

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY

# BECOMING

A PERSON OF



# WELCOME

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FOREWORD BY TOD BOLSINGER



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# THE POSTURE YOU TAKE



FAMILY AND FRIENDS WELCOMED them to a foreign land. My parents were the first of their families to move across the world to gain access to opportunity, education, and a different life. The United States was a welcoming country for those who had the option and means to make the trip.

They traveled with others, friends who were also making the bold leap. My dad considered New York, where my aunt lived, but chose to settle in Texas's warmer climate. He and his friends started in small apartments, and soon their families journeyed over. My parents chose to leave the familiarity of Tehran for a foreign land. They already knew what it was to be foreigners in a land that was not their own as they were Armenians living in Iran. In the United States they were welcomed to live, to learn, and to become part of the people.

While my parents had the choice, many do not. People often enter foreign lands without agency or voice. Think of refugees, foster care children, or slaves; or those for whom home has changed due to divorces, remarriages, or deaths. Such people come against their wills, at the mercy of others, and without the security of an expected welcome. These are not choices made with

agency but consequences of another's choices. These people don't choose to change their home; home is changed for them.

We live in a world filled with fear and uncertainty, where places of home are hard to find. We get lost in stories told from a distance and believe the filtered social media images. We suffer the consequences of others' decisions on both personal and global scales, and we withdraw in order to find safety in that which is closest to us. In this type of world, we need places and people of welcome. We need to take love, security, and hope to the stretches of our cities and expanses of our lands. And who better than those of us who know the love, security, and hope of a home in God?

Our home with God is the welcome that is always offered to us—the home that never leaves and will always be with us. We have a God who, like a loving parent, created a space and place for us, giving us boundaries to protect us and purposes worth pursuing. This God became like us in Jesus, who walked in our world and loved it. And we have been given the Holy Spirit to be with us forever. This means that we Christians have a God who created home, moves toward us in Jesus, and lives with us. We are always home in God. We may stumble or even lose our way at times, but we can always come back home. And it is up to us to continue to remain in God and to replicate God's welcome wherever we go.

Becoming a person of welcome starts with God, and it continues through us. Welcome isn't only found in a place; it is primarily found in people. And if it is found in people, then it can be carried from hospitals to hotels, from offices to orphanages, and from the least to the greatest. As people of welcome, we can take God's welcome wherever we