

Radical Hospitality, a sermon by Rev. Doug McCusker

A year ago, I experienced Radical Hospitality when I wasn't expecting it. I had just finished my ministry at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rockville and I had one free Sunday before I was to start here in Fredericksburg.

A month before, 9 people were shot and killed at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. The killer was a young white visitor who was welcomed into their Wednesday night bible study. Right after it happened, I was talking with some UU minister colleagues, and we all vowed to visit an AME church as a show of solidarity. So this was my chance.

I found an AME church near my house. I arrived and sat in the pews while the band was setting up. It was about the same size, maybe a little smaller than our church. An elder came by to introduce himself and welcome me to his church. Eventually the music started and about 4 ministers processed and took their seats in front of the church.

About 20 minutes into the service, one of the ministers stood up and asked if there were any guests visiting on that day. She asked us to stand, say our names and say where we were from. So I stood up and introduced myself as Rev. Doug McCusker, and I explained that I had just finished one ministry and that I was headed down here to be the pastor.

Right after that, one of the ministers came over, and in a low voice, welcomed me and asked me to write down my name on a scrap of paper. Then he asked me to come up and join them at the front. Another minister was clearing off a chair that was right next to the pastor. I tried to politely turn him down, but his invitation was so genuine and filled with such grace.

So I threw caution to the wind and followed him up to the stage. I had never been to an AME church, so I didn't have the slightest idea what to do. Pastor Abraham, dressed in a splendid white suit, stood up to the microphone and with the piece of paper said, "We are so happy that Rev. Doug McCusker has come to be with us this morning." Then he asked me to say some words to the congregation. He stepped aside and turned the pulpit over to me.

I didn't see this coming. I told them why I was there, how I expected to sit quietly in the pews but that the Spirit of Life must have had different plans. Everyone was focused on me like I was a prophet who had been sent to bring them a great oracle. I recognized complete attention in their eyes. I told them that I came from a Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, I gave them my elevator speech about who we were, and that I was touched by being welcomed to sit at the table with their ministers.

When I was finished, Pastor Abraham put his hand on my head and said a prayer of blessing for my new ministry with you all. Then he whispered to me that it was Communion Sunday and that he would be honored if I would join him in leading the communion. I told him that we didn't do communion at our church and that I didn't know

what to do. He calmly said, "Don't worry, I'll talk you through it." He was so gentle as he showed me what to read and where to stand. The other ministers helped me out also.

When service was over, people came up to wish me well. I floated out of that church building feeling like I had just met some distant relatives who took me in to their home and fed me a great feast.

In our opening reading this morning, Henri Nouwen wrote that hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest with no intentions. Most of the folks in those pews had never heard of Unitarian Universalism, but that didn't matter. Even though a few weeks earlier, a stranger had walked into an AME church in Charleston and repaid their hospitality with bullets, they welcomed me with open arms. They weren't afraid of what I might say or do. They showed me the utmost respect and love. They were able to do that because they were comfortable in their own house and totally available to serve me as their guest.

That was radical hospitality. The word radical comes from the Latin *radic* meaning having roots. Usually we think of radical as "extreme", but it also means returning to one's foundation. Radical hospitality is about returning to the ancient practice of welcoming strangers into your home with no questions asked, and taking extreme care of them. Rather than asking "why are you here?" radical hospitality asks, "how can I serve you?"

In the book of Genesis of the Hebrew scripture, there is a passage that beautifully illustrates radical hospitality:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day." Mamre is near the present city of Hebron in the Palestinian West Bank. It's a semi-arid desert climate there and the mid-day sun can be quite oppressive.

"Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him." Okay, we were just told that one of the men was Yahweh, but Abraham doesn't know this. To him they are three humans.

"When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and he bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lords, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Abraham was no lowly shepherd. At this point in his life, Abraham was the elder of his tribe. He owned a huge flock of livestock and was the religious leader of his people. And yet he referred to these strangers as his lords.

He continued: "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." And they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to

prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and stood by them under the tree while they ate.”

The religious historian Karen Armstrong explains that in the ancient world, foreigners were dangerous; because they were not bound by the local vendetta. They could kill and plunder with impunity. Even today, very few of us would willingly bring three total strangers off the street into our homes. But Abraham shows no such reluctance. Instead, he rushes out to greet them, prostrates himself before them as if they were kings, brings them into his encampment, and gives them the best of what he has.

He took a big risk to accept the stranger, and in so doing he had a divine encounter. He made a place for the other in his life. He threw down the precautionary barriers we erect to protect ourselves from harm and entered a sacred dimension of experience. In Hebrew, the word for “holiness” is qadosh, which literally means “separate, other.”

By sharing what he had, he entered into a relationship that transcended separation with no intentions. He was acting out of pure compassion and hospitality.

In a true encounter with another human being, we come face to face with the mystery of life. When we practice radical hospitality, we open ourselves to the other as if we were tourists visiting somewhere for the first time. We approach this new human experience with curiosity and no judgment.

In David Rynick’s article from which Steve read, he writes that every experience we have with another person is always a personal experience. We see them through the filters of our own idiosyncratic experience, beliefs, and senses. The resulting picture becomes a combination of who they are and of who we are. In that sense, we are part of everything we encounter.

So this journey of radical hospitality is simultaneously outward and inward; we are always meeting ourselves in the other person. We are both giving and receiving at the same time.

The notion of radical hospitality reminds me of a beautiful poem by the Sufi mystic Rumi

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.*

*He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Rumi is reminding us that every encounter with the stranger at our door is a sacred encounter that has the potential to change us. He says “each has been sent as a guide from beyond.” Radical Hospitality brings the unexpected and with that the opportunity to move deeper into our lives and align our actions with our deepest values. It may feel like you are being robbed of your trusty old furniture, your comfort zone, but in reality you may be cleared out to make room for a new delight.

Have you ever heard this before? “The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg fosters a welcoming and intentionally diverse community of those who seek philosophical, spiritual, intellectual or religious growth in a forum of mutual respect.” That’s our mission statement. It’s a mouthful, but at its core it declares that our mission is to foster a welcoming and diverse community of people seeking to embark on some form of personal growth.

That sounds like radical hospitality to me. Because if we are welcome and open to diverse people engaged in the process of personal growth, then we and the community itself cannot help but grow and change along with it. As Rumi says, “Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

But do we really truly live up to this mission? Was that just something that sounded nice on paper, but we didn’t really mean it. David Rynick describes what he calls New England hospitality: “We sincerely welcome you into our church as long as you know how to get here and know what to do and know your way around. We’ll be happy to talk to you if you initiate, and will promise not to bother you.” Does that sound familiar?

That AME church in Alexandria broke all the rules of polite and genteel etiquette. I don’t suggest we go as far as inviting our guests up to the pulpit to say a few words to the congregation, but what I am suggesting is that we risk engaging with everyone who comes through our doors, visitor and member alike.

Our mission, if we truly want to live into it, calls us all to be the welcoming committee. Hospitality is not a duty for whoever volunteers to be the greeter on Sunday. It is a spiritual practice that we must take on to be the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg. Otherwise we are frauds.

A couple of weeks ago while driving through upstate New York, we stopped for gas. A man came running out like Abraham to pump our gas. We wondered if he had ulterior motives. Did he expect a tip? I looked at the pump to see if the price of gas had been jacked up. No, we were simply in a time warp where full service was still being practiced. What would that be like at church? How would it feel to pull up to a full service church where we were being treated as a guide from beyond?

Rumi, Henri Nouwen and the ancient writers of Genesis are all telling us that radical hospitality means to see through the eyes of the guest. To become aware when we talk in code, or mention people's names as if everyone knows them, or form up in cliques like middle-schoolers or when we enforce unspoken rules. Guests are keen observers of all these things. If there is conflict and anxiety floating around, guests will pick up on it in a heartbeat. If we aren't at home in our own house, we will be blind to all the little turn-offs that repel visitors.

Radical Hospitality is extreme because it is hard to do. But we can do it. This weekend, we welcomed over 40 guests who travelled from all over the state and even from Maryland. We hosted a two-day youth ministry workshop. Youth slept in sleeping bags on our floors, adults were taken in to our homes. We served them meals and provided a caring environment where everyone could share at a deep level. This place was buzzing with the energy that only radical hospitality can muster.

This was something new for us, connecting us with our Unitarian Universalist peers. A week ago, we weren't sure we could pull it off when the organizer, our Director of Religious Education, was hospitalized. But lots of people jumped in to help, putting their heart and soul into being the most welcoming congregation we could be. Imagine doing that every Sunday. Turning our Fellowship into a guest house. Totally at peace with who we are. Flexible and accommodating, humble and curious, loving and compassionate. This is our mission if we choose to accept it. So let nothing stop us! May we serve all who come here with grateful hearts as though they are guides sent from beyond?