

I would guess that most of us know the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan – the broad outline, if not the details. On the road to Jericho, a man – presumably Judean - has been beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest, and then a Levite, pass him by, each going to the other side of the road to create as much distance as possible between them. And then the Samaritan comes along. Samaritans seem to be on everybody's out-group list. The Samaritan rescues the man, takes him to an inn, pays for his room and the wine and oil that will be needed for his recovery, and then goes his way. He doesn't calculate that the man he saved would have left him for dead were the circumstances reversed. He sees another human in need and does what he can do. He doesn't ask for anything in return. No repayment. No recognition. He is forever nameless.

This parable is held up as an example of how we should treat a stranger in need, without thought for which tribe the stranger belongs to, without thought for our own risk, or the cost. It represents the ideal for such behavior, and like all stories, we are present in all the characters. We recognize ourselves in the traveler left for dead, the priest, the Levite, the innkeeper, and the Samaritan. Which character will we play today?

But there is something missing from the story, something critical to our notions of hospitality in law and custom. The story takes place in the wilderness, on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a road notorious for its danger. It seems obvious, but the road and the wilderness are not home to any of the characters.

Hospitality requires a home. A home dwelling, a home city, a home country. A safe place with boundaries, with borders. It requires an invitation, consent, and reciprocity.

Jacques Derrida saw hospitality as inviting and welcoming the 'stranger'. This takes place on different levels: the personal level where the 'stranger' is welcomed into the home as guest; and the level of individual countries, with the immigrant and the refugee.

Many words associated with hospitality have evolved from the same hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root *\*ghos-ti* meaning: stranger, guest, host. *\*Ghos-ti* also evolved into the Latin root *hostis*, meaning enemy, army, and where *host* (multitude) and *hostile* come from. The combination of *\*ghos-ti* and another Proto-Indo-European root *\*poti* – meaning powerful, evolved into the Latin *hospes* and eventually into hospice, hospitable, hospital, hospitality, host (giver of hospitality), hostage and hostel. There's a lot tangled up in those roots.

The Greek languages also evolved from the same Proto-Indo-European; *\*ghos-ti* gave us the Greek *xenos* which also has the interchangeable meaning of guest, host, or stranger. From *xenos*, we get the word *xenophobia*, fear and hatred of the foreign, but also the word *xenophilia*, the attraction to the stranger, to the new, to the unknown. The stranger may bring danger, but they may also bring things worth knowing, and perhaps even salvation.

The words hospitality and hostility share roots because the stranger is an unknown. They could be a threat, bringing not just physical danger, but new and destabilizing ideas or beliefs or possibilities. At the beginning, we don't know, and so we must ask – Is there a threat here? How far do we trust this stranger? What are the limits of our hospitality? Because in the real world, there are always going to be limits, and not to ask those questions is foolish.

Hospitality is a reciprocal relationship between host and guest in a home, and between a country and the refuge or the immigrant. Without that reciprocity, there can be no hospitality, because both host and guest are adrift, without an understanding of how to behave, of what is expected from each, and where the boundaries are that cannot and should not be crossed.

Derrida made a distinction between unconditional hospitality, which he considered impossible, and normal hospitality which in his view was always conditional. In trying to imagine the extremes of a hospitality to which no conditions are set, there is a realization that unconditional hospitality could never be accomplished. It is not so much an ideal: it is an impossible ideal.

This is the dilemma of hospitality. On the one hand, there is a moral imperative to show hospitality, especially to people in distress or fleeing from danger; and on the other hand, the total abandonment of borders would obliterate the home into which they are being invited. All borders have some degree of permeability; but if they become absolutely open, then the border itself is abolished, and there is no longer any place of safety – any home – to enter.

Hospitality assumes the ability to provide a safe haven, and like a filter, the border must inevitably be selective when allowing itself to be crossed. If refugees fleeing from persecutors find their way through an opening, it cannot be equally open to those pursuing them.

And guests are expected to respect the home and the host and help preserve that safety, that refuge and its boundaries. Conversely, to harm any guest in any way is a grievous violation of our obligation as a host to provide that safety. Our nation is guilty of this violation in so many ways, presently and historically.

Xenophobia rises from our ancient animal anxieties and fears, the old lizard brain that fears the unknown and unfamiliar. When times are troubled and the future uncertain, our tribes get smaller, more defensive, more concerned with purity and enforcing right belief and right behavior – as our tribe sees it. We circle the wagons, seeing the external world as even more hostile and dangerous.

But it isn't total strangers that we have to most trouble extending hospitality to, it's outgroups. Freud noted that "it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and ridiculing each other". What makes an outgroup? Proximity plus small differences. If you want to know who someone hates, find the group that lives closely intermingled with them and is most conspicuously similar to them, and chances are you'll find the group who they have years of seething hatred toward.

Nine in ten Americans think that the nation is more divided now than at any point in their lifetime. In a 2018 poll, roughly half of Democrats described Republicans as ignorant (54%) and spiteful (44%) while a similar proportion of Republicans described Democrats as ignorant (49%) and spiteful (54%). 61% of Democrats labeled Republicans racist, sexist, or bigoted while 31% of Republicans applied these terms to Democrats. Perhaps most concerning of all, more than twenty percent of Republicans (23%) and Democrats (21%) describe members of the other party as “evil.” Only four percent of both parties think the other side is fair and even fewer describe them as thoughtful or kind. Many would rather their children married an atheist or someone of another race or religion than marry someone from the other party.

How do you welcome someone like that?

Who is the stranger? There is a sense in which we are all strangers now. Many of us no longer recognize the country we grew up in, and no longer feel safe. Many of us never felt at safe at all. Physical and emotional walls are going up everywhere these days, our lives are riven by dozens of what appear to be insurmountable dividing lines – politics and race and class and religion and nationality and sexuality and... the list is endless. We are divided within and without, and wholeness seems impossible. Our alienation makes us strangers to ourselves.

Who is the stranger? Why, I am. You are. We are. They are, whoever they are. And if we are all strangers, where is home? Where is safety?

Hospitality is risky business. We should never pat ourselves on the back and claim we are a hospitable people. Instead, we must always be asking how we can become more hospitable, while at the same time avoiding the collapse of the region of safety implied in the word ‘home’.

This is not a liberal or conservative thing, but an ancient human conundrum.

Derrida's is not a philosophy that offers definitive answers to this question. Such answers would be wrong, since we are dealing with a true dilemma. Instead, he alerts us to the fact that we are always in the situation of never having done enough. The hospitable person or country or organization should be seeking at all times to be more hospitable, alert to any opportunities to move in this direction, never saying, "we've done enough, we can't do more," but always seeking practical ways to do more than we have. To somehow feed just one more person. To somehow shelter to just one more family. To somehow welcome just one more stranger.

Welcoming the stranger is not just for their sake, but also for our own spiritual development and self-overcoming. And it applies to everything unfamiliar and unknown. Hospitality in terms of welcoming the stranger is also an important spiritual practice for facing down our animal fears and anxieties, of learning to be more generous and less fearful.

We can never make that practice perfect, but we are not called to be perfect. We are called to be hospitable, no matter how impossible that may ultimately be.