

SUMMER WITH THE MOUSE

The Mickey Mouse Club made a profound impact on me when I was growing up. I really did believe the invitation to ‘come along and sing a song’ with the promise that, if I did that, I would be welcome to ‘join the jamboree’. Do you remember the end of the show: they sang “M-I-C (see you real soon!). K-E-Y (why? Because we LIKE you!) M-O-U-S-E. Wow! Someone I didn’t even know liked me? What a wonderful club that was ‘made for you and me’. What a great statement of hospitality! Even though the real world didn’t quite look like Annette and Tommy and Darlene and Bobby, the image of a club that welcomed EVERYONE – no matter if they were fat, or read a lot, or were musically gifted, or just a little different – was very powerful.

Last week we talked about walls –boundaries – being necessary to define, build, and protect a community. We concluded that walls were fine as long as they had gates in them. Lots of gates. There has to be a way for new people to enter into a community and become part of it if they agree to conform to the behavioral norms of that community. If we don’t have guests coming through our gates, our community will stagnate and eventually die. So how do we welcome these guests? How do we behave so they want to stay with us and become part of us? How do we provide genuine, radical hospitality to the stranger? The answer comes from an unlikely source, but first I want to tell you a story. Actually, I’m going to tell you a lot of stories today. Here’s the first one.

Hospitality has been a central theme in my life. I was called to ministry in a church kitchen, where I was taking an inventory of paper cups in advance of some sort of function. All of a sudden I felt an intense calm and the sense of certainty came over me that I was exactly where I belonged. While I was profoundly moved, I was also suspicious. Who would believe they were called to a life’s work of counting cups? It took me over 30 years to get the point that I was called to be in the religious community – not necessarily in the kitchen. But in those years I was fortunate to travel to places around the globe where the image and practice of hospitality was very different than – and counter to – my middle-class suburban suspicion of strangers. I was made to feel welcome by people who looked and spoke and even smelled differently that I did. I felt that same as I did when the Mickey Mouse Club gang welcomed me into their world.

I was similarly welcomed into the world of Tampa General Hospital in the summer of 2007. I was at the hospital because I was fulfilling my ministerial requirement to log at least 400 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education . CPE interns take on the role of chaplain, interacting with patients, family, and staff in the crucible of living and dying while all of us struggled with the full range of emotions in an institutional environment. Although it was an exhausting, painful, and profound time, it was ultimately a transformative experience. But not exactly the sort of hospitality you’d find at the Hilton. Or at Disneyworld. But the experience was transformative precisely because it was so much like Disney. There’s a good reason for that. It’s the story of change – of institutional change – that holds some lessons for our Unitarian Universalist congregations in the twenty-first century.

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Eight or nine years ago Tampa General Hospital was a mess by anyone's institutional standards. It had a horrible reputation, it was losing money hand over fist, employee morale was non-existent, patients had not much good to say about their care, and, for families, frustration was the watchword of the day. It was so bad that Tampa decided to get rid of it, and it was sold to private buyers. Being business people, the first thing the new owners did was analyze the institutional structure to see how they could turn the existing resources from liabilities into assets. They identified 'customer service' – 'hospitality' – as their number one priority. Then they set about finding a teacher to help them change the institutional environment to model hospitality. Where did they find this teacher?

Well, they didn't call the Buddhists to teach them about Dana ... generosity...the first level of which is hospitality. They didn't discover that, to the Buddhist, hospitality "takes us beyond ourselves to the needs of others and it encourages us to kindly welcome strangers into our territory. So it counteracts any tendency we might have to 'clique-ishness- or exclusiveness.'" Or, I might add, any tendency we Unitarian Universalists may harbor toward arrogant certainty of our intellectual superiority.

Nor did they call in the Hindus. Offering hospitality is fundamental to Hindu culture. An unexpected guest is called the *atithi*, which means "without a set time". Scripture enjoins that the *atithi* be treated as God. Furthermore, scripture also enjoins that one should treat visiting enemies so well that they will forget their animosity. Think of that. No more malpractice lawsuits! No more screaming political talking heads! No more flaming emails!

Back to the subject at hand, the new owners of Tampa General didn't call in any of the Abrahamic religions either. Maybe they didn't know that Islam stresses the entertainment of guests; that for most Muslims, hospitality lies at the heart of who they are. Guests are welcomed into the home and shown kindness regardless of whether they are relatives, friends, neighbors, or strangers. Families judge themselves and each other by their generosity to guests. How might our congregation fare if we were judged by the Islamic practice of hospitality?

I guess the new owners weren't familiar with Judaism either. To Jews, *hakhnasat orchim*– literally the 'bringing in of strangers' – is considered a mitzvah – a blessing. In fact, when one knows of strangers who are hungry or need a place to relax, *hakhnasat orchim* becomes a legal obligation. This imperative is extended in Christianity, where the New Testament is rife with calls for hospitality. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it".

