

Angels Unaware

Readings: 'Up-Hill' by Christina Rossetti

'The Same Cold' by Stephen Dunn

'Meeting the Light Completely' by Jane Hirschfield

Surah 59:8-9

In 2001, I spent my college spring break in Syria and Lebanon. I know, not the typical spring break destinations. I was studying at the American University in Cairo, Egypt then and took the week to travel with my friend and fellow student Jill in other parts of the Middle East. We arrived in Aleppo on the eve of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim feast of sacrifice, a holiday that Muslims celebrated this past week. Eid al-Adha commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God's command – and God's sparing of that sacrifice. One of the traditional ways to celebrate Eid is to slaughter lambs. It is custom to keep a third of the meat for one's family, give a third to extended family and friends, and a third to the poor. It is also the time of the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims make once in their life if they are physically and financially capable of doing so.

And on that spring evening, I was horribly sick. I was trying to wander Aleppo with Jill—wanting to soak up as much of that beautiful city as I could—and realized I just couldn't. So I walked back to the hotel. Along the way, a man named Mahmoud, fell into step with me and started speaking to me in perfect English. He said, "tomorrow is Eid. You should celebrate with me and my family." I was hesitant. Who was this guy? But I was also traveling so I could learn about the culture and what better way is there to do that than accept invitations like this? I agreed, though I told him I was Canadian, as if that hedged my bets in some way, would keep me safer in some way.

I didn't fully appreciated that invitation until the next morning. Jill and I were accustomed to American holidays. Even on the most important holidays, commerce doesn't stop. You can still find breakfast on Christmas morning somewhere. It was challenging to find food for purchase in Aleppo on Eid al Adha. We wandered through streets full of closed shops, hungry for breakfast. We finally found food in the Armenian part of town. The Armenian Christian shopkeepers kept their stores open for their community and hapless travelers who didn't plan ahead.

That evening, Mahmoud picked us up at our hotel and drove us to his house. We stopped along the way so he could show us what he considered the best view of his beautiful city. When we arrived at the house, he led us into the living room. He introduced us to his parents and his sister, Rima, who handed us each a large plate bursting with cookies and fruit. Mahmoud stayed with us for a few minutes, making introductions and translating. He told us he taught English as a second language. He showed us the textbooks he uses in his classroom and asked us to teach him the tune to the alphabet song so he could sing it in the classroom with his students. 'A, B, C, D,'...

Then, his sister took us into a second living room, which is where the women and young children celebrated that night. The extended family started to arrive. There were probably a dozen of us there. The women and young children were warm and welcoming, giving us smiles and plates full of pita bread, rice, stuffed eggplant, and lamb in a yogurt sauce. It was delicious.

We didn't share a language. None of the women spoke English. Jill and I had been studying Arabic for six whole weeks, so our skills were limited... and we were studying Egyptian dialect, which is not what these

Syrian women spoke. Most of the movies they had seen were in Egyptian dialect, so they could understand some of what we were trying to say. But we quickly gave up on speaking and turned to other ways of passing the time. Rima was a dancer, a belly dancer, and she tried to teach Jill and me some dance moves. We were not pretty or graceful – and we all laughed together. We showed them some American dancing, including the Macarena and the hokey pokey. We sang songs to one another. We felt connected across boundaries of language and culture. When we left that night, they gave us bags of snacks to take with us, but the most enduring remnant of the night was a vision of radical hospitality, that family's welcome of strangers who did not share their nationality, their language, their culture or their religion.

Since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, I've often thought of Mahmoud, Rima, their family, and their city. Aleppo, one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen, has been largely destroyed in the fighting. Historic mosques and marketplaces are now rubble. Millions of refugees have fled the fighting. If Mahmoud and Rima are still alive, their lives are nothing like what I witnessed years ago. Perhaps they are internally displaced, living in another part of Syria. Perhaps they are among the four million Syrian refugees. Perhaps they are living in a refugee camp in Lebanon or Jordan. Perhaps they are among the thousands making the dangerous passage toward the European Union, making the perilous sea crossing in rickety boats or facing borders lined with razor wire.

