

Finding Home

BY KATHY CALLAHAN-HOWELL

The key to true hospitality is an attitude that moves over to allow space for the other, the ability to set self aside and welcome the other person into authenticity, to welcome them home.

Sitting under the hairdryer at Granny's house meant being treated like a princess, complete with refreshments to ward off the tedium of being still for such torture.

"Madam," she would say, treating my ten-year-old self as a fully adult patron in a beauty salon, "what would you prefer today while your hair dries? Grilled cheese or peanut butter?"

My sandwich would arrive with trimmed crusts, cut on the diagonal, a few chips on the side, and even a small garnish of parsley.

Granny was born in a house in a small town in eastern Kentucky and lived in that town for over ninety years. She and her maiden sister lived with their father, the pharmacist for the community. Her mother once owned a small tearoom, and in that place my grandmother learned the finer points of Southern hospitality.

Dinner at Granny's included a table set with linen cloth and napkins, a centerpiece of collected household items, a full set of silverware at each place setting, and even personal salt cellars. Everyone felt like royalty at Granny's table.

But hospitality at Granny's house extended far beyond cloth napkins and fancy silverware. Hospitality was a way of life, an attitude that honored the guest no matter who that person might be or how unexpected their appearance. A guest always received an offer of food and a cool refreshing glass of iced tea or a warm cup of coffee, depending on the season.

With the food and drink came easy conversation—catching up on family events and travels, the growth of children, or local politics. Granny knew how to listen. Guests not only felt welcome, but even valued. Time stood

still there in Granny's living room as the visitors lingered, despite having said, "I'd better be going," multiple times.

Finally as stars shone over the house the guests would reluctantly gather their belongings and head for home. That is, if they hadn't been persuaded to spend the night, another extension of Granny's hospitality. She was always ready to make a bed for the weary traveler. As the guests departed, promises would be solicited to return another time, a promise easily kept since Granny's house attracted guests magnetically, daring people to walk past without stopping, like an epicenter of calm in the hectic storm of life, drawing people into its peace.

After I married and moved to Cincinnati to live in an urban neighborhood, I struggled with the meaning of home. Was home this strange house I now inhabited in a city of alien noises and sights? Was home the house where I grew up in the suburbs of Lexington with my parents? Or was home Granny's house, in the mountains, where peace reigned unendingly? Granny's house seemed the most convincing answer, but I knew somehow I had to convert my new house into a home. Peace must reign here too.

Home could not be restricted to green mountains and star-lit skies. It must be available in the city, in a northern state, full of noise and chaos. Home had to be that attitude—the acceptance of the guest, the honoring of the visitor, the hospitality represented by food and drink, yet much deeper.

Granny's house felt like home not because of soft beds, but because of her welcoming attitude. For my new house to be a home, I had to re-create that sense of welcome.



Jesus says to all of us, "Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me" (Revelation 3:20). This verse has represented salvation, the ultimate hospitality, the welcoming of Jesus into our very lives. He is the guest, yet he brings with him hospitality. He accepts our food and that becomes a symbol of our fellowship. We have but to open the door and offer ourselves. He not only accepts our welcome, but he also welcomes us.

Notice the invitation begins with listening. We have to be listening to hear Jesus' voice outside the door. To begin to be hospitable, we must be listening for the person who wants entrance into our space.

Hospitality continues with listening. The most welcome a person ever feels is when he or she is truly being heard. When I talk to my friend Erin, I feel like I am the only person in the world. She is totally absorbed in what I am saying. Her eyes fill with sympathy and compassion. She asks relevant questions that show me her depth of interest and understanding.

Erin models the kind of listening and hospitality once practiced by Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543). Indeed, his Rule for intentional communities

starts with the word “listen.” Recent interpreters draw the connection between hospitality and listening in Benedict’s work. “Hospitality is a way to counter the thousands of other times another human being has felt less than human because others didn’t listen. Listening is the power of hospitality; it is what makes hospitality the lifegiving thing it is. When you listen, you get past yourself too. That is something we all need to do a little more. In the listening stance, the focus switches from the self to the other.”†

To truly listen is to abandon our selves, to enter fully into the expression and experience of the other person. Too often listening is simply a pause in our speech while we construct the next installment, narrate the next story, or explain the next principle. Rather than using that moment of listening to formulate a response, we ought to be thinking about what others are saying and how to draw them further into their explanation. During their speaking, think of relevant questions and observations that will help the person arrive at their needed destination, that of being truly heard and understood.

Jesus excelled at this skill, for example, when he encountered the woman at the well (John 4:1-42). Rather than explain his own mission or issues, he asked leading questions that exposed her need and resulted in her receiving the ultimate gift of hospitality, salvation. She was so enthusiastic about Christ she ran into the village to share the gift of hospitality with others.

In Revelation 3:20 we also see the significance of food, of sharing a common meal. The food we eat becomes part of all who share it, symbolizing fellowship and unity. Jesus promises to eat with us and for us to eat with him. Often eating with others provides the perfect outlet for hospitality, the opportunity to share our physical needs and discuss our deeper concerns.

Some people open their homes but not their hearts. A couple I know often welcomes guests to their home. They provide scrumptious meals and luscious beds, but the wife remains polite and detached from her visitors. In that setting I feel I have permission to be a guest, but I am not at home.

Home is a place where you feel welcome to open the refrigerator or pantry and find something to eat. We also create that kind of accessibility through listening, allowing the other person to open our hearts and be nourished.



We can easily feel that a ministry of hospitality requires money to share food or lodging, when really the greatest treasure to offer is welcome. That requires little monetary expense but great personal risk, the risk of vulnerability. We expose ourselves to misunderstanding, lack of appreciation, and rejection. We face loss, as the people we have welcomed into our lives move on, whether to a new town, a new relationship, or even to their final home.

Yet despite the risks, hospitality is our calling if we are following Christ. As we welcome people into our homes, but more importantly into our

hearts, we must provide a space where they can be heard and understood, accepted and loved. In a grocery store line, at a soccer game, around a dinner table, after a tough meeting at work, we are called to be the listening ear, the open heart, the conduit of hospitality. When we set ourselves aside and focus on the other, they will know they are at home. They will feel welcome to dine as they are in need, to search until they are satisfied. Our families are often the people the most in need of this gift of hospitality.

Granny knew how to put people at ease. Our physical environment can help people feel welcome. But beyond the externals, the key to true hospitality is an attitude that moves over to allow true space for the other, the ability to set self aside and welcome the other person into authenticity, to welcome them home.

NOTE

† Lonni Collins Pratt and Father Daniel Homan, O. S. B., *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2000), 215-216.

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