

Red Brocade, by Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.¹

Two weeks ago, my partner, Lisa, and I visited the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of La Crosse, Wisconsin. They'd invited me to do a Sunday program with them, so we made a weekend of it, following the curve of the Iowa border, cruising along the Mississippi River to Wisconsin. The group up there was all abuzz. This was only the members' second meeting in that new space, their first with religious education. The renovation of the building was still in process, with rough-hewn boards and electrical wires showing. Plaster gaps made it evident that a wall had once bisected their meeting room, although I don't think anyone would have guessed that this building's past life had been that of a funeral home.

¹ Naomi Shahib Nye, "Red Brocade" in *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2002).

It was a wonderful morning. The highest praise I received was from the person who'd invited me, when she explained that, before that day, many of them had become so caught up in the building project that they'd lost track of why they were doing all this. Sunday, she said, helped them reconnect to the meaning of their community. I'm not sure whether it was that idea of reconnecting, or the time when our proximity to the river made it feel as if we were floating, or bridging the distance between these two Unitarian Universalist fellowships, one in Ames and the other there in La Crosse, but I began thinking about our congregations as ships at sea, the moving vessels of hope that we create and crew to carry ourselves in life's waters.

This spiritual metaphor of the vessel carrying us across uncertain waters has its roots in India, where crossing the mighty Ganges serves as a metaphor for a spiritual awakening. In Buddhism, followers speak of the lesser vehicle, those practices and teachings that help a single person reach enlightenment, and the greater vehicle, the boat aimed at carrying every living being across the river. This led me to ask, "What kind of boat is it that we are making here?" Our Universalist tradition indicates that ours should be a big ship, capable of holding all souls. This would be a sturdy ship, made of many woods and stronger for its variety.

Who's on board? How do we poise our lookouts to watch for lifeboats of people wanting to come on board? How are those who come on board welcomed into the crew, helped to understand that their journeys are important and that their lives matter? Part of the answer is the environment we create here, how welcoming we are to those who enter our doors the first time and every time. Part is how we define ourselves as a community, how we are intentional about creating a theology where hospitality is front and center.

I recall visiting two Unitarian congregations in Great Britain. At the first, in London, we entered the building to find a stack of hymnals by a sign with an arrow pointing us into the meeting room. No one said "hello" or invited us to coffee hour; this group felt cold and closed. The only people who introduced themselves were other visitors who'd huddled in the back of the room after the service, most of them making their way to the exit as quickly as possible. On the other hand, when we visited the congregation in Edinburgh, Scotland, we were greeted on the sidewalk, and, as we entered the building, a smiling face handed us an order of service and hymnal. When we sat down, heads turned to smile and welcome us. After the service ended, several people introduced themselves and led us to coffee — not so much inviting us but walking with us. I don't remember the content of either service, but I know where I felt welcomed, where I felt valued.

I'd guess every congregation has words in its mission statement about being welcoming, but words that come from our heads don't mean a thing if the actions of our hearts aren't in them. The Dalai Lama tells a story of a monk who keeps promising his student that he will take him on a picnic but is always too busy to do so. One day they see a procession carrying a corpse. "Where is he going?" the monk asks his student. The student replies, "On a picnic." No doubt the teacher was allowing his business to keep him from doing the work of his heart, caring for his student.

This idea of creating community as a work of the heart, combined with my metaphor of ships at sea, resulted in a very odd connection. If you'll just stick with me, you'll see that it works. It's from the summer blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. In this movie, we learn that Davy Jones had pledged to guide the souls of the dead across the great waters to their final resting place. In

a jealous rage, he abandons his calling and begins destroying life, claiming souls for his own purposes. In the end, our heroes defeat Jones, and one of them takes over the role of shepherding the souls. Now the interesting sidebar to this adventure is that, in order to captain the ship, the captain gives up his heart. I know it's a reach, but I found that poignant, this idea that the shepherd of souls gives up his heart to do the task.

Here, too, we do the work of the heart. But the souls we shepherd are of the living. This giving of our hearts means being open to all who enter — not closing ourselves from the story of another person, not shielding our hearts from the suffering of the world, but instead inviting it into our lives, knowing that each person here has also suffered. It means opening our hearts to let the pain out, finding a place where we can be honest about our own humanity, honest about our own experiences, in touch with our place in the universe.

Davy Jones put himself, his selfish desires for revenge, before the souls he was called to serve. As a result, his ship became a place of fear. It inflicted pain and terror into the lives of those who crewed it; it was a place of horror in the seas it sailed. Unfortunately, this analogy could be made for the way religion often functions in our world. Some religious communities are built on narrow claims of truth often accompanied with promises of wealth or eternal rewards, where travelers are first asked to state their beliefs before they are welcomed to the table. If their answer is not in accord with those deciding, they are expelled or damned. The opposite approach is what I like about the poem *Red Brocade*. I imagine an oasis in the sea of the desert. There the ship might be a camel, and the traveler seeking to find a place of refuge is greeted not by the question of “What do you believe?” but instead welcomed to a meal, welcomed to a place of comfort, and known as another human being first.

The reading gives us a description of another way of being welcoming, one that puts the needs of the person before tests of truth. This act of hospitality is rooted in the *Qur'an*, which says, “Be kind to parents, and the near kinsman, and to orphans, and to the needy, and to the neighbor who is of kin, and to the neighbor who is a stranger, and to the companion at your side, and to the traveler Surely God loves not the proud and boastful such as are miserly, and bid other men to be miserly, and themselves conceal the bounty that God has given them.”