Let's take a break from this survey of world religions to imagine for a moment that the person next to you is an angel. Suspending your disbelief in angels; take a good look at him/her. Think about how you would extend hospitality to this divine being. This little exercise makes most people uncomfortable – and I do apologize to our visitors. But it points up our wariness of

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each other and our difficulty with the notion of radical hospitality. Now let's go back to the hospital to find out who Tampa General's owners chose to instruct them in the art of hospitality.

Believe it or not, with all these fine examples of hospitality as a religious and cultural imperative, the owners of Tampa General Hospital called in ... Disney. Out of all these world religions that have hospitality as their foundation they chose...the Mouse. Why? (pause) Disney, as it turns out, has a college that's all about hospitality. Disney is perceived to be at the pinnacle of knowing how to make folks feel welcome. And they make lots of money at it, so it's not surprising that people who are running a business, who want to be hospitable to help them make money, turn to Disney. There's nothing Mickey Mouse about the Mouse.

My first day at Tampa General was taken up with orientation – incidentally called “Show Time” – and I was experiencing the Disneyfication of the concept of hospitality. And I was becoming more and more confused. I was wondering when did guests – customers – patients – pilgrims – those in need of hospitality – veer away from the churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques to find refuge in the Magic Kingdom? I felt a wave of sorrow. When did we trade enlightenment for entertainment? And I was getting angry. When did we dumb ourselves down to the point where we are lectured on our values by a mouse, a duck and a cricket? And where were our faith institutions while this was happening?

It's tempting to blame Disney for hijacking hospitality. But I'm not sure they did. I think they just did it better than we did. They analyzed, codified, and communicated the concepts of hospitality. They wrote the “how to be nice” manual, and then conveyed it using non-judgmental, non-threatening kids and animals on the brand new medium of television. Is there something here we can learn about getting back into the hospitality business? Did we ever get out of it? Or did we just get lazy and hidebound? Most important, can we change the way we do hospitality while preserving our Unitarian and especially Universalist traditions? For answers to these questions I went online to the Disney College program.

Disney outlines seven learning objectives in their hospitality course. (Does anyone but me read something into the fact that both Disney and Unitarian Universalism is informed by seven principles?) In plain English these objectives deal with 1) recognizing that people are important, 2) people need training, 3) everyone's contributions counts, 4) good manners are critical, 5) tell your story outside your walls, 6) figure out how to resolve conflict so that everyone feels heard, and finally, 7) reward people.

I'd like to share a story that illustrates all of these points in the Disney program. I was standing in a cafeteria line balancing 3 or 4 items when the fellow in front of me, who was a food service worker, invited me to go ahead of him. He said he could see I was a chaplain and I was in a hurry and that my time was more important than his. I opened my mouth to protest, but not before three other people in line opened their mouths to assure him that he was the most important person in the line. They pointed out that if people didn't eat, it didn't matter what we

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did to them. The greatest nursing, or physical therapy, or pastoral care, or most advanced tests in the world didn't matter if you were hungry. I could see this guy swell with pride at the recognition he received from his peers for his role in caring for people! He was made to feel that he was a valuable member of the club – the club that was 'made for you and me'.

At the same time I can scarcely tell this story without tears, this example of successful, positive institutional change makes me uneasy. Why am I so suspicious of the Mouse's model of hospitality? What the difference between the church and the Mouse? I've struggled with this question for a number of years. It's a variation on the question of the difference between the church and a social service agency or a political party or a business or a country club. I think the difference in all cases is in the motive for hospitality – between the why and the how. I think that Disney's hospitality is motivated by profit – by corporate gain. Be kind because kindness will make money. I think the faith communities' hospitality is rooted in a Spirit-inspired imperative. Be kind because it is the nature of the universal 'we'. Now I don't think there's anything much wrong with money, but if you don't have that light of the Spirit at the center of your hospitality, all you have is a set of instructions. Instructions that are conveyed by a mouse, a duck, and a cricket. A set of instructions informed by profit – not by the heart and the soul. I want the set of instructions for Unitarian Universalist hospitality symbolized by our chalice. I want Spirit-inspired instructions that reflect our third and seventh principles calling us to accept one another 's differences while acknowledging and respecting our interdependence.

When we open the gates to our UUFMC community do we really want our guests to see a rodent, a bird, and an insect? Or do we want our guests and potential community members to see a flaming chalice fueled by the passion and joy of our Universalist anthem of love and acceptance for all comers. My hope for us is that our guests will hear all of us singing our hymn of welcome -- (sing to the tune of the Mickey Mouse Club final chorus) H-O-S (pause) P-I-T (pause) A-L-I-T-Y. Sing with me. H-O-S (pause) P-I-T (pause) A-L-I-T-Y. May it be so. Amen.