I can't help but see a tragic irony in the Syrian refugee crisis. During my time in Syria, it was more than Rima and Mahmoud and their family that welcomed us warmly. Nearly everyone we met was friendly and hospitable. And now, they are dead or their lives are destroyed and they are having such trouble establishing themselves again somewhere new. They are facing refugee quotas, hostility, underfunded refugee programs, governments unwilling to welcome them.

Though the central story of Eid al-Adha is about God sparing Abraham's son, I want to tell another story about the figure views as a spiritual ancestor by Muslims, Jews, and Christians, which are sometimes called the Abrahamic faiths because of this common ancestor. In the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, Abraham sees strangers approaching his tent. He offers them water and bread for refreshment and water to clean themselves. When they accept that hospitality, he outdoes his promises, offering cakes, milk, curds, and the meat of a calf. The audience of the story knows that these were not ordinary visitors, but God and two angels in human form. After receiving Abraham's generous hospitality, they proclaim that his 90 year old wife Sarah will have a son. This story of entertaining angels unaware is references in the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament and retold in Surah 15 of the Qur'an.

And there are many more important stories of hospitality in these faiths. In the oral tradition surrounding the passage from Surah 59 that I read earlier, there is a story that the people in Medina who received the refugees fleeing Mecca kept their houses dark during meals. They would put out food for themselves and their guests and then sit in the darkest corner and mime the gestures of eating, as they didn't have enough food for themselves and the refugees and they wanted their guests to eat their fill without an awareness that there hosts were going hungry.

Part of why these stories of hospitality are so central to the Abrahamic faiths is that the early followers of these faiths were desert people. Many eked out lives on the edges and margins in a climate that was inhospitable. They knew that a lack of hospitality from other people was deadly. Should you find yourself a strange-looking stranger, hospitality is survival. The Bible is full of reminders that the people of Israel were once those strangers and so now they are obligated to care for the strangers among them. The poem

we heard earlier by Steven Dunn makes a case that hospitality is not only for desert people. Extreme cold binds us together similarly, makes us hospitable in the same way. "The cold makes good neighbors of us all."

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What wisdom do these stories of hospitality in the Abrahamic traditions hold for us now? What might it look like if we welcomed the stranger, knowing we have been strangers ourselves and surely will be again? How might we remember that the long-beloved was once an unrecognized stranger? What does it look like mean, "come, come, whoever you are?"

The world witnessed an exuberant example of welcome a few weeks ago in a story from Iceland. When the refugees ask, "Will there be beds for me and all who seek?" People in Iceland responded, "Yea, beds for all who come."

Last month, the Icelandic government originally said that they would accept 50 Syrian refugees into their country. For Iceland, this was a generous number, as they have resettled only 500 refugees in the past 50 years, an average of five each year.¹ Many people in that country were outraged by this low number. Author and professor Bryndis Bjorgvinsdottir wrote an open letter to the Icelandic welfare minister in which she said a friend of hers could provide housing for a Syrian family of five and she would pay for their flights to Iceland and help them adjust to Icelandic society. She wrote, 'refugees are our future spouses, best friends, our next soul mate, the drummer in our children's band, our next colleague, Miss Iceland 2022, the carpenter who finally fixes our bathroom, the chef in the cafeteria, the fireman, the hacker and the television host. People who we'll never be able to say to: 'Your life is worth less than mine.'

Her message spread. More than 13,000 Icelandic people have joined Bjorgvinsdottir in offering to donate their time, their money, and their houses to help resettle Syrian refugees. The Icelandic government is currently reassessing the number of refugees they can accept.²

This story is not limited to a small country in the north Atlantic. Similar citizen efforts to welcome these displaced people and increase refugee resettlement quotas are ongoing throughout the world. In Germany, soccer fans are holding up banners in the stadiums during matches. These banners are not to cheer on their team, they say "welcome, refugees."³ The Obama Administration has announced plans to increase the number of refugees this country will accept by over 30,000 in the next few years.⁴ This change in policy is contingent on the federal government continuing to function, which, sadly, is not a certainty in our current political reality.

