

Hospitality for Self

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Kindling Opening Words

We are here
after a week of grey, wet skies
to celebrate our whole lives,
both as distinct persons of intrinsic worth
and as a whole community of spirit
rooted in mission, self-reflection and love.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story Small Saul does things differently from the other, more gruff pirates, and is rejected by them, but because he accepts himself as he is, he is eventually welcomed back and appreciated for who he is.

Sequence for Rosh Hashanah

I open the Torah, I open the book of nature, I open every scripture, and poem, and almost every song worth singing, and there I read what has been written in a thousand ways: *Kamokha l're'akha veahavtah*

As you love yourself, so love those around you.

As my Jewish friends prepare to welcome the new year with the sound of the shofar, with the sweetness of apples and honey, with the privilege of self-examination, I join them in wondering how I may best love others as I love myself. Especially when sometimes I am not very loving to myself. Sometimes I don't sleep or exercise enough, trying to be perfect at work instead of allowing myself to be human and intrinsically sufficient. Sometimes I tuck away my formidable anger about things like the execution of that man in Georgia, Troy Davis, to avoid such a harsh, hot fire within me while I am trying to work. Sometimes I refuse to admit that my stomach churns when I read about plunging stock markets or hurtful political debates. Sometimes I spend too much time regretting that roses have thorns instead of being glad that thorns have roses. And so now I stand here naming my anger and my avoidance so I can begin to love myself just as I am. I begin to open my tight fist, closed around the image of "who I think I should be," and release myself into the embrace of acceptance and love all that I actually am, human, fragile,

strong, wounded, powerful, enough. And when I enter the silence as I am, instead of as I should be...how quiet the silence is, how soothing, how sweet... like honey and apples.

silence

Kamokha l're'akha veahavtah

As you love yourself, so love those around you...human, fragile, strong, wounded, powerful, enough. On the altar of this moment, may we place our loving concerns, our grief, our hopes, our compassion for those in our life, near or far, whose lives are, or were, woven into our own. Whispering their names aloud, or letting them echo quietly within, we bring their indispensability into our time of worship together, knowing that without them, none of the rest of this makes as much sense.

naming

Kamokha l're'akha veahavtah

Coming home to ourselves, coming home to wisdom, coming home to rejoicing, to love of self and others and gratitude that thorns have roses, we receive the blessing of music to sweeten the length of our journey and to provide our portion of nourishing joy.

Choir Anthems

The First Reading is a 2007 poem called *The Door* by the great Canadian poet and novelist, Margaret Atwood.

The door swings open,
you look in.
It's dark in there,
most likely spiders:
nothing you want.
You feel scared.
The door swings closed.

The full moon shines,
it's full of delicious juice;
you buy a purse,
the dance is nice.
The door opens
and swings closed so quickly
you don't notice.

The sun comes out,
you have swift breakfasts
with your husband, who is still thin;
you wash dishes,

you love your children,
you read a book,
you go to the movies.
It rains moderately.

The door swings open,
you look in:
why does this keep happening now?
Is there a secret?
The door swings closed.

The snow falls
you clear the walk while breathing heavily;
it's not as easy as once.
Your children telephone sometimes.
The roof needs fixing.
You keep yourself busy.
The spring arrives.

The door swings open:
it's dark in there,
with many steps going down.
But what is that shining?
Is it water?
The door swings closed.

The dog has died.
This happened before.
You got another;
Not this time though.
Where is your husband?
You gave up the garden.
It became too much.
At night there are blankets;
Nonetheless you are wakeful.

The door swings open:
O god of hinges,
god of long voyages,
you have kept faith.
It's dark in there.
You confide yourself to the darkness.
You step in.
The door swings closed.

The Second Reading comes from the remarkable recent memoir *One Day It Will All Make Sense by Common*, whom his family calls Rashid, short for Lonnie Rashid Lynn, his birth name. He is a socially conscious rapper whose lyrics have been cruelly misrepresented recently by folks on the televised far right. He is also a poet and an actor in film and television, and is a member of Trinity Church in Chicago where the powerful minister Jeremiah Wright served until his retirement.

