

I N T R O D U C T I O N :
H O S P I T A L I T Y A S
T R A N S F O R M A T I O N

This book is about transformation through the spiritual practice of deep hospitality. Becoming a person of hospitality will both center you and open you up; it will help you know yourself better, as well as perceive the richness of creation more fully. I call this kind of hospitality *deep* because it comes from our inner core and has the capacity to significantly change our self-understanding as well as the quality of all our relationships. This capacity for change is why I also call it transformative spiritual hospitality. It is centered in our understanding about who we are and how we are related to that which is holy.

Transformative spiritual hospitality, as we shall see, flows from *receptivity*, *reverence*, and *generosity*—three qualities that reflect a basic pattern of movement: *in-with-out*. Becoming receptive is preparing ourselves to be able to invite others into our lives, our hearts, and sometimes our homes; it is the development of an *inner* state. Reverence is a state of *being with* others, honoring and welcoming them while generosity reflects a *flowing out* of physical, emotional, and spiritual care. In certain chapters I use the related concepts—awareness, acceptance, and action—to explore methods for practicing the qualities of receptivity, reverence, and generosity in our lives. Developing your

capacity to embody these qualities will help you discover the spiritual power of hospitality and will bring you closer to God, yourself, and the world.

This is a spiritual as well as a practical book, filled with insights from scriptures, spiritual practitioners, and thinkers from around the world. It's full of exercises and experiments that you can do to discover the natural sources of hospitality deep within you. It reflects my own efforts to integrate my studies in comparative world religions with my spiritual practices. As a Christian, the teachings of Jesus have been illuminated for me by the words of Mahatma Gandhi, the philosophy of Martin Buber, and the practices of Thich Nhat Hanh, as much as by the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr.—you'll see that this book is influenced by all of them and many more.

But why *hospitality*? I mentioned to a friend of mine that I was working on this book and he got a befuddled look on his face. You know the one—eyebrows raised and drawn together, lips pursed ever so slightly, holding a tiny question. How could you fill a whole book on the topic of hospitality? “Be nice to people when they're at your house.” Doesn't that about cover it? Use pretty place mats with color-coordinated napkins and an attractive centerpiece involving candles and a seasonally appropriate flower or twig. Right? Entertaining—that's what hospitality is, isn't it?

Nope. That's why this book is not about how to throw better dinner parties. Although dinner might be part of hospitality, this book is really about the inner quality of our own spirits and how hospitality can transform our relationship with the world.

HOSPITALITY CHANGES US

There have been people in my life who have astonished me with their generosity. They seemed to make their hearts available to me in ways that caused my own heart to open. In times when I was struggling financially and personally, they extended to me a simple acceptance and deep respect, which allowed me to step

into and acknowledge my own vulnerability and accept the hospitality they offered.

The ways people extended hospitality to me in times of need shook me and changed me: when I was broke and couldn't afford a car, and people loaned me theirs; when a devastating life change left me with no place to live and a friend took me in, sacrificing to me her newly renovated writing studio to be my home for a year; when an acquaintance invited me to house-sit for her and she told me, "Have a party while you're here, invite your friends, have a barbecue, eat anything we have." The generosity inherent in this last example was startling to me. I was so astonished by the wild permission-giving nature of that attitude that I felt my being relax. I vowed to make that same offer to someone else when I had the means. Their hospitality changed me!

In fact, there came a time when I was able to welcome a friend into my own place, as I had been welcomed at other times. I told her, "Have a party while you're here, invite your friends. Let this be your home while you're here." Having been so warmly and compassionately received by others, I myself was transformed. I was able to relax into my own confident openness and, in turn, extend hospitality with love and generosity.

What I experienced in the graciousness of others was a simple and sincere generosity. It was a deep hospitality, offered authentically and respectfully. They approached me with hands open, not fists clenched, and I saw how beautiful that was. It generated in me a deep gratitude and gave me an experience of grace. In turn, I wanted to embody that grace and reflect that beauty. Receiving deep hospitality changes us; learning to offer it changes us even more.