¹ Montagne, Renee and Tryggvi Adalbjonsson. 'Iceland Considers Taking in More Syrian Refugees.' *National Public Radio*. September 2, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2015/09/02/436820838/iceland-considers-taking-in-more-syrian-refugees>

² Hauser, Christine. 'Icelanders Use Facebook to Open Door to Refugees.' *The New York Times*. September 1, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/02/world/europe/iceland-residents-join-on-facebook-to-offer-help-to-refugees.html?_r=1

³ Wagner, Laura. 'Professional Soccer Sets Welcoming Tone for Refugees in Germany.' *National Public Radio*. September 3, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/03/437275528/professional-soccer-sets-welcoming-tone-for-refugees-in-germany>

⁴ Bradner, Eric. 'Kerry: U.S. to Accept More Syrian Refugees.' *CNN*. September 20, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/20/politics/syrian-refugees-john-kerry/>

That is the broadest level of hospitality, the actions of nations. How can we here at People's Church live out the words we sang earlier, welcoming wanderers, worshippers, and lovers of leaving? How might we—literally or metaphorically—mime eating in the dark so others can have their fill? What might it mean to be an even more hospitable people here at People's Church?

Make no mistake, you are a hospitable people. As your new minister, I have felt warmly welcomed by you in recent months. Thank you. But I am not the only one you welcome. You are a Welcoming Congregation, which means you have gone through a Unitarian Universalist Association program that helped the congregation 'learn how to undo homophobia—and... transphobia...—in our hearts and minds, our congregations, and our communities.'⁵ Many of us have rainbow flags on our nametags as a way to show that welcome every Sunday. Many of you help people of all ages and all identities find a spiritual home at People's Church. And People's Church is part of ISAAC which is working to make Kalamazoo more hospitable for all who live here, more just for all who live here. I hope you will join me in attending the ISAAC Issues Convention this Thursday to help us all select what issues ISAAC will be focused on in the coming years.

And there are ways we can grow into being even more hospitable. I'm not going to lay out a five point plan—or any point plan. I'm just settling in here and don't yet know you all well enough to suggestion meaningful changes, though that time will come. For now, I'm going to suggest a practice, a way of looking at and thinking about who we are and how we welcome others. Those of us who are settled here, those of us who know that this is our spiritual community, a place of love and hope and joy, need to remember that coming to church for the first time is hard. It's hard, not crossing-continent-to-make-a-new-life hard, but is hard nonetheless. Do you remember your first time here? That first visit, even if we've been to church before, even if we've been to Unitarian Universalist churches before, is hard. On that first visit, walking in the door we don't know where the bathrooms are or where The Commons is—or even that The Commons is the name for the room where the Sunday services happen. We don't know when to stand or sit during the service. We don't know the words and tunes and rhythms that everyone else seems to know. We don't know if our questions will be welcome. We don't know if we will be welcome. Every person who visits this church—or any church—is taking a leap of faith, hoping that we might be the community they're searching for. They are hoping we might really be who they want us to be, that we might welcome them to our table, to our community.

We are visited by these brave wanderers, these unrecognized strangers who might become our long-beloved friends and fellow congregants, every week. How might we shoulder some of the burden of the risk they are taking? How might we make the hard thing they are doing as easy as possible? How might we diffuse their awkwardness that comes from not knowing how we do things yet? How might we pretend to eat in a dark corner so they might eat their fill? I don't know the answers to those questions yet, but I know they are out there. I will be thinking about this in the coming months. I invite you to join me in thinking about how we might welcome strangers, refugees, angels, wanderers, worshippers, and even the lovers of leaving.

May we create a community of exuberant welcome here.

And may our commitment to welcoming all people grow beyond these walls.

May we make Kalamazoo, our state, our country and our world hospitable to all.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁵ 'Welcoming Congregations.' *Unitarian Universalist Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/lgbtq/welcoming/program>