Acting is one of the deepest forms of artistic expression I've ever experienced. To take pieces of yourself—some of the most vulnerable, painful pieces of yourself—and explore them is a deep form of healing. You go to some of the most painful places of your life. You open the locked rooms of your soul. You open a door to find a room that someone may have died in, and you can still feel his or her presence hanging in the air. You open another door, and you're flooded with a feeling of abandonment. You're a child again on the basketball court, wishing that your dad were there to coach the team. You're a lover stranded in a place where love doesn't live anymore. You don't visit those rooms without a reason. Acting forces you to visit those rooms, forces you to feel the pain, and then gives you a safe way of releasing it. It's a tool for life if you use it right.

Sermon

As I have been studying our theme word for this month, "hospitality", I've noted that the word hospitality often goes with the word industry. As in "The Hospitality Industry." Hotels, concierges, restaurants...welcoming guests who journey far, often thousands of miles. Putting them up in comfy beds. Spreading out a breakfast buffet. (And yes, offering them "special deals" on line for the rest of their life.)

The word hospitality, even when it's personal and not an "industry," always seems outward looking...you *receive* guests from elsewhere; you shake their hand or embrace them and welcome them into your place; you say, "Have a seat;" you ask, "How was your trip?" It's about others...you fluff the towels in the guest room, not for yourself, but for your guest. You cook a special meal with truffles and rare purple artichokes for your guests, not for yourself. When Abraham, in the Torah (the Bible), in an often told story, welcomes the three strangers to his tent, the text says he and his wife not only washed their dusty feet, and had them rest on cushions in the cool shade of a *terebrinth* tree, but he and his wife baked a very special meal of bread for them...using three seahim, of fine flour which translates into 22 liters, or about 40 pounds. That would have been some loaf! Enough to feed dozens to the point of gluttony, not just three guests.

Clearly, hospitality is lavishness.

And really, this lavishness is not just some ancient Bedouin practice, as biblical scholars often describe it. Think about your own holiday meals, if you happen to have guests over...aren't you rather lavish in what you provide? Don't you pull out all the stops? And when hospitality is shown to you at some holiday fete, aren't you always blown away by the abundance of the offerings? The number of dishes spread out across the table?

Today I am going to wonder out loud why it seems so difficult to show *that* kind of hospitality ...to ourselves. We're "people" too after all. And on the model of the famous dictum from the Torah, *kamokha l'reakha veahavtah*, "As yourself, those around you shall you love," I want to say this morning, "As you are hospitable to yourself, so show hospitality to others." If opening the door to a stranger is a good thing, isn't it also good to open the door to yourself?

What does that mean?

I think Margaret Atwood begins to explore the meaning very beautifully.

*The door swings open,
you look in.
It's dark in there,
most likely spiders:
nothing you want.
You feel scared.
The door swings closed.*

These lines grabbed me. Sometimes in the middle of the night, when I suddenly wake up, or when I'm driving alone some distance (like this afternoon, when I make my way to Cleveland), or standing alone in the shower, or sometimes just sitting on a bench over at the Topiary Park, I start to think about my life, and my goals, and my deeper feelings. I start to think about the mystery of life and death. And sometimes, when I look inside, I worry that there is "nothing that I want," as Atwood says. "Most likely spiders" she offers...certainly for me, an arachnophobe of the first order, a symbol for something creepy, despite Charlotte's Web. Maybe I'm afraid of some suppressed feeling...some anger, some resentment, or some unanswered question or self-doubt and I'm afraid if I look inside, it might come trampling out and make me look foolish.

Maybe you've had an experience like this too. And experience of avoiding what's churning deep inside. For good *or* ill, suppressed joys as well as suppressed sorrows. Even suppressed uniqueness.

So, says Atwood, we shut the door to ourselves. We deny ourselves lavish hospitality. We refuse to welcome ourselves with all of our hidden wounds, rages, or disappointments or even our uniqueness and joys. We have to smile to the world after all, and say OK! when someone asks "How are you." Social custom doesn't often smile on people who are transparent about what they are feeling. Not on the street mind you when passing by, but in real heart to hearts. In my family of origin, the command "Don't be sad! Smile!" was often bandied about as if it was a crime to feel sad or even just thoughtful. But not just sad or thoughtful, anything short of downright cheerful was criticized... after a while, I stopped recognizing any other feelings than the approved ones. In fact, when I look at one of those lists of feelings the psychologists often print up, I'm always surprised at how small my vocabulary of feelings actually is.

But hospitality, I think it's fair to say, can, at the very least, be described as the act of *opening the door, not slamming it shut*. Atwood used her poem to tell the story of a woman's life...she marries, she shops, her dog dies, she grows older, she gives up gardening. All the time the door swings open...and she refuses to reflect on her life, refuses to look inside her soul...she lives a life without any hospitality for herself...which is not, the poet suggests, really living at all. The door swings open, she says, many times...it's dark in there, she's afraid of finding something that will make her uncomfortable, like the drudge of having to clean up water leaking into the basement...so she slams the door shut and refuses to find out what's there so she doesn't have to do the work. But in the end, when the door opens for the last time...she can't slam it shut...she has to, at last, "confide herself to the darkness."

The poet suggests that not to show hospitality to ourselves is to die before we die, to lose the opportunity to really live our lives deeply, to grow comfortable with the parts of us we resist. If we don't allow ourselves to do that, how can we really welcome the stranger who is different from us? If we are comfortable only with life on the surface, with the superficial, with what we already know, with the fool deadlines and calendars, and not the deep mystery of life and death that transcends time; if we ignore the deeper questions and the attention to feelings and wonder and spiritual hunger, life can simply pass us by, and not be actually lived, except visibly.

Attention to feelings does not mean expressing them without care or without kindness. Anger is an important emotion, clarifying; but when someone simply blows up at me, all I feel is attacked and wounded, not invited to open myself to clarity or a deeper truth. I'm not sure it's very appropriate or helpful to express anger by blowing up. It *is* appropriate to express anger with care. Naming loneliness is important too, but there are ways of expressing it that are inappropriate, ways which literally drive others away, not invite them in. Unless I admit that there are parts of my heart that suffer shame, or embarrassment, or mistrust, or fatigue or hostility, then I cannot express them appropriately, or learn what lessons they have to teach; all I can do is shut the door on life itself...my life.

My life is about *all* of me, not just the surface with my calendar, duties, habits and tasks. As theologian Matthew Fox once famously wrote, *all spirituality is about living a deep, rooted, and therefore radical and non-superficial life*. To live a deep life means not defaming myself, or denying myself, but claiming myself in my uniqueness, with all my idiosyncrasies and particularities. I may indeed benefit from addressing some of my faults and bad habits, but unless I name them, look at them from a place of receptivity and honesty, I can't even begin to do that. You can only address something that's there...if I deny anything's there, there is nothing to do.

The spiritual practice of true hospitality outlined by Nanette Sawyer in the affirmation this morning...*receptivity, reverence and generosity*...applies to myself as well as others. I have to receive and accept who I am, especially since I can't be anyone else. I have to reverence myself...that is, treat myself as Abraham treated his guests...with compassion for the length of their hard journey, and offerings of lavish peace, nourishment and kindness. I have to be generous to myself, not hard on myself all the time, which usually amounts to me feeling some stupid shame that I am not someone else whom I deem better than me.

The hip-hop artist Common is also an actor in film and television. While there are similarities between singers and actors, or ministers in pulpits for that matter, there are significant differences. What Common says about acting is most instructive, I think. He refers to the preparation the actor does as the process of looking at his or her own life with courage and honesty and yes, reverence and generosity...even, he says, the difficult parts. He even uses Atwood's metaphor of the door. *To take pieces of yourself—he suggests, some of the most vulnerable, painful pieces of yourself—and explore them is a deep form of healing. You open the locked rooms of your soul. You open a door to find a room that someone may have died in, and you can still feel his or her presence hanging in the air. You open another door, and you're flooded with a feeling of abandonment. You're a child again on the basketball court, wishing that your dad were there to coach the team. You're a lover stranded in a place where love doesn't live anymore. You don't visit those rooms without a reason.* Then Common clarifies beautifully **what that reason is**. *Acting forces you to visit those rooms, forces you to feel the pain, and then gives you a safe way of releasing it. It's a tool for life if you use it right.*

A tool for life. For the living of life. For not dying before we die by shutting all the doors to our depths. It's a tool for being alive inside as much as outside. For accepting ourselves, and then accepting that we are accepted, to quote the wry observation of theologian Paul Tillich.

And a mature, deep and good life is a form of acting, of improvisational acting no less, of moving through the world "as if." Just because, as one of your ministers, I can offer you no spiritual guarantees it doesn't mean that justice, kindness and love need to be abandoned. We can enact them ourselves as best we can, flawed as we may be. There is no ultimate script, after all. Oh, true, some have tried to get us to live by their scripts. I know that. But I say this: the scripts we were given from the unhealthier parts of our past...*distrust one another, be suspicious of whatever is strange or new to you, grab everything you can for yourself and to hell with the other guy, let authority be your truth, never use truth for authority, kindness and compassion are for weaklings and wimps...* need to be torn up into confetti and thrown in the trash. Such scripts offer no tools for life, only shovels to dig our graves.

When I look at the idea of hospitality to ourselves as the model for hospitality to others, I can also include the idea of hospitality to ourselves as a community. We will open the doors to our community, yes, and welcome the stranger, the guest, the visitor, the seeker through those doors; but we can also look at how we welcome ourselves, including those of us who have been here a long time. How are younger people, say of college age, welcomed? Or single people? Or families with small children? Or seniors who live in assisted living? What does hospitality look like for those whose spiritual lives are enriched by distinct theological languages? Might there be a service in the evening sometime for those of us whose life makes no sense in the morning?

Oh, we've been working on such things, but only because we *have* been looking deeply at ourselves. The senior luncheon we had this week went very well, and work on a Soulful Sundown service on some Sunday evening is afoot. But none of these things happens without self-examination. Marguerite Turnbull first raised the questions about the senior elders in the congregation, and our answer was the Senior Gathering, even though it took a while to figure out

and implement. You have to be hospitable to the questions first, hospitable to the questions and openings before you can move forward. You have to open the door, not nail it shut.

I had lots of feelings this week. Feelings about the economic plunge. Feelings about the injustices in our capital punishment system as evidenced by the Troy Davis execution. Feelings of rage when that gay soldier, Stephen Hill, who is from Columbus and whom I know, was jeered by people at the debate in Orlando when he came out. Feelings of frustration because of expensive and lengthy fix of pipe leaks in my loft at home that ate my time and money like bonbons. Feelings of sadness about my mother and her deep pain and confusion. I tried to avoid looking at some of them since I had so many commitments to fulfill this week. But preparing these words reminded me of what my Jewish friends like Richard are doing right now as the season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are upon them. They call it the days of *S'leichot*, the days of self-examination, of inward reflection, of opening the door to the places we avoid looking at and facing it all, and openly naming what we find there without shame or avoidance. It's not a bad idea at all. Even when it's a demanding time. Especially, maybe, when it's a demanding time. Like a great *rebbe* once said, "I pray an hour each day, except on especially busy days. Then I pray two hours." And remember that the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefillah*, is the noun of the verb that means "to examine oneself."

The hospitality industry spends plenty on its welcome of guests. Lavish tile in the restrooms, lush towels, fancy food in the eateries, exquisite suits on the people behind the desks, great lighting, comfy beds. The new Hilton being built in the Short North will even build a bridge to the convention center so no guest has to walk in the rain or snow. That's a lot of hospitality.

All I am saying this morning is...lavish hospitality, true hospitality, is wonderful, a real spiritual strength. But, I say, let's begin with ourselves so, as we offer hospitality to others, it's not just another duty on our calendars, but the pure, compassionate, receptive offering of healing, healed human beings that know what it means to be welcomed and accepted. And like the story of Small Saul made clear this morning, if we learn to accept ourselves for all we really are, in all our uniqueness, yes, others may at first try to get us to conform to their scripts of how life should be lived, but eventually, they too may very well be transformed.

Offering

Together we make a community. Together we make a community that blesses the world inside of our hearts and outside of these doors, a community that both raises and shelters the questions and both names and douses the fears. Together we support such a community as best we can, in many ways, through our human presence, our gifts behind the scenes and through this ancient and thoughtful way of supporting what we love.

Hospitable Psalm

I open my heart to you, Love,
center of my own capacity for love.
I rejoice that you are not afraid to welcome

every single part of me.
Even the parts that are in pain.
Even the parts that simmer.
Even the parts that wander.
Even the parts that claim to know so much.
Even the parts that are afraid to know.
Even the parts that pretend.
Even the parts that worry and fret.
Even the parts that react in fear.
Even the parts that feel as if they have failed.
Even the parts that reel from loss.
Barukh atah, Ahavah,
osey hashalom lehayim tovim
Blest are you, Love,
shaper of peaceful good lives.