HOSPITALITY REFLECTS OUR POSTURE TOWARD LIFE

The practice of deep hospitality can help us step into a more vital, vibrant embrace of this great adventure we call life—which

includes our relationship with God, however you might define God. We'll take a closer look at our language about God in chapter 1. But, however we conceive of God or understand the nature of Ultimate Reality—whether it is as Creator, Interbeing, Emptiness, Consciousness, or Life Itself—we have choices to make about the inner posture we hold in relationship to that reality. We have the power to become aware and to choose how we will act in our lives. This book is an invitation to walk through life with a liberating posture of receptivity, reverence, and generosity.

The practice of hospitality begins with *receptivity*, which is fundamentally a *posture of invitation*; it's the impulse of openness and possibility that initiates acts of hospitality. Receptivity is not about “receiving” something so much as it is about awareness, the kind of full awareness that allows us to perceive ourselves and each other accurately. It is an inward state that invites others into our lives. Receptivity will allow your relationships to flourish in newer, deeper ways than you thought possible.

The next step in the process of hospitality is *reverence*, which is a *posture of welcome*; it exists in the space between people, where we hold each other with honor and respect. To welcome deeply means to encounter the fullness of a person, perceive his or her inherent integrity and intrinsic value, and then engage it with your full self. Reverence says, I value who you are and what you have to offer to me, to us (you and me), and to the world. In a state of reverence, we stand in the full presence of another, while being fully present ourselves. There is deep acceptance and love in this state, as we encounter the image of God in each other.

The completion of the circle of hospitality is *generosity*. Generosity is a *posture of nurture*; it transforms invitation and welcome into a complete expression of hospitality. It is an outflow of physical, spiritual, and emotional care and gratitude, the actions we take to express compassionate love and grace. Generosity changes us by affirming the abundance of life itself.

This abundance is not related to how many possessions we have; rather, it's about living life in all its fullness—*abundant life*. Suddenly, we realize that we have much more than we understood ourselves to have. We begin to realize that what we actually *need* in human life is a lot less stuff and a lot more relationship.

This book will introduce you to ideas and practices that can help you hold a receptive, reverent, and generous posture toward life, love, God, reality, other people, and creation itself. The ideas here reflect my own adventures with life and my journey toward hospitality. In chapter 1, I write at length about a spiritual experience I had with hospitality that deeply changed me. It happened in a church, which was surprising because I had been disenfranchised from the faith of my youth for many years. Yet, I had remained deeply interested in spiritual life. I had gone to Harvard Divinity School to study comparative world religions, and while I was studying there I met a few people who did go to church. One of them, a dear friend, invited me to his church, where I had a profound experience of the radical hospitality of Jesus in the ritual moment of communion. After that, I started showing up more at that church, and the members welcomed me and embodied the spirit of love in their ministry the way I imagined Jesus did in his. Experiencing that love changed my life.

In that small church in South Boston I felt my call to the ministry based on a deep desire to share the radical, Jesus-inspired hospitality that I learned there. So I went to seminary and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Now I'm the pastor at a young new church that meets in an art gallery on the west side of Chicago. We're called Wicker Park Grace (Wicker Park is our neighborhood), and an important part of our identity as a community is shaped by that word *grace*. Grace is something we've experienced from each other, and which we're always learning how to extend. It's about offering friendliness and friendship, kindness and warmth. It's about pushing through our fears and timidities in order to welcome others.

Sometimes it's also about being quiet enough long enough to really be able to hear the stories and wisdom that others can bring us.

I write as a Christian, but these concepts related to hospitality are available to you whatever religious or spiritual path you follow, or none at all. Grace, for example, like hospitality, is about extending invitations and caring sincerely about the people we encounter. Grace is something that the divine presence, which I usually refer to as God, offers to us all the time—an unconditional love that affirms how precious each human being is. This grace of God is a deep welcome, an existential embrace, a holy hospitality that fills us up. Extending hospitality *to* God means welcoming this embrace until we can't help *offering* it as well.

HOSPITALITY AS PRACTICE

At Wicker Park Grace, we have been experimenting with the practice of hospitality in a number of creative ways. As a new church, we've been trying some innovative things, such as having a changing pattern in our regular Sunday gatherings. Two Sundays a month we do something prayerful, usually a vespers gathering (which is prayer in the late afternoon), and the other two Sundays a month we share a meal and discuss various topics. We did this on purpose, because we wanted to have a lot of time together to get to know each other, and we figured what better way than to eat and talk? This is one of the ways that we built hospitality into the actual structure of our lives together.

