

Hospitality: a Friendly perspective

By Jennie Wright

As Friends (as we Quakers prefer to call ourselves), we come in many shapes and flavours. Some of us meet for mostly silent worship; others have programmed Meetings that include sermons and hymns. Some of us speak of our relationship with Jesus; others prefer to speak of the Light within us. Our beliefs are, however, built on the same bedrock: two of the most important ones are a conviction that there is that of God in each one of us, and a commitment to simplicity. This bedrock colours our perceptions of hospitality.

For true hospitality to occur, there must be a spiritual transaction of some sort between the host and the guest. It is difficult for this to happen during the course of a lavish buffet dinner for eighty people, which is why this is not the particular image that springs to mind when we discuss hospitality. Simplicity, on the other hand, implies a paring down, a reduction of spiritual and physical clutter, the act of jettisoning unnecessary baggage. When you take this same buffet dinner and reduce the numbers, the traffic, and the food, you end up with a mental image closer to a group of people in one room, seated at one table, enjoying food and each other without distraction – something much closer to most people’s mental images of hospitality. This more simple setting allows a spiritual transaction to occur, without which we have people “entertaining” their guests instead of “offering hospitality.”

A simple act is not necessarily an easy act, only one in which the focus has narrowed. Giving hospitality can be inconvenient, tiring, and time-consuming. Receiving hospitality in the spirit in which it is offered can also be daunting. The greater the investment of oneself, however, the more significant becomes the

spiritual transaction. At its best, hospitality becomes a dialogue that goes beyond guest and host and becomes communication between the Light, or that of God, within each person.

In modern English our word hospitality implies only one end of this exchange between guest and host, and we think of the two words as antonyms. Earlier languages (and some modern ones, such as Spanish) show the two-way nature of the relationship much more clearly. The Latin word *hospes* implied both the words *host* and *guest*. This is not the paradox that one might think: a host cannot be a host without a guest, and it is impossible to be a guest without a host. For those of us who see that of God in everyone, these seemingly paradoxical ideas begin to merge. A *hospes* can also be guest and host simultaneously, but more on that later.

If we look back even farther, into the very roots of the Latin language, the paradox deepens. The Romans called their enemies *hostis*, from which arises our word *hostile* and *host*, as in a host of enemies). However, *hostis* and *hospes*, as well as the Greek word *xeno*, all arise from an Indo-European word *ghosti*, meaning guest, host, friend, foe and stranger. This made sense, since you could never be quite sure into which camp the stranger fell, that of friend or that of foe. We now have the words *hostile*, *hospice*, *xenophobia*, *hostel* — and *hospitality* — all arising from a common root.

We frequently hear references to “the sacred bonds of hospitality.” In the spiritual transaction that occurs during hospitality, a bond of trust is created. Friendship does not have to happen, but trust does. A word that comes to mind is that of companionship, whose root — *compan* — means to share bread. A perversion of this relationship, where people are involuntary guests who sometimes find themselves denied even the most basic necessities, is described by another word from the same Indo-European/Roman root — the word “hostage.”

Our spiritual health is tied to our finding a balance between the roles of host and guest. This was brought home to me when I was travelling in the mountains of southern Mexico, sometimes feeling like a permanent

guest. I stayed with many people who had very little themselves, all of them kind and gracious hosts, and began to fret that I was taking and taking, and giving so little in return. It is easy to get into this state of mind when your two hosts and their four children give you their only bed and sleep on the dirt floor of the kitchen during your visit. A friend pulled me up short after one of my lamentations and said very simply, "It keeps you humble." He was right, of course; if we begin to perceive ourselves only in the role of beneficent distributors of hospitality, and never as recipients, we lose sight of the true nature of this transaction. I have learned from experience that simplicity and balance are intertwined; and if we lose sight of one, it is harder to maintain the other.

We enter this world with nothing but the loan of a body, which must be returned on the date we leave the world again. This, therefore, must mean that our time on earth is spent living off God's beneficence as guests. Surrounded by miracles — a chick pipping its shell, an opening leaf, a dainty monarch butterfly tumbling out of the chrysalis it formed as a fat striped caterpillar two weeks earlier — I feel like an honoured guest indeed. And yet, with God's presence in each of us, are we not also the hosts of God? Hosts of the Spirit, guests of the Spirit, we do indeed walk in the glory of the Light. ☞

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Broken open at the Welcome Table: A grieving Friend at the ninth assembly of the World Council of Churches

By Katie Aven

It comes as no surprise to me that I write this reflection for the issue of *The Canadian Friend*, whose theme is illness, aging and death. My trip to Brazil to spend two weeks among theologians, clergy and lay people from every denomination all over the world was one of my most anticipated experiences in many years. When the time came to go, however, it was the most difficult choice I have ever made: our beloved niece ended her life just two weeks before I was set to depart.

In the end, the decision to go was discerned and encouraged by my family, my meeting, and the members of the

Finance Committee of YM. It was a choice to go half a world away from my grieving family, from my husband, and from our home, in which our niece lived just a few weeks before her death.

I went to Brazil praying that the Spirit would go with me, hoping that grace would surround me. From a life of sudden, acute shock and grief, where we literally lived day to day, or even hour by hour, it was the only way I could imagine making it through almost three weeks in a foreign country, where I knew no one.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a global ecumenical body, bringing together 340 Christian denominations worldwide, and providing a forum for churches to reflect, speak, act, work, worship, challenge, support, share and debate, together. Founded simultaneously with the United Nations (and continuing to have a strong relationship with the UN), the World Council of Churches is committed to the work of justice and peace, international affairs and human security, upholding the integrity of creation, and working together to understand and achieve the shared vision of the