

# In This Old House

BY JONATHAN AND ELIZABETH SANDS WISE

**While generosity typically involves donating money or goods, it includes giving less material things. In this way, hospitality is a species of generosity, a making room and giving space to others in your own place, or in your attention, or in conversation.**

---

**I**n today's housing market, our house passes for a modest, "starter" home. It's a small bungalow, and most visitors are surprised to find four bedrooms and two bathrooms squeezed under its dormered roof. Living in an older neighborhood, we have big, sturdy trees out front, and most of the neighboring houses' original homeowners have passed away. Young families like ours have moved in, or the houses have become rentals.

Built in the fifties, these houses require a lot of work. We renovated our bathrooms, moving their walls and re-plumbing their fixtures; mudded cracked plaster, sanded, and mudded some more; planed doors so they would shut in their frames, raised and repainted kitchen cabinets, and stripped the mantle. While re-sanding the hardwood floors on our hands and knees—our very first task, even before we moved in our furniture—we paused mid-task and asked one another, "How many feet will walk across this floor over the years? How many people will we welcome in?"

*Our front door is usually open, though often the glass outer door remains locked to keep toddlers inside. Whether expecting company or not, we try to welcome every visitor, neighbor, and friend at the front door, to jump into comfortable conversations that ease them gently into our home. We have no entryway, but a braided rug covered with scattered shoes encourages a laid-back atmosphere. Young visitors typically kick their shoes off, too.*

We try to practice hospitality through a generosity of physical and figurative space. We do not merely invite others into our home when we open that

glass door, we invite them to be present in our lives. Friends come for a meal, neighbors for playtime on our swings or sandbox, college students for a Crockpot of chili and a theology reading group, and church friends for a Sabbath potluck. Some people stay a few minutes, some a few hours. Family comes in from out of state and stays for a few days now and then. But as we open our home to those who cross our paths—as we say to them, *yes, you are welcome here with us*—we’ve discovered more and more friends in periods of transition, friends whose days in our home turn into weeks and then into months.

In the last five years we’ve had seven housemates. A friend asked us recently how it is that we find people to live with us. We responded, “We don’t find them. They find us.”

*After guests-turned-friends enter our living room, we invite them to sit in the circle of chairs and sofas, facing one another. In the center is a paint-splattered child’s desk, serving as a coffee table. We have no television here. We have not invited them into our space to be amused or distracted by some outside source, but to be part of a conversation, to be welcomed, to be paid attention to. It is here that the guest, the other, becomes part of our circle.*

In the living room, so often scattered with toys and blocks and stacks of library books, we share stories about our living: our hopes and regrets, jokes we have heard, struggles we are having with work or church or family, experiences we have enjoyed or wish we could have, our joys and our sorrows. Sometimes, with different housemates, we have shared times of communal prayer in the evenings, sitting around a candle or two. When we host large potlucks that overflow the dining room but cannot be in the yard, then people perch around the circle and on additional chairs with plates on their knees and drinks on the floor, and when the drinks spill, we mop them up and forget all about where that new stain came from.

*Our house was built on a typical 1950s plan: separate rooms, not large open spaces, but all connected in a big circle. Heading to the left from the living room, guests pass through the dining room, then into the small, L-shaped kitchen, which leads into a short hallway that connects two downstairs bedrooms and a bathroom, and then back into the living room. The dining room holds our well-used table—it has a lot of scratches, but it is a heavy, hardwood table with two extra wings that snap onto each end. The kitchen is short on counter space or standing room, especially for folks like us who cook from scratch, preserve seasonal produce, and bake bread and cookies and pies. We spend a lot of time in this tiny space, and, inevitably, so do our guests, gathering and standing and dancing around one another on the decades-old green linoleum floor as food is prepared and served.*

We know people when we share our table with them, whether it is a potluck dinner for thirty, or simply our standard Friday-night homemade

pizza. As we bless this meal together, we recognize that we do not sustain ourselves, but are sustained by God, by the bounty of God's earth, and by the work of a community of people that has brought this food to our table. And we remember that there are too many people who do not share the blessings of good food, loving community, and meaningful labor. May our

---

**All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space.**

---

generosity, we pray, make us part of the solution for those who lack these essential and God-ordained goods. Because it is one of our three-year-old's favorite songs, we usually conclude our prayer with the Doxology.

