

December Service 2015 Are the Lights on?
by Andrea Offner

I'll be home for christmas....you can count on me....I'll be home for Christmas...if only in my dreams. Home is where the heart is... I wish I were in Kansas, said Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. Home is where our journey begins....Paul Simon says - Home where my thoughts escaping, home where the music's playing, home where my love lies waiting silently for me....

What songs and images arise when we hear the word HOME? For people living an expatriate life, that is a very good question. As part of the turtle clan that carries HOME around on our backs our family probably has a different sense of HOME than someone who has stayed in the same place all their life.

What *are* the ingredients that make a house a home for the holidays? Is it the decorations? Is it the songs? Is it the comfort and energy of those around us? Is it gratitude for the blessings in our lives in spite of the conflicts in our midst? Could it be the way in which our sense of hospitality is enlarged - especially during the holidays? Is it the feeling that THIS is our place - we belong here?

When I was young, our routine when going out at night included a curfew and the knowledge that Mom would leave the light on. In a small town on a dirt road, having the light to see your way home had a symbolic and practical purpose - not only could I find my keys and the door which was basically never locked anyway, but I also knew that Mom had *thought of me* out there in the dark.

With my children, it is the same - We leave a light on when they are out in the evening - so they too, can find their way home and know that we are thinking of them being out in the dark. It seems a loving and hospitable action - and I miss it when I come home to a dark house. But hospitality is more than just leaving the light on, right? And what of that 'turtle clan' nonsense about home being right there on our backs all along?

Well, the Sufi poet Rumi writes about this inner "guest house" with its new arrival each day including joy or sadness, anger or depression. We welcome them each into our lives because "each has been sent/as a guide from beyond." All of the feelings I encounter that make me want to slam the door on my inner life—these are precisely the places where we are called to meet the sacred. They do enter from our own back door. Thus the term radical hospitality –

Radical Hospitality? The idea is found in many traditions, but I will quote the interpretation that originates from ~ Rule of St Benedict 53:1-2

“Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35)”.

This quote from Benedict's Rule is a foundational expression of the principle of hospitality at work: I am called to *welcome in* every stranger who comes to the door as the face of the divine.

This not a simple rule. I think about what this means at its deepest point is that everything that seems strange, foreign, or uncomfortable, is exactly the place where the sacred shimmers forth. This kind of hospitality applies to those who arrive at the door to my *outer* world in terms of people and experiences I find difficult or challenging.

Equally important, I think that Benedict and Rumi are pointing us to an inner kind of hospitality. I find this interpretation even more important because it is our inner lives, where hospitality actually begins.

But welcoming in a stranger in is a threatening. Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist best known for his book *Bowling Alone*, writes of the growing isolation of Americans, he has done some new research—and his conclusions have been surprising [1]. He wanted to find out what happens when diverse groups of people live in the same area, as opposed to a homogeneous group of people living in an area. He found that when people are near people unlike themselves, they tend to “hunker down.” Not only do they not interact as much with people who are different from themselves, but they don’t interact with their own group as much: they watch more TV, they have fewer friends, they are less likely to work on community projects. The level of trust and interaction is greatest when people are with others who are most like themselves. When these results came back, Putnam distrusted what he saw, and so did his colleagues. So he spent several more years checking out his data (30,000 people were interviewed)—and yes, he found he was right. Putnam, a dyed-in-the-wool progressive and very pro-diversity, nevertheless concludes, “In the face of diversity, most of us retreat.” That tendency for isolation can complicate practice of radical hospitality, but shows why it is so important. People want to keep the borders around their lives ‘safe’. But it calls us to reach beyond those borders.

These days I am living in a foreign culture, and one of the gifts and graces of this chapter in my life is discovering where my own hidden assumptions are about how things *should* work. From greeting others to grocery shopping to banking to eating in restaurants, I am continually being challenged with what feels strange and what feels like home to me. All of the daily tasks of life become less comfortable, less familiar, and in the process I am learning more compassion for my own responses and limitations. My assumptions are being stretched apart. I am called to welcome in this strangeness as something sacred and powerful.

Jungian psychologist Ann Bedford Ulanov writes that, "The Holy refuses to stay put in a box . . . These meetings with the sacred well beyond our images of a higher power comprise great religious moments that smash us, or open us further to the transcendent or both. Mystics write of these moments." It is the moments that break us open, that move us beyond what is conventional or familiar, that strip the illusion of safety and security from our fingers, in which we begin to plumb the depths of the holy.

Jung once said in a BBC interview that he began calling God all those "things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions, and change the course of my life for better or for worse." The divine is that power which disrupts everything.