Hospitality, we knew, included sitting at table together, being friendly, and growing more connected by getting to know each other and by spending time together. However, it turns out that hospitality is a little harder and a little deeper than we first imagined. Although we were eating and talking together, we noticed that we had a tendency to slip into our habits of superficiality. When greeting each other with, "How are you?" we habitually

replied that we were good, fine. We didn't know how to engage each other in deeper conversation, or how to share our own lives and vulnerabilities with each other. Even though we had set aside so much time and space to be in community and to extend hospitality to each other, we found that we didn't really know how to do it! It turned out to be something that we actually needed to work on and think about and talk about and practice.

This surprised us, and it may surprise you as you read this book to discover that hospitality is a deeply spiritual practice that changes us the more we practice it. This book delves into some of the questions we began to think about as a community, including:

- How do we break out of our shyness or our intimidation around people we don't know?
- What keeps some people talking all the time and others quiet?
- How can we change that dynamic?
- How can we start a conversation that actually leads to people feeling closer afterward, and not just the same or, worse, *less* connected than they were before the conversation?
- How can we encourage each other to take the risks required to show our real human vulnerability in order to grow personally and become closer communally?
- What prevents us from making the commitment to consistently showing up in order to be together?
- Why are we hesitant to invite people into our homes?

In some ways, all these questions boil down to *how can we be truly hospitable?* And why should we be? Why is it important? This book gives some food for thought as well as some hands-on and hearts-open practices to help us dig into these and many related questions.

CIRCLES OF HOSPITALITY

Since hospitality both affects and reflects our spiritual wholeness, this book explores hospitality going out from our center in all directions in ever-widening circles of relationship. Hospitality begins in our spiritual core, and so chapter 1 explores hospitality to God, while opening up new ways of thinking of God as the matrix of life itself. Hospitality to God means being open to sacredness and the interconnected nature of God, self, and creation. Chapter 2 then goes into practices that can help us love and accept ourselves, to heal and discover a deeper, broader, bigger self than we knew we were. Extending hospitality to the self means beginning to practice the three elements of hospitality—receptivity, reverence, and generosity—toward ourselves. In doing this, we discover that the true self is deeply interconnected with divinity, with God—a connection that gives us energy and courage to engage in acts of hospitality with resources from a source greater than ourselves. Chapter 3 broadens the circle of hospitality to the family and to places where we experience the special joys and challenges of intimacy of all sorts. Offering hospitality here will help us create a safe and generous home in which our lives can be nurtured and from which we can offer gracious hospitality to others.

From there, we look in chapter 4 at neighbors—what *is* a neighbor and how to be one—how to reach out in friendship and generosity. We explore the interconnectedness of life as expressed in the concept of interbeing, and consider ways to “dwell in nearness” to one another. Chapter 5 takes a look at the alienation we can reinforce by seeing people as “strangers.” This chapter is an invitation to pursue kinship rather than estrangement, and includes suggested practices for dealing with fear, pridefulness, and shame—emotions that tend to increase estrangement. Chapter 6 reaches into the difficult topic of loving our enemies. How might we extend hospitality even in the face of hostility? With suggestions from Martin Luther King Jr., this

chapter explores the ideas of non-retaliation and active nonviolence. We also look into some of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas about "soul force," or *satyagraha*, as well as the importance of claiming our personal power for right action in relationships. Chapter 7 brings us full circle back to God and the matrix of life through an exploration of hospitality to creation as encountered in both urban and rural settings.

My own spiritual journey has truly been one of *walking together, finding the way*, as the motto of SkyLight Paths Publishing suggests. It has been a process of extending hospitality to an abundance of ideas and perspectives about God, life, and religious and spiritual practice—which has truly illuminated my path. I needed to do this for my own development of spiritual practice, and it's another example of how receptivity, reverence, and generosity can transform us. Through this practice of hospitality to ideas and the people who hold them, I have been opened and inspired, nurtured and reassured of the deep relationality that is life. I hope that my learnings can shine a light on your path as well.