After dinner we all clean up together, carrying the plates to the kitchen sink. We lack a mechanical dishwasher, so that task is carried

out by one of us, or often by a guest. It can be another instance of generosity, odd but genuine, to allow our houseguests to serve us as well – by washing dishes, even when they do it poorly, or by putting dishes away, even when they put them in the wrong place.

With housemates who live with us for a while, we try to share communal meals on set nights each week. These are a priority, not bumped easily for the myriad meetings, events, or offers that may come up. Then we can speak of the mundane mysteries of our lives that, shared together, mold us into a community. We take turns cooking meals, allowing them to share their palates with us, and likewise take turns cleaning up. We have lost some non-stick pots to metal implements, dishes to slippery hands, and spoons to whatever mysterious place they go, but we have gained far more than we have lost in these exchanges.

Putting leftovers into a shared refrigerator can be like playing a game of Tetris. Not getting frustrated about misplaced food getting spoiled is a lesson of community. And patience with less-than-adventurous eaters has been a must. We've introduced friends to tofu and hummus, homemade granola bars, using Greek yogurt as sour cream, and to Pennsylvania staples like pickled beets, baked oatmeal, and pouring milk over pie and cake.

*Until this year, our long-term housemates always slept in the rooms on the main floor and used what is now our main bathroom. Our bedrooms were in the larger, dormered rooms upstairs, at the top of a stairwell most guests didn't realize existed. Hidden discreetly behind a latched door off the living room, the stairwell led to the detritus of daily life typically unseen by visitors or friends. When we lived upstairs, we hid our mess better.*

Living in community has made life messy and teaches us regularly how selfish we are. It is easy to bristle when the front door gets left unlocked overnight, or to be annoyed when an extra laptop or coffee cup is sitting around in common spaces, but then we see that our own laptops, our own water glasses, and our children's toys are littered throughout the house: a life of hospitality reminds us to check the mirror for sties in our eyes before opening our mouths.

*The two small bedrooms on the main floor now sleep our nuclear family. Our young daughters share one, and we squeeze into the other, along with a king-sized bed, and bookshelves, because it was supposed to be the library in our original house plans. It's messy and it's tight. The black and white bathroom between the bedrooms is shared with short-term visitors. Hooks keep towels out of the way; an old colander is full of bath toys. We used to wipe down the sink before company came, but now rarely remember. Even our personal space is now shared space, filled with children and housemates.*

All hospitality is hard, but we have found that the hardest is when we move beyond inviting others into our space and instead invite them to make our space their space. We have learned that we cling more tightly to our physical possessions than we thought we did. We may pride ourselves on our generosity, on our frugality, on our conviction that people matter more than worldly goods, but the anger we feel when a new gash appears on the hardwood floor we sanded ourselves puts us in our place. We are attached to our things.

We are more attached to our schedules, plans, and to-do lists. Housemates disrupt those things. We've learned over the years that there are days we will not be able to compose an article or grade papers because a conversation is more important. When we want alone time to unwind after the girls are in bed, it is tiring to say "yes" to community time. Living with non-family members has challenged us to be charitable, hospitable, and generous even when it is hard.

But living with friend-guests has also made life richer, quirkiest, and, overall, more fun. Adam taught us it is possible to live simply: no bed frame, one pair of jeans, flip-flops preferable. Kays reminded us how old we were by making dinner for himself about the time we headed to bed. Angel's friendship encouraged us to be authentic and live faithfully to our convictions. Devin, or "Dobby," was the first person our preschooler nicknamed. Phillip soon learned to change a diaper. Because we had guests living with us before having our own children, our preschooler thinks it's normal to have other grown-ups in the house. And of the handful of adults our toddler allows to pick her up, Devin and Phillip make the cut.

Our first housemate, Adam, is now married, has finished seminary, and works full time in a church. We recently asked Adam if he had any thoughts

about what he learned while living in community with us, and his response reminded us about why we offer our space to our friends, why we open our home and our days as shared resources. "Living in community enriched my perspective on sharing space with others at a time in my life when I was learning what being independent meant for me," Adam said. "Living in community became my greatest opportunity to learn about hospitality: receiving it from you while also giving it to others alongside you."

---



**JONATHAN SANDS WISE**

*is Vice President of Enrollment Management and Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky.*



**ELIZABETH SANDS WISE**

*is a freelance writer and poet, and serves as Production Assistant for Christian Reflection.*