred.

So often we are afraid to commune with each other, to tell each other how the divine touches our lives, to listen to each other to hear how the divine enters our lives. The practice of hospitality is seeking to achieve a balance between revealing what we have felt and an enthusiastic desire to invite others in to that and creating a space for others to feel what they will feel. When we do that, that which is divine will flow through both of us.

The kind of hospitality, I am talking about is not so much about social graces while hosting another to dinner; it is about setting the table for relationship. And it takes practice!

Centuries ago, St. Benedict, wrote "the rule" of hospitality for monks living in monasteries. The rule simply states that in order to grow as a human being, we need other people. He helped monks to understand that it is not enough to practice whatever one practices to create space for the divine in isolation.

In order to grow in spirit, we need other people.

Father Daniel Homan, in his book; "Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love", says that radical hospitality is about mutual reverence. It is about embracing those who are different.

All of us, every human being, is unique. One way of practicing our principle that acknowledges the worth and dignity of every person, is to practice hospitality.

When we practice hospitality, when we invite others in to sacred space, we do it not just to understand the other; but also because there is the potential to gain a

new understanding of ourselves which can lead to growth, change, and a more loving way to be in the world.

It takes practice to be hospitable. First we have to risk communicating what we experience. We have to do that enthusiastically and in a way that invites others to risk communicating what they experience.

Hospitality is a spiritual practice, it is about setting the table for the sacred to appear...

When we hear the term spiritual practice, many of us think of it as something exotic. It needn't be. It is anything we do with the intention of moving closer to what is most true and alive for us.

The mystery of aliveness can be found as we engage ourselves and each other in this time and this space, in the here and now.

It is when we engage another human being with the fullness of who we are, open to the fullness of who they are, that we come face to face with the mystery of life.

Too often we get stuck in wishing for someone else to be just like us, to feel and think what we feel and think. If we learn to practice hospitality whenever we engage another human being with openness for something sacred to emerge, we will both give and receive at the same time. Setting the table for this will no longer be understood as ritual duty, but as an opportunity for transformation.