

Holidays, Hospitality and Heart
(Genesis 18:1-12; Exodus 23:1-14 and Malachi 3:23-24)

In anticipation, the signs are everywhere. Full parking lots at supermarkets. Inside, special holiday displays and long lines at the checkout counter. Delicious aromas wafting from the kitchen throughout the house and into the street. Full flights culminating in exuberant, heartfelt hugs at the airport. Hosts welcoming families and friends from far and wide. Hospitality is omnipresent and abundant.

Hospitality is in our cultural DNA. It is also in our oldest and most sacred texts and traditions. The Midrash teaches that Abraham and Sarah's tent was open on four sides, so they could welcome travelers coming from all directions. Indeed, our Genesis text teaches that while Abraham sat, ready to offer hospitality to travelers, the Holy One appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre. As if that wasn't extraordinary enough, in the same moment, three travelers appeared, and with them, Abraham's attention turned from the Divine presence and toward the guests—he hurried to greet them, to welcome them, to wash their feet and to feed them. Noticing this sequence, the rabbis surmise that welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence. When you welcome a guest, it is tantamount to honoring God.

Hindus ritually enact this identification of a guest with God. A few weeks ago, our Fellowship for Religious Encounter was invited by the Hindu Students Association to attend a *puja*, ritual worship, in honor of *Diwali*. *Diwali*, the Festival of Lights in the Hindu tradition, celebrates the victory of good over evil and light over darkness. The sanctuary in the CIRCLE on the third floor of the Old Union was transformed, with lights above our heads and linens under our feet. Beneath a colorful altar with portraits and statues of Hindu gods sat a priest offering oil and food and light as he chanted praise in Sanskrit. The god was treated like an honored guest. The priest and by extension, the community of devotees, were the god's attentive hosts. The priest chanted prayers of welcome and of praise. He lit incense. He anointed his guest with oils. He draped flowers. He blessed food for the god. It was a ritual display of hospitality for the Divine.

How often have we felt special, bathed in love, lavished with sustenance and welcomed with scents by a friend, family member or sometimes even more powerfully, by a stranger soon to become an intimate? Approaching a table carefully set, full of food and drink, surrounded by people with time for one another, for dining and for discussion evokes the sacred bonds between us. In a world that is too often transactional, generosity manifesting as hospitality is precious indeed. Yet, as the Hindu and biblical traditions teach us, hospitality is not found only inside a sturdy edifice or even a house. It is called forth by the attention of those who welcome us. I had a memorable experience of hospitality this summer. It was neither in a home nor over a special meal. There were technically no hosts and no guests. Instead we each contributed to becoming a community of learners. We were together for a week-long study seminar exploring the Roman writer Ovid's 12000 line poem, *Metamorphoses*. To be sure, we were in a beautiful and welcoming place—at Asilomar on the Monterey Peninsula. If not hosts, we had guides—one a faculty member, one a student, but each of us knew well the rituals—we had practiced them at Johnston College, now the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies. From that experimental college, we embodied a pedagogy that is inclusive, egalitarian and organic.

Why did we, in some cases leave our families, pay what for some was a healthy portion of their income and come together for a week to study an old and long text that we had to read in advance and that, to be honest, more of us initially struggled through rather than loved?

We came for "unsolitary reading"--a concept that, by its very nature suggests that expertise is not held in the hands of a particular person, no matter how educated or experienced. We came because we knew we would be trusted to practice ideas, where every person contributes, every mind is valued and any experience can be invoked to build upon our community understanding. We came hungering for hospitality and heart.

And people gave with extraordinary generosity. Whether it was Wes, the vintner from Clos Pepe who drove his truck up the coast filled with cases of his favorite wine for tasting and teaching, or Matt, the Steinbeck-enthusiast who took us on a meticulously and lovingly constructed tour of Cannery Row, reading to us from Steinbeck's novel and contextualizing along the way, or Sandi who guided us in exploring Ovid through artistry or Sarah who performed a heart-stopping soliloquy from *Metamorphoses* of the bereft mother Niobe or the night when many of us shared our own poetry, short stories or

artwork, the hospitality and generosity overflowed. Little of this was planned. People contributed because they were welcome to do so. We worked hard, read, argued, analyzed, constructed our collective understanding of the text, of the pedagogy, of the community.

At times throughout the week, we each became guests. At others, we were hosts. Together, we were all travelers. Not in space but in time. We traveled to the best moments of our undergraduate learning. We traveled to the dawn of the First Century where Ovid wrote and to 250 BCE where the myths he metamorphosed were initially told. We traveled into one another's imagination. And we traveled to and with a community of learners to the heart of wisdom.

Traveling in time, I would argue, is the essence of holidays. We recall, like images repeating themselves in a mirror, our celebrations and the celebrants. Who was seated at the table in the past and who is passing the food to us now? How much do the children at the table resemble the grandparents or great grandparents whose recipes are present but whose bodies are absent? Whose aphorisms do we recite and whose toasts do we propose? I hope that your Thanksgiving, like mine, was a cornucopia of grace and gratitude. We associate Thanksgiving with cranberries, turkey and pilgrims, but its origins are thought to be biblical. The pilgrims of the colonies mirrored the pilgrims commanded to go up to Jerusalem with the firstfruits of their labor. The first Thanksgiving, in the fall of 1621 most likely fell in October, coinciding with the Jewish week-long pilgrimage festival of Sukkot. Both Sukkot and Thanksgiving express gratitude for a bountiful harvest. During Sukkot, we leave the comfort and sturdiness of our houses to eat, study and sleep in a fragile booth, similar to those used when harvesting. Our senses are heightened as we gather under the stars, remove from the table a few falling strands of stray greenery from the roof of leaves, and as the Autumn chill descends in the darkness, sip warm hearty soups, clothed in down jackets and blankets. At Sukkot, just as the days grow colder and the shorter days are upon us, in anticipation of the darkness and isolation of winter, we call forth an outburst of hospitality. In addition to flesh and blood guests, we invoke the tradition of “ushpizin”, of hospitality to our ancestors, inviting a patriarch and matriarch each night to dine at our table. We are who we are, celebrating at this moment, because we are claimed by those who came before us, guiding us. On holidays we turn not only to those whose history or stories we recount, but as importantly, to those sitting beside us. As Malachi teaches, “He will turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents.” Despite the many media cautions about post-election conflicts, holidays can be those moments when

reconciliation is possible even between those who have been estranged or misunderstood. Holidays are the times where we create memories, moments when we hold close the generations before and the generations yet to come.

If hospitality honors the sacred within each of us, if hospitality reflects the generosity of shared study and discussion, if hospitality calls attention to gratitude and the generations, hospitality also invites us to welcome in the stranger. “You know the heart of the stranger. For you were strangers in the land of Egypt,” the bible tells us. The wider world becomes present through the practice of hospitality. Where better than through holiday hospitality can we learn the heart of the stranger? Having visitors in from beyond our familiar haunts, developing friendships across national and cultural boundaries fosters our shared humanity. As one young man who grew up in a secluded rural community to become an international relief worker reflected, “We had missionaries from all over the world who would spend a night or two with us and they’d talk about the work of the church in Haiti or in Australia. So I was part of a worldwide endeavor even though I grew up way outside of a small town. We were on a first name basis with people around the world. It was very empowering.” (Common Fire, p. 30). Having strangers transform into friends in that most familiar place of all—home—is the wonder of hospitality. Sharing conversation about things that matter with those whose different experience broadens us and helps to shrink the vast contours of the world. It makes for empathy, for generosity, for justice.

As we savor our holiday celebrations past and plan for those soon to come, let us do so with a heart filled with hospitality, with the graciousness of generosity. Let us know the heart of the stranger. May the hearts of the children turn to the parents and the hearts of the parents to the children. May we invite the vast world into our familiar homes to celebrate our holidays with hospitality and with heart.