

Hospitality

September 12, 2019

By: Meggie Exner

The Arabs used to say,

When a stranger appears at your door,

Feed him for three days before asking who he is,

Where he's come from,

Where he's headed.

That way, he'll have strength

Enough to answer.

Or, by then, you'll be

Such good friends

You don't care.

[...]

No, I was not busy when you came!

I was not preparing to be busy.

That's the armor everyone put on

To pretend they had a purpose

In the world.

I refuse to be claimed.

Your plate is waiting.

We will snip fresh mint

Into your tea.

– Naomi Shihab Nye, *The Red Brocade*

As the Young Adult Group reconvened for our first meeting of the year, we shared stories of where we had found the holy over our summers. One group member shared stories of the sense of welcome and radical hospitality she experienced while traveling in Newfoundland. She spoke of how the people there were eager to offer directions and assistance and viewed monetary repayment for their efforts as an insult. The conversation turned to what radical hospitality might look like here, in America, and how we might practice it.

Personally, I was reminded of a “civility practice” for which I was supposed to verbally greet everyone I met for one week. Outside of a few “drive-by hellos” while riding my bike, I failed miserably at the exercise. I justified this to myself in various ways. I see too many people for it to be practical. People looked like they were enjoying their peace and quiet. It felt awkward when people wearing earbuds couldn’t hear me. Maybe it wasn’t even always safe. (My friend took the civility practice much more seriously than I did, with the result that someone tried to follow her home as she got off the bus.) But the truth is, I didn’t really want to practice greeting everyone I met because this kind of civility didn’t feel like true hospitality... But I did want to practice curiosity towards people I didn’t know and I did want to practice letting that curiosity propel me into new and brave conversation. I wanted to experience the expansive sense of love and welcome that Naomi Shihab Nye describes in her poem, a love that cannot help but leave both the host and the stranger changed.

These conversations on hospitality and civility remind me of the Multicultural Training I attended with 150 other Unity congregants this past Saturday. Like many of us, I could do a much better job of reaching out to people I don’t know in the Parish Hall after

service (particularly to folks with the temporary name tags). But this training and this conversation on hospitality reminded me that even if I regularly greet people I don't know, this may not be enough to truly welcome others. We named at the training that Unity as a congregation is predominantly white, financially secure, and highly educated. Those who have different identities than these, particularly a non-white racial identity, may not feel that Unity is a place that was created "by me, for me, and with me in mind." While there is no single "fix" or even a single starting place, I do feel certain that if we entered church in the manner that Nye describes in her poem – with intention and care and a "refus[al] to be claimed" solely by those we already know – we would better embrace unfamiliar ways of being and a new, more broadly welcoming culture at Unity.

We could still all use a little more civility in our lives. But may we more often claim opportunities to practice deeper connection by through hospitality. May all people know belonging. May we all know that we come with something worthy to share.

Author's Note: The phrase "by me, for me, and with me in mind" is used by the organization Team Dynamics to describe the way that people with dominant identities experience culture.