

Hospitality in a Time of Social Distancing

“With the advent of the coronavirus and social distancing, things changed radically, challenging the very notion of hospitality. How does one practice hospitality, particularly with persons who have been impoverished and marginalized, while maintaining social distance?”

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For forty years, a major theme in my life, both intellectually and practically, has been hospitality in the Catholic Worker tradition of personalism. After two years at Unity Kitchen, a Worker "house of hospitality" in Syracuse, NY, which provided two meals a day to anyone who came plus an overnight shelter for men, I enrolled in the Sociology Ph.D. program at Syracuse University and wrote a dissertation on Catholic Worker hospitality based on participant observation at three other Worker houses. In 1986, I was given a job at Nazareth College and within a year was coordinating the Saturday meal at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, NY. I brought in groups, mostly from churches, to provide the food and prepare and serve a lunch to whoever came, usually between sixty and a hundred-twenty guests, roughly a third of whom were currently homeless. This gave the "real" Catholic Workers, who lived in the house (and thus were literally practicing hospitality by welcoming poor persons into their home) a day off while keeping the daily meal going. I would be present most Saturdays to welcome the guests and deal with whatever arose. For over thirty years, things ran relatively smoothly. Several churches had been coming once a month for thirty years; occasionally, I called on student volunteers to fill in.

With the advent of the coronavirus and social distancing, things changed radically, challenging the very notion of hospitality. How does one practice hospitality, particularly with persons who have been impoverished and marginalized, while maintaining social distance? How can one invite the stranger into one's home if one is self-isolating? Can one simply accept the

bromide "I'm keeping my distance and wearing a mask out of concern for you" as justification for refusing hospitality in the face of need? If we are social distancing, are we doing it to protect others or to protect ourselves, or some combination of the two? Giorgio Agamben in March, 2020 noted that one of the great dangers of the pandemic is that we come to see other persons "only as potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs." This is a particular danger with respect to homeless persons, who have been regarded as sources of contamination for centuries and who have been largely ignored in governmental responses to the pandemic—ignored in the White House's incoherent response and at times actively repressed by state and local governments, particularly when police have broken up homeless encampments against CDC recommendations.

Perhaps the most iconic example of hospitality during the pandemic has been Rahul Dubey, who opened his door to some sixty Black Lives Matter demonstrators who were being attacked and pepper-sprayed on his street by DC police. Interviewed by a reporter the next morning, as the demonstrators were leaving his home, he stated: "We had to keep the door open and just kept grabbing people and pulling them in. . . . It's a storm and you would have let anyone into your home. I know it." Another example is the medical student who continued to work with me on Saturdays, stopping only when she volunteered to work with COVID-19 patients as her hospital appeared on the verge of becoming overwhelmed, and returning to St. Joes once the number of infected patients decreased and her services were no longer needed at the hospital (after a two week self-isolation). I could name a number of others. Sociologically, the important point is that it is these exceptions, these outliers, rather than "mean behaviors" that provide the key to human possibilities. My own experiences were much more mundane, but perhaps instructive.

The first major change at St. Joes came just before the second Saturday of March, when a volunteer group comprised mainly of elderly men that had been coming for decades cancelled

because of the pandemic. I recruited my wife and a couple of friends plus one member of the original group; we made spaghetti and served the meal in the dining room as usual. Within days, the Worker community had decided to give out bag lunches and not allow any guests inside. Several of my volunteer groups continued to bring in meals—some doing bag lunches; others coming in and preparing hot meals to go.

The next Saturday, we began giving out lunches at the door and not allowing anyone into the building. About fifty people came, a number of whom expressed gratitude that I was still there (since, at the age of sixty-eight, I am designated "high risk"). Because St. Joes is a Catholic Worker rather than a bureaucratic shelter, there were a number of exceptions to this new "no entry" approach to hospitality. Hospitality begins at the door with the decision as to who is permitted entry.

The House was still doing our "winter shelter," in which ten men slept on mats on the first floor. The shelter was scheduled to run through mid-April, but the Workers had been trying to get the men placed elsewhere. There were still four or five men in shelter, and the Workers had decided that they could stay inside throughout the Saturday meal since almost every place else was closed up due to the pandemic. By the middle of April, the County had agreed to place most homeless people, including our shelter guests, in hotel rooms. This approach, up to now, has been beneficial both for the persons themselves and for the public health of Monroe County as a whole.

I negotiated with the house director to allow Jane (a pseudonym), a woman in her sixties who has been sleeping on the streets for twenty years, to come in to take a shower and wash her clothes on Saturdays. She has had a relationship with the house—and with me—for all of those years, relying on the house as a place to get cleaned up. She is a white woman, and my decision to allow her in immediately raised the issue of racism. Some of the men in the shelter, who were

mostly Black or Latino, complained that I was giving her special privileges because she was white. These complaints came out of a context in which people had been complaining for years that she took too much time in the shower and interfered with other people's laundry. Over the years, I had broken up numerous arguments over laundry, often involving Jane.

Issues of race have permeated the house's history. Founded in 1941 by a group of young white Catholics, the house was open to guests of all races. By the time I arrived at St. Joes in 1981, the majority of guests were black. However, it wasn't until the late 1980s that a black person became a member of the community board. Over the past decade in particular, black volunteers have charged that many decisions, including who should be banned from the house, have been racist. For the last several years, the house director and the chair of the board have been black. Issues of white privilege and white supremacy continue in the daily work of hospitality.

The Catholic Worker approach to personalist hospitality, derived in part from the European philosophers Emmanuel Mounier, Martin Buber, and Nicolai Berdiaev, contrasts sharply as an ideal type from a bureaucratic approach. In personalism, one tries to respond to the whole person, in an I-Thou relationship (to use Buber's term, also used by the sociologist Alfred Schutz). One attempts to take the person's whole situation into account and respond in a way akin to the ethic of caring elaborated by Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto. The approach, I think, also parallels Michelle Alexander's argument that, in contrast to a "color blind" approach, one should see all aspects of a person, including color, and still care about the person. It involves listening to a person's story; sometimes, it involves "knowing" that story because of a relationship which has endured for years or decades.

In contrast, the bureaucratic approach, particularly "street level bureaucracy" as delineated by Michael Lipsky, entails classifying persons into "appropriate" pre-determined categories based

on specific attributes in order to provide the "correct" services or treatment. I have criticized this approach elsewhere (1990, 2016). However, with respect to racism, the bureaucratic approach has a key advantage over personalism due to its formal rules. In bureaucracy, if I, as a white person, have ignored race, placed the person in the "appropriate" categories, and provided the "correct" services, then I can claim, even to myself, that I have not discriminated, that I have been "objective." (Again, a critique of this kind of claim is beyond the scope of this essay; one can just note that the procedures themselves often entail systemic racism, sexism, etc.). With personalism, one can never argue that one has "followed the rule" because there are no hard and fast rules. One chooses to act in response to a person's story, a story which inevitably includes race, gender, sexuality, age, and so many other aspects.

Am I a white supremacist because I allowed Jane "special privileges"? Did I choose to act in a caring ethic, taking the whole situation into account? Did it matter that she was the only person with this particular long term relationship to the house? After much soul searching, I have no ready answers. Perhaps to be hospitable is to live in that tension, refusing to submit to a set of "objective" rules, in favor of the messiness of trying to respond to others in a personal way. One can never claim that one has done "the right thing." Hospitality is, as Derrida has said, an aporia. And yet, in the face of the federal government's utterly inadequate handling of the pandemic and vicious response to the BLM demonstrators, do we have any alternative but that twin program which Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, laid out in 1933: hospitality and resistance?

References

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