What if part of our Radical Hospitality as a spiritual practice were to court a *holy disruption*?

What if we welcomed the Bull from the China Closet under our tree? What if we left the lights on and welcomed everything which challenged our perspective on how the world works? This would upset all the plans we have for ourselves, and would turn things on their heads - right?

What if when life started falling apart, I opened my heart to welcome in the grief, insecurities and fears that arrived as well and considered them as holy guides and windows into my deeper connection to the divine? What if all the painful feelings of loss and disorientation were invited in for cookies and milk? What if everything that turns our preconceived ideas inside out is precisely where we find the sacred during this holiday season?

What I mean, is that perhaps we are called to make room for the full range of our experiences of discomfort, strangeness, and loss, and cultivate trust that these draw us into an encounter of radical openness, where our walls have been torn down. This becomes a path to be able to build anew. The power comes in what can flow through the universe when we treat our *experiences and emotional responses to loss* as honored guests. It does mean trusting that somehow the brokenness we experience, when truly welcomed in, can become a doorway into a more expansive way of living and imagining our world.

When we practice this kind of radical hospitality to all the ways that holy disruption arises in our lives, we make room for the possibility that fear does not have to compel our every response. We begin to experience more kindness to everything that feels difficult within our lives and so this begins to flow outward.

We no longer feel compelled to limit who might be included in the realm of 'good guys and bad guys' - and we cling less tightly onto our own personal agendas. We begin to see that a benevolent universe is much bigger than our own imagining and we become able to talk with more humility. We are willing to consider that we might have been wrong all this time.

In a culture where people are encouraged to express their "critical" opinions and public debate is governed by *so much divisiveness and certainty about who is right*, a monastic perspective can truly teach us about what is welcome in our lives, in our fellowship, in our cities, in our countries and on our planet.

So what does this mean for us as a church? We are committed to being a welcoming community. We say we believe in the "inherent worth and dignity of all." And yet we are human beings, and we have the same challenges that all human beings have. We feel more comfortable when we're with people we know. We come to church, we gravitate to people we know. We feel less comfortable when we are with people who have different ideas and interests, different cultural assumptions. Tribalism is strong, and we need look no further than our church. I hope we would be called a friendly church, a hospitable church, and I think that we are. But do we practice radical hospitality?—and if we did, what would that look like?

A congregation committed to radical hospitality would go beyond seeking out others like themselves, for mutual support—such a congregation would recognize the humanity of anyone who walked in. And such a congregation would concern themselves with people who feel beyond the reach of organized religion. The public theology of such a church would not be

limited to charity—which after all, puts the receiver one-down—but would also be committed to justice. Surely this is part of our mission and our spiritual practice. During this holiday season, let's strive to be more open and receptive than ever before, to many different people and different groups who will come here and share precious moments with us. Let's keep the light on.

“Radical hospitality” is a term that rolls easily off the tongue—to actually carry it out is a demanding. But we are not a department store, not a government agency, not a Clinic—in all these places, one would expect to be received politely, as it were—served, as is our due. No, we are a fellowship, and it is appropriate that we ask ourselves, what is the moral dimension of our hospitality, the moral dimension of our reception of others, of our solidarity with others, who may not look like us or move from the same assumptions or values? I'm not talking about being politically correct, or legalistic—I'm talking about hospitality as spiritual practice. I'm not talking about just opening the doors—I'm talking about opening the heart.

I include radical hospitality today because there is a world out there that needs HOME, that needs community, and I encourage us to stretch spiritually, to stretch ourselves open. I know that of course, we'll blunder, we'll fall when we take the risk—yes, and make mistakes—believe me, I blunder all the time—but when we take the risk, our lives will grow so much richer and deeper because we have pushed ourselves. Our creativity will blossom, for we won't be stuck with our old ideas and assumptions, our narrow ways of perceiving our world. Our lives will grow wider and softer and more trusting.

There are those who come to this city every year, and many who come to this fellowship, who are coming to start a new life—they move here because of some kind of major transition, a new job, the loss of a spouse, or simply the desire to start over in a great city. Is the light on for them? Even in gorgeous Paris, starting over isn't easy - it is dark outside! We miss the friends we left behind, our old familiar restaurants, our hairdresser. It takes a long time to rebuild a community of comfort and belonging. But there is a fellowship—our fellowship, we hope, that might be a place where a wayfaring stranger can find respite, acceptance, a new beginning. People don't seek us out on Sunday morning on a whim—people are here because they need to be here. So this holiday season - let's leave the lights on for those out there in the dark - and see what richness flows from connecting on a deeper level.

Amen and Blessed be!