The *Qur'an* is not alone in saying hospitality is a religious ideal. Jesus made a place at the table for those no one else would want to be seen with, and the Buddha redefined what it meant to be a community. Benedictine monk Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt hear a call to hospitality because “you can't ignore people when God is looking out their eyes at you.”² All these reflect attempts to create a big boat for all humanity. If this is true in so many religions, why is it so hard? There is a real tension within us to associate with those who are like us. In such groups is comfort and confirmation. But, in the end, will there be real enlightenment, real salvation for our humanity and for our world, if our spirits are not moved to grow by those who are different?

Yet to be such a community does require boundaries. We need to understand what we are and what we aren't. We are a religious community. We exist to help each one of us understand who we are in the world and how to live most fully with that understanding. We exist to provide comfort and challenge so that we find the strength in ourselves to seek that path of harmony and, in so doing,

² Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2002), p. 10.

create a better world around us. What we are not is a family; we aren't a political party or a social club. These groups all define themselves narrowly, by specific categories and connections to limit membership. Certainly we overlap with these groups. We seek to provide the support that we hope families offer, advocacy that political parties engage in (when at their best), and friendly connections made in social organizations — yet there is a difference. When we forget these differences and expect the Fellowship to replace our family, which then means people not like us will be excluded, or expect it to be our political party, meaning those with different ideologies will be viewed as wrong, or expect it to be a social club just for those who like to dance the way we do, then we do ourselves and our community a disservice. We create walls that limit voices we need to hear. We stifle our possibility for growth, our opportunities to connect with other views of the world.

When we engage in the world, we do so from a place of deep connection, not dogmatic assertion of beliefs. These connections lead us to seek justice for every person. I can't help but think of the brave Buddhist monks in Myanmar, formerly Burma, in recent weeks. They left the safety of their monasteries to lend their considerable moral authority to those protesting a brutally oppressive government. Their spiritual calling was to stand in solidarity, regardless of the cost that they are now suffering.

Watching these monks, who are so different than I am, I learn something more about what it means to be human. To truly understand what it means to be human, we must be continually open to the other, the stranger. While we advocate for human rights, this can't become a political agenda, it must continue to be rooted in human experience, not abstract ideologies. These human experiences are made all the more rich when we learn the story of another, when we sit around a table and share a meal, or work around living plants beautifying our surroundings, or teach a group of children. All of these opportunities give us the experience of getting to know another as a human being, not a set of categories. As Parker Palmer writes, "If the church is to serve as a school of the spirit and as a bridge between the private and the public realms, it must find ways of extending hospitality to the stranger. I do not mean coffee hours designed to recruit new members for the church, for these are often aimed at making the stranger 'one of us.' The essence of hospitality — and of public life — is that we let our differences, out mutual strangeness, be as they are, while still acknowledging the unity that lies beneath them."

Being open to those who are different may be the source of wisdom that allows us to grow into being more fully human, that may save our lives. There once was a learned professor who had to cross a wide, rapid-flowing river. He boarded a boat, and the boatman began to row him across the river. About halfway across, the professor became bored, so he thought he'd engage the boatman in a conversation. He looked at the common man rowing (without much hope of a good conversation) and said, "I say, have you studied linguistics and philosophy?" to which the boatman replied, "No I have not." "What a shame," said the learned professor, "for half of life is the study of such subjects." Just then the boat struck a rock and began to take on water. The boatman asked the professor, "Have you learned how to swim?" to which the professor replied, "With all my studying, I've not had time to learn to swim." "That's too bad, for learning to swim would have been all your life, for our boat is about to sink."

That little story not only reveals that we need to know more than we think to understand the world, but it also shows how difficult it is to create a community of human beings when we are all so

different. As Homan and Pratt write, “You can be accepting with people without trying to make everyone your best friend.”³ We human beings need community. It keeps us healthy and keeps us sane. And if we feel a calling to grow, in our spirits and in helping the world, we need community to keep us inspired and honest. The struggle of working with our differences is worth the effort. In an essay titled *Reflections on Working Toward Peace*, Alice Walker echoes the sentiments about the necessity and challenge of working in community as she writes about the things she’s learned, saying, “One is the futility of expecting anyone, including oneself, to be perfect. People who go about seeking to change the world, to diminish suffering, to demonstrate any kind of enlightenment, are often as flawed as anybody else. Sometimes more so. But it is the awareness of having faults, I think, and the knowledge that this links us to everyone on Earth, that opens us to courage and compassion. It occurs to me often that many of those I deeply love are flawed. They might actually have said or done some of the mean things I’ve felt, heard, read about, or feared. But it is their struggle with the flaw, surprisingly endearing, and the going on anyhow, that is part of what I cherish in them.”⁴

Here, in these walls made holy by our presence, we, too, bring our flaws, our differences, our stories, and we strive to be our most compassionate, most joyful, and most just. Here we strive to open our hearts to each other, to humanity, to the fragile earth that is our home. When we are able to create a ship that can cross the sea, one that is crewed by all who care, regardless of their station or beliefs, then we will sight the other side, where we transcend creed and focus on the deeds; where we respond to life, not shrinking from the joy or the sadness; where we respond to life with an innate hospitality, saying, “Welcome, welcome.”

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³ Homan and Pratt, 2002, p. 49.

⁴ Alice Walker, *Reflections on Working Toward Peace*, part of the Architects of Peace Project, through the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, <http://scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/>.