

The Welcome Table

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I arrived in Japan at perhaps the most awkward moment possible. I began my yearlong study of Buddhism in early December of 1995. Part of the reason for my arrival at that particular moment was so that I could experience the biggest celebration in the Japanese calendar: New Years Day. New Years was a huge celebration filled with food and parties. Whereas here in America New Years is something of a Christmas after-thought, in Japan it is the event itself. Rather than a holiday to be spent with friends, it was a holiday mostly for families. People traveled from the big cities of Tokyo and Osaka back home to the country to be with extended family. It was a big deal and I wanted to experience it.

However it created some logistical problems. Less than a month after my arrival, the dorm I was staying in would be closed for about two weeks. Everyone was heading home to their family – no one would be there. Except for me of course. So there was a bit of scramble; what to do with this new guy who just showed up? Where do we put him?

Fortunately one of the students was gracious enough to invite me over to his family's house in Northern Japan for those two weeks. It was a great opportunity to experience life at home in Japan, as opposed to the somewhat artificial environment of my dorm life. All I had seen of the country thus far was Tokyo – a very large, very cosmopolitan, very international and foreigner-friendly city. Subway stops were printed in Japanese kanji and English, for example. However out in the country, where foreign visitors were less common, such accommodations were non-existent. Not a lot of people from other countries traveled out to the Japanese hinterlands, and certainly not during New Years. Add to that I looked very different. Hard to believe now, but in those days I had very long blonde hair tied in a pony tail to the middle of my back. And I was about six inches taller than most of

the population. In Tokyo, I was unusual but not remarkable. In Northern Japan I stuck out like a sore thumb.

Perhaps more so than any other time of my life, I was the other – the stranger. Growing up a white, straight, man in our culture I had rarely experienced this due to my cultural privilege. Japan has a decidedly mixed reaction to foreigners. On the one hand, their 250 years of isolation from the rest of the world still has them a bit wary of people from other countries. Yet their economic success has meant that they are very active at the world stage. Most Japanese seemed enamored with American culture. I never in my life heard as many Elvis songs as when I lived in Japan!

The family I stayed with was extraordinarily welcoming. I stayed in their home, ate the traditional New Years day food, and even helped make some of it. Sure I got stares, and a little pointing, when we would go out to see the sights. But the family I was with were endlessly interested in me, my culture, and even Unitarian Universalism. I will never forget the how they made

room for me, both in their home and in their heart. Theirs was a truly welcoming table.

There are a lot of way we can be the other, the stranger, in a group of people. Sometimes we can see these differences and other times we cannot. Sometimes people feel like outsiders even though they have been a part of the group for years. One colleague of mine grew up in a low income household. Shortly after her second child was born, she and her husband separated. For many years she was a single mom just scraping by on food stamps and other assistance programs. Eventually she got a degree in social work at Michigan and was able to earn a pretty good living. Later she and I attended Meadville together, and she became a UU minister. She would often share with us that among Unitarian Universalists she felt like a stranger – even in some of the congregations she served. While financially she was now middle class, culturally she still felt that difference.

People have told me many times that the words of welcome we say at the beginning of the worship service are some of the most powerful words we speak on a Sunday morning. Ingrained

as those words are in some of us they speak an important truth: no matter who you are you are welcome here. This worship space is a welcome table for all. We will make no assumptions about our commonalities, but instead every week speak to those ways in which we could be different. And every week we do not deny that those differences exist, but instead invite everyone to our welcome table because of, not in spite of, those differences.

I find that my experience of being the stranger in Japan has made me feel greater empathy for people who are strangers to me. In our reading this morning the 90 year old grandmother still remembers what it was like to be an orphan. To be different and alone in a world that assumed one had parents. That experience was so profound for her in her early life, that decades later she continued to live out of that experience. Like my friend who had been poor for much of her life, this 90 year old grandma felt like a stranger even though she may not have appeared as such. But instead of letting that experience turn her bitter toward the world, resenting people who had things that she did not, this grandmother let that experience open her heart. It made her more receptive to other people. Her early life motivated her to set

a place at the welcome table for others, because she remembered what it was like.

This week is Palm Sunday, the week before Easter. It is also coming up on Passover for our Jewish brothers and sisters. Both holidays have elements of welcoming the stranger in our midst, and treating each other in a spirit of openness and acceptance. The Old Testament is very explicit about this. Deuteronomy 10:19 “You shall love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Middle East is known for its spirit of hospitality. In the harsh conditions of the desert, to turn someone away from shelter and water was to hand them a death sentence. Hospitality was a crucial ingredient for survival. No doubt that is why hospitality is a key component to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is a basic message of empathy. You were strangers once. Don't forget that experience. Welcome the stranger among you.

One of my favorite stories of welcoming and community comes from the poet Naomi Shihab Nye. She is a second generation Palestinian American. Her parents are Palestinians and Muslims. She grew up and lives in the American southwest.

Talk about being a stranger in the desert! Naomi Shihab Nye wrote this essay entitled "Gate 4-A":

"Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been detained four hours, I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well – one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the Flight Service Person. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. "Shu dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, "You're fine, you'll get there, who is picking you up? Let's call him." We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would

stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for fun. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands –

had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

Not everything is lost. Community can spring up anywhere, at any time that it is needed. We don't have to have years and years of history together in order to feel a connection to other people. All we have to have is an open and welcoming heart. A little empathy for another suffering human being, who weeps a hurts, and limps along just as I have. Just as we all do. “Love the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” That feeling, that experience of being the other, motivates us to preparing the welcome table for them.

If my friend Rabbi Yair Robinson were here, he would no doubt remind us that in Judaism “Egypt” does not always refer to a physical place. Egypt is also a spiritual condition. To be in Egypt is to be lost, isolated, alone, bereft of any reference point or guidepost to life. Egypt is a metaphor for spiritual brokenness; to think of oneself as a slave rather than as a child of the living God. In the land of Egypt, this metaphor goes, we are all strangers and other.

This is why our hospitality, our welcoming, needs to be “radical.” I believe I preached on this subject of radical hospitality in my second sermon as your Senior Minister. And as I recall, people didn’t like the word radical – maybe you still don’t. It may have negative connotations left over from overuse in the 1960s. But to me it is an important modifier on our notion of hospitality. It is easy to welcome the people who look like us, act like us, like the same music we do, go to the same cultural events we do. That is easy. That is also not what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to do. If anyone could rightfully be labeled theological and spiritual radicals it would be both our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors! The faith they handed

down to us calls us to push the envelope of our hospitality. A hospitality that is radical welcomes people across boundaries of familiarity and even comfort. Because you know what, not all of those boundaries are visible. You may not even know who we are unintentionally excluding. We need to go the extra mile to welcome everyone regardless of differences.

Which is what is so powerful about Naomi Shihab Nye's story of the airport. What starts off as a strong division between the lady wailing because she thinks her flight is cancelled and the airline attendants struggling to communicate with her, transforms into something else entirely. By the end, not only has the lady calmed down, but has reached out and shared her culture with the people at Gate 4-A. And they in turn were open to her – they get credit for this too. She laid out the welcome table; they accepted. It took openness and a heart of empathy for both of them to come together. Naomi Shihab Nye's hope and inspiration that this is the world we could be living in becomes our own.

May we ever practice the important spiritual discipline of being open to the strangers. May we never forget the moments when we too were strangers. And may the welcome table be open to all. Amen Blessed Be.