



Radical Hospitality: A Gift We Can Give Ourselves

By The Rev. Joan B. Murray

Chaplains on the Way

March 10, 2011

Radical hospitality has long been at the heart of my ministry – first at Ecclesia Ministries in Boston and now at Chaplains on the Way in Waltham. Henri Nouwen describes hospitality as creating safe space for the stranger. This definition resonates with my sense of radical hospitality and for me practicing radical hospitality or creating this safe space, involves specific attitudes and practices, including:

- An attitude of respect for the other person
- A willingness to meet the person where he/she is
- Trusting that every person has inner wisdom
- Acceptance of the person as he or she is without need to change him/her and at the same time being willing to support his/her growth and development. Ironically, we all seem to be more able to change and grow when we are accepted as we are first.
- Curiosity, which leads to open-ended questions and creates space for the person to tell his or her story
- Listening not only to the content of what is being shared, but to the deeper or underlying message as well.
- A non-judgmental attitude
- A desire to discover and affirm the strengths and inner resources of the other person
- Accompaniment or companionship – a focus on “being with” – rather than “doing for”

The Rev. Dr. Craig Rennebohm, founder of Mental Health Chaplaincy in Seattle (www.mentalhealthchaplain.org), practices a companionship model of pastoral

care, which he describes in his book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*. This model has helped me to be more intentional about living these attitudes and practices of radical hospitality and creating safe space for others, as well as for myself. Key aspects of this model include:

- **That it is first and foremost, Spirit-driven.** Practicing the art of companionship starts with discerning the Spirit, or one's inner wisdom – in order to determine when one is called to companion another. Among other things, this helps me to be aware of my own limitations and my need and right to say from time to time, **"I am not able to do that."**
- That **deep listening** is central to the practice.
- That it is a **side-by-side way of being with people** – sometimes literally side by side, as in sitting next to people, or walking alongside them while talking – and always metaphorically side-by-side. I am a companion entering into another's journey for a time alongside him or her. I am not directing from behind or leading by walking ahead so the person can follow me.
- The important goal of **increasing the person's circle of care to avoid creating dependency.**
- That it is **public** - for me companionship is almost always literally in public spaces. However it always includes "private" one-on-one conversations. Companionship as public is not so much about the space itself, but rather about representing a wider community. I represent Chaplains on the Way as well as the United Church of Christ (UCC), my own particular church (Wellesley Congregational), the Waltham Ministerial Association, and often a particular program where I am present as a chaplain. I am not alone and I am accountable to others. Others are companionshiping me in community as I companion individuals.
- **Participation in spiritual community** to nourish one's own soul and to support one's work. In the companionship model this refers particularly to spiritual nourishment from a group of peers, sharing scripture or poetry or other spiritual readings and discerning the Spirit together.

All of these practices from Rennebohm's companionship model of pastoral care, resonate with, and support the living of, the attitudes and practices of radical hospitality.

In addition Hebrew and Christian scriptures can help us in the practice of radical hospitality. There is a rich biblical tradition of hospitality which is about taking in and welcoming the stranger. There is also an aspect of transformation involved in offering hospitality. One well-known story in Hebrew scripture is about Abraham taking in three strangers who turn out to be God's messengers to him and Sarah. The Harper's Bible Dictionary says that "In the Ancient Near East hospitality was the process of 'receiving' outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests." In this process there was an initial testing of the stranger to find out if the stranger would adhere to general customs. The ritual of foot washing was often one aspect of this. When the stranger responded to expected customs he was welcomed as a guest and offered the protection of the host. The host was recognized in the community as a sort of patron of the guest. This process through which the stranger becomes the guest, reminds me of the companionship practice of listening to the Spirit and where the Spirit is calling me to companion. I cannot companion everyone and even when I feel called to companion a particular individual, there is a sort of dance in the beginning, as we each figure out the ground rules and how we will enter into relationship. There are some times when what the "stranger" expects of me and what I can offer do not match. In those cases companionship that person may not be possible for me at that time.

One of the most powerful calls to radical hospitality in the Christian scriptures is found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, where Jesus teaches that whenever we welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, we are doing the same for him. It is this concept – that every person is worthy of care, as if that person were Jesus, himself – that both drives my work as a community chaplain and can get me into trouble! I need to remind myself that I am not without limits – that although God will give me strength and energy and guidance so that I can do more than I could do alone, healthy boundaries are still important! There are times to say, "I am not able to do that!"

This leads me to my awareness that the Spirit also calls me to give **myself the gift of radical hospitality**. This is ultimately life-giving and an antidote to burn out.

Just imagine what it would be like if we were to apply all the attitudes and practices we think of as radical hospitality to ourselves.

- An attitude of respect for the other person **becomes an attitude of respect for myself also.**
- A willingness to meet the person where he/she is reminds me that I **offer who I am now. It is my best gift. It doesn't mean I can't reflect later and think how I might do something differently the next time.**
- Trusting that every person has inner wisdom, **which turns into trusting my own inner wisdom, my deep intuition.**
- Acceptance of the person as he or she is without need to change him/her and at the same time being willing to support his/her growth and development. Ironically, we all seem to be more able to change and grow when we are accepted as we are. **Again, accepting that I offer myself as I am, and this will be enough for now.**
- Curiosity, which leads to open-ended questions and creates space for the person to tell his or her story. It is also important that **I am aware of my own sacred story and that I honor it.**
- Listening not only to the content of what is being shared, but to the deeper or underlying message of story as well. **Listen to my own inner voice. Pay attention to my feelings in the moment. If something is "off," be careful.**
- A non-judgmental attitude – **what an idea, a non-judgmental attitude toward myself!**
- A desire to discover and affirm the strengths and inner resources of the other person – **again, a wonderful thing to do for myself!**
- Accompaniment – focus on “being with” – rather than “doing for” – **be in the moment with what is going on with me as well as what is going on for the other person.**

The practices of companionship which I have mentioned are also part of offering radical hospitality to myself and they help me to set limits and keep good boundaries.

- **That it is first and foremost, Spirit-driven.** Discerning where the Spirit is calling/directing me needs to be first and foremost. Where am I called to

be? Who, when, how am I called to companion another? Among other things, this helps me to be aware of my own limitations and my need and right to say from time to time, **“I am not able to do that.”**

- That **deep listening** is central to the practice – again, listening to my own inner voice as well as to the voice of another person.
- That it is a **“side by side” way of being with people** – The Spirit is leading both of us and is present in the connection. I don’t have to make things happen. I simple have to be present alongside the other person.
- The important goal of **increasing the person’s circle of care to avoid creating dependency. Drawing others in to companion the person with me is important.**
- That it is **public** – I am in community.
- And this leads to another important aspect of companionship, which is **participation in spiritual community** to nourish one’s own soul and to support one’s work.

A final practice which is life-giving for me is to notice at the end of each day or most days, the highs and lows. What has given me energy? What has nourished me? Where has God been especially present? And, just as important, what have been the challenges? Where might I need help from God and from colleagues? Over time, especially when I write these in a journal, this can be very revealing.

And when all else seems inadequate I read this quote by Thomas Merton, which is on my web site (www.chaplainsontheway.org) and also appears below. This quote comes from a letter Merton wrote to a friend.

From a letter written by Thomas Merton to Jim Forest dated February 21, 1966.

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.

... All the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love. Think of this more, and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it.

... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand