

A Place At The Table

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
October 25, 2026

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Many years ago my husband Kevin and I were invited to have lunch at the home of some friends. They were relatively new friends who were also customers of our antiques business. We had gone out to eat together many times, but they always talked with pride about what great cooks they were and how they'd love to have us over to sample their cooking. They also knew from conversations and eating out together that I don't eat seafood, regardless of how its prepared or who prepared it.

And so the day of the luncheon arrived and Kevin and I dove out to our new friend's house. It was actually their summer house, and a grand one at that, abutting the lush, sweeping lawns of a golf course. Inside, the vast rooms of the house brimmed with fine furniture, artwork, and other antiques, some which they had purchased from us. The massive kitchen had been beautifully remodeled and was stocked full of all kinds of herbs, foods and wine.

When it came time to eat we sat down together in the dining room. Set before each one of us were two plates. One with mixed greens and the other with what appeared to be a thick slice of meat. As it turned out it was a meatloaf, made in part, our hosts gleefully explained, with seafood. They then proceeded to tell me the reason I didn't like seafood was that I had probably never had seafood the way they make it, reminding both Kevin and I what great cooks they are. In my frustration I wanted to remind them that I had spent many summers as a youth at the shoreline an on the waters of Long Island Sound and had had ample opportunity to sample all manner of seafood and preparations. But, in the interest of civility, I tried the meatloaf which, because I don't like seafood, I had to chase down with a gulp of water if there was any hope that it would stay down. Afterward I pushed the plate aside and ate the mixed greens.

A few hours later Kevin and I departed our from friend's grand home overflowing with abundance hungry.

The hunger I left with that day wasn't simply felt in my stomach; I felt it in my being. I left feeling like I somehow didn't belong, that although I'd been served lunch, there wasn't really a place for me at the table. I felt, on a deeply personal level, unwelcome.

For too many, such an experience is not merely confined to the dining table of a perhaps well intentioned, if not misguided, friends. Indeed, for many, much of life itself may be experienced, as Rosiland Russell's character, Mame Dennis described it in the movie Auntie Mame, "a banquet"...where "most poor suckers are starving to death!" A situation much like the scene in hell from this morning's reading.

The fable of the long spoons offers an interesting observation: the difference between heaven and hell is not a matter of geography, so to speak. If you recall, in the fable both heaven and hell were identical in every detail, including the setting. Indeed, there was but one crucial difference between the two. In hell the people struggled to feed themselves; in heaven they fed one another. Now there are many directions one could go with this story, but one way of understanding the difference between heaven and hell is to say that in heaven, the people had to the courage to practice hospitality. Which, amidst the uncertainty and polarization in our world, is not always easy.

Yet, hospitality is the one of the most venerated and essential of spiritual practices across religious traditions; and it is the right and responsibility of all who would call this community their spiritual home.

Mentioned throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, hospitality was considered a moral obligation in ancient societies where travel was often extremely dangerous. And, as various religious traditions teach, the practice of hospitality goes beyond the act of providing another with food or shelter or the sharing of material goods. Indeed, for Unitarian Universalists hospitality is a state of heart and mind we seek to promote and practice in our congregations and through social action work and is directly related to our values of equity, interdependence, justice, pluralism, transformation, and generosity centered around love.

Hospitality includes cultivating and practicing a generosity of spirit....the opening of one's heart and mind to the unique presence and gifts of another as

well as honoring and respecting another's differences and limitations. This generosity of spirit reveals and recognizes our interconnectedness, and is responsive to the truth that the way we live in relation to one another and the larger world impacts us all.

Hospitality is both outwardly and inwardly directed, something we practice in community and solitude, mindful that some of us have been taught to welcome others while remaining distant strangers to ourselves or conversely to focus on ourselves and keep everyone else at a distance.

Indeed, hospitality is fundamentally about our relationship to others, ourselves, and to life. It is, at least in part, how we practice what it means to be human. And church, as the late UU theologian James Luther Adams reminded us on our call to worship, is a place to engage this practice.

Here at the Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, we strive to provide both a place and means to practice the spiritual discipline of hospitality. As a community we seek to welcome, affirm, and empower one another. We work to provide a safe place to be vulnerable, to ask questions, to give and to receive. We promote learning, encourage spiritual depth and growth. And we look for ways to continue and deepen our practice outside these walls in the community, in our homes, schools and places of employment.

Of course, like my friends with the seafood meatloaf, we don't always get it right or go as far as we could, and so we also try to recognize and learn from our mistakes or assumptions and try again.

Hospitality is a sacred commitment we make as people of faith to live a more generous life in body, mind, and spirit, even, or especially in the face of challenges. It is the commitment we make as members of this faith community to support its mission with our time, talent and treasure...the way we prepare a place at the table for members to be... and the same commitment we ask others to make when they join this congregation.

Since our annual regathering service in September we have had four people, Bob, Libby, Joey, and Joan become members of Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society. The formal act of becoming a member is relatively easy.

Bob, Libby, Joey, and Joan attended services for a period time, met with me briefly and then signed the membership book.

The less formal, but no less important part of becoming a member, is the process of living into the rights and responsibilities of membership, to which the spiritual practice of offering and receiving hospitality is central, and includes contributions of time, talent and treasure in support of the mission, ministries, programming, and operations of the church.

This practice takes many forms such as:

Regular attendance at worship to strengthen the bonds of community, nourish our spirits and maintain connection to our highest values.

Voting at congregational meetings. The right to vote is one of the great legacies of our congregational polity dating back to the Cambridge Platform of 1648.

Ongoing spiritual exploration for the benefit of the individual, the congregation and the larger world.

These rights and responsibilities of membership remind us that the church and its mission is not here for us alone, but for those near and far, who may or may never cross our threshold, but who pray and find hope in the possibility that a community like ours exists. For the world we live in is too much like the hell as described in the fable of long spoons...a banquet hall overflowing with abundance where people are awkwardly struggling to feed themselves, find meaning, experience generosity and compassion, and nourish their soul.

We know it doesn't have to be this way. We know we can make a difference. And so, today, as we officially welcome our newest members into the life of this generous, compassionate, and, I'll add, party-loving religious community, let us in heart, mind, and body recommit ourselves to the spiritual and soul nourishing practice of hospitality, that we may feed and be fed by one another here and in the worlds we inhabit outside these walls.

Indeed, let us set for all people, a place at the table.

Amen and Blessed Be