

## **GREATER THAN THE NAME OF GOD!**

I'm going to talk this morning about something greater than the name of God itself! Wow, just saying that sounds a bit blasphemous, doesn't it? But this revolutionary notion didn't originate with me, so I'm not the guy to blame. In fact, most every prominent world religion has announced that there's one thing greater than the name of God itself, and you know what their answer is? Hospitality. And the theme of hospitality seems just right to kick off a new year when visitors are resolving to try out religious life, indeed visit our very own spiritual home!

But as card-carrying freethinkers, I bet you want some historical evidence for the relevance of hospitality, don't you?

So here's some, first from a Hebrew proverb: "Hospitality toward strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God."

And then from the Christian scriptures: "I was a stranger, and you took me in." In other words, Jesus is saying that in caring for the least, the lost, and the last among us, we're doing so for the very Prince of Peace.

And Muslim theology reports that on the proverbial Day of Judgment humans must give account of all expenditures except those of hospitality, which Allah would be ashamed to demand.

Folks, I'm not saying that God isn't important. Hardly. I've written an entire volume in praise of honest atheism, reverent agnosticism, and devout affirmatism—a book that explores multiple ways to affirm the divine in our daily lives. So, I'm not dismissing at all the power and pertinence of a mature grasp of the Eternal Spirit.

Talking about a mature grasp of God, I confess to being unimpressed, actually upset, with our UU advertisement in a recent *Time Magazine*. Now, I know lots of marketing ingenuity supposedly went into this clever text, certainly lots of cash as well, but the core of the ad—**IS GOD KEEPING YOU FROM GOING TO CHURCH?**—bothered me on several grounds. First off, no God worth its salt has anything to do with keeping us from or shoving us into religious life. A mature divinity supports humans in making their own choices.

Second, the ad is degrading to any of those in our ranks who happen to believe in our own understanding of the Eternal, and, as for the skeptics and non-believers in our midst, in what ways could that text be possibly useful to your religious journey? Now, some of the ad appeals to me—the part that says: “nurture your spirit. Help heal the world”—but not the blatant, bold punch line! But enough on our ad, check it out for yourself.

Mainly, what I want to say is that I affirm the power and pertinence of a mature grasp of the Eternal Spirit.

It's just that God will remain God whether or not discussed or worshiped by human beings. So, if I've got it right, God wants us to spend our energy where it counts most, like taking good care of the universe, not quarreling over any name. The Great Spirit's urging us to be

concerned about earthly service not heavenly speculation. Yes, hospitality toward strangers is greater than reverence for the name of God itself.

There's even more scriptural push for the importance of hospitality. According to Jewish tradition, the sin of Sodom wasn't homosexuality, as we're led to believe by religious orthodoxy (and by the rash of recent discriminatory proposals passed across America) but rather, get this, the sin of Sodom is insensitivity to the needs of the stranger. Abraham, you'll remember, was famous for his hospitality; why, he kept his tent open during the day in all four directions, and when he saw strangers approach, Abraham would rush to greet, then feed them.

Thus, Abraham tried to prepare food for messengers who came to tell him of the fulfillment of his dream to have a child with Sarah before he even knew who they were. Those same messengers proceeded to the house of Abraham's nephew Lot in the town of Sodom, where they were accosted by an angry mob who demanded Lot hand over the strangers. So Rabbis have long argued that this was consistent with the Sodomites general refusal to treat the powerless in a welcoming and generous way. And it is for this sin—inhospitaleness not homosexuality—that the city of Sodom merits the fire and brimstone and people turning into salt.

One more biblical illustration to confirm the importance of hospitality, then we'll move on to its relevance in our personal and institutional lives.

The Judgment Day, in Christian scriptures, is depicted as a final banquet where everyone will be invited to partake. People from the East and West, North and South will join you and me for a scrumptious feast. Now, let's be clear: there will be folks present whose tongues you won't recognize (sorry, but English won't be the assumed language), folks from places you've never

seen and places our homeland has even bombed, and they'll surely be plenty of folks who won't be found on any of our personal guest lists.

And, my friends, we won't be gathering for hors d'oeuvres; no, we're going to sit down and consume a lavish, full course meal together. Strangers and enemies will be summoned to unite as one people; for in sharing food together we literally become companions, "those who eat together."

That's how special, how huge, how holy the charge to hospitality is.

But what does all this radical hospitality stuff mean for our Fellowship?

It surely entails greeters which you already produce, and lovely potlucks which you periodically occasion, and the custom of name-tags which you're currently expanding, plus a pictorial directory which you're wisely pursuing this very month—an absolute necessity, especially by the time your settled minister arrives in the Summer of 2008. All of that, but far more.

Radical hospitality goes beneath warmth and beyond welcome. It signals a revolutionary way of being religious, of doing Fellowship. It means being a people of open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands...for starters, within these walls; then in North County, for sure; and finally throughout distant corners of the universe—being wide open to all that greets us along life's path: ideas, things, people, animals...the whole of Creation.

Hospitality isn't mere social grace; it's a spiritual vocation with an inescapable moral cost. It meets our most basic religious need to know and be known, to embrace and be embraced.

Being truly hospitable is the most important thing we humans ever do. Yea, it's greater than the name of God itself!

Regrettably, the art of hospitality in modern culture has been rendered harmless and quaint, reduced to table manners or sipping tea and making bland talk with people who live next door. In truth, our spiritual sanity and international safety bank on hospitality. For, if we don't practice it, locally and globally, we'll grow increasingly aloof, alienated, even hostile. And hospitality is an answer to hostility, perhaps our best answer.

So, let's begin to put a name and face on the people we encounter daily, at the gas station, grocery store, and flower shop; for these folks aren't incidental to our lives. They're our traveling buddies. I often tell our young people, that if they really want to know what my religion looks like as their minister, then they'll need to follow me around during a typical day and see how I, a frail and foibled creature, aspire to treat things and touch people. And then I'll be honored, as well, to spend a day at their haunts. These youngsters will also need to review my check stubs along with seeing how I negotiate my spare time, and I want to see how they're spending their loose change and idle hours too.

The scope of radical hospitality is far-ranging, as expansive as the entire Creation. Starting at home, with our very own selves. Far too many folks need to grow better acquainted with our inner being...before we die. You might say, lots of us suffer from severe self-estrangement. But the paradox of human existence remains: we'll never achieve any better relationship with others than we've achieved with ourselves. Indeed, we're placed on earth to love our neighbor as ourselves, neither more nor less. There's an unmistakable equal sign there.

That's why I spent a month alone in the woods over a decade ago, heeding Thoreau's summons to "Explore thyself..." probing the scary yet wondrous depths of my interior realm. That primal time of solitude and stillness in the woods changed me forever. Unavoidably, I began to befriend my aloneness as well as my mortality.

But hospitality doesn't stop with self-exploration. Not at all. As religious travelers, we must enter ever-widening circles of respectful, loving engagement. Your very mission, which we share at the end of each Sunday service, reeks of radical hospitality: "we gather as a congregation to deepen our connections to each other, the community and the planet."

In short, if I read accurately both your documents and your soul, hospitality is a core aspiration of your espoused theology here at San Dieguito. And as Unitarian Universalists we affirm the supreme dignity of every person, contending that even the most troubled and troubling among us are redeemable. And we believe in an Infinite Spirit that holds every creature in its loving embrace, and challenges us to follow suit.

But hospitality needs to be addressed in practical, personal terms. For example, how do we address, in our Fellowship, matters of *inclusion* such as: Who seems to be missing in our amphitheater? And why? And what will truly be required of someone upon joining our tribe? For frequently, as you know, the claim-relationship of a Unitarian Universalist parish is too thin and undemanding.

And issues of *affection* like: is our Fellowship basically a warm or a cold place? And is there a closed, inner circle or an open, welcoming spiral of leaders around here? Can we say to the visitor: "our door is open or in the case of the amphitheater, our space is open...we've been

waiting for you, come sit in a seat of honor...” And, furthermore, would our San Dieguito Fellowship miss me, if I didn’t show up three weeks in a row? And if they did miss me, what would they do about it?

You see hospitality forces a congregation to take a spiritual audit about how it’s actually addressing issues of inclusion and affection, how it’s balancing independence and intimacy. No congregation is perfect. Our San Diego First Church labored hard, for a quarter of a century, to create an intentionally diverse and welcoming congregation, and we were always what I would call “imperfectly healthy.”

Here’s but one example of our flawed attempt to practice hospitality. We printed in our order of service every Sunday the following invitation: “We warmly welcome you into our Beloved Community. We welcome you, whoever you are, and challenge you to grow toward whom you might become. In our presence may you walk the ways of truthfulness, service, and holiness. And through all your days and nights in our midst, may you experience love.”

A pretty solid statement, if I do say so myself, but it wasn’t long before a blunder was pointed out. May you *walk* assumes that everyone is able-bodied, when there exist persons in every congregation who aren’t. Move would have been a better word than walk. At a peace rally in town, I remember singing the verse of Pat Humphrey’s protest song, “We’ve got to keep on walkin’ forward...” and the person next to me was in a wheel chair. Immediately following the song, she boldly shouted for everyone nearby to hear: “Hey not me, not me...I’m movin’, but I won’t be walkin’!”

And so it goes, one could sleuth out some goof in the well-intentioned literature and vision statements found in any of our liberal congregations, including yours. We repeatedly fall short of our noblest ideals. But the goal of hospitality remains progress not perfection, to stay at the table and on the path, to grow gradually more inclusive, paying sincere attention to who might be left out in our hymns or readings, leadership circles or social action efforts, and in the manifold encounters of daily congregational life.

Why make the effort, you ask? Why? Because San Dieguito is called to be not only liberal in thought but also liberating in action, not just tolerant (putting up with differences) but genuinely accepting, where diversity is truly celebrated as a wondrous reality.

Nonetheless, radical hospitality always reaches beyond our local congregation. It won't ever allow us to remain complacent or smug. For the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Dieguito exists not for itself, but for the world, and especially for troubled folks and bothersome spots in the world.

So, our failure of nerve to be hospitable is basically a heart problem. We seldom lack resources or opportunities for just and merciful service, but too often we lack heart. And hospitality, above all else, dares to stretch our puny, brittle, wary hearts.

Now let me be clear: opening ourselves to the other is not equivalent in today's world, to leaving our doors unlocked or bringing utter strangers into our homes, if thought unwise. Hospitality doesn't mean we either ignore obvious threats to personal safety or do stupid things with anyone's life.

No, hospitality simply means refusing to harden our hearts against suffering. It means harkening to the deeper sounds of every precious human being, especially the cries of the abandoned and the misunderstood who are often bellowing, in one form or another: “I’m not a street person. I’m not a token of my race or class. I’m not a statistic. I’m not a divorcee. I’m not an Aids patient. I’m not a sex object. I’m not a laborer. I’m not an ‘at-risk’ kid. So I implore you to see me, hear me, open your heart to me. For I too possess a heart. I too have a mind. I too dream. I too fall. I too care. I’m fully human, just like you are.”

Which brings me back to God; yes, it does. For it’s my ardent belief that the Infinite Spirit of love is cheering humanity on, as we struggle to practice hospitality. And if God could speak, I imagine God would be saying something like this: “Come on sisters, come on brothers, I know you can do it. Remember that’s why I created you. So get to work: above all else, my name included, be hospitable, open your heart and your hands, because no one’s gonna be saved until everyone’s saved.”

Shalom, salaam, blessed be and Amen.

Tom Owen-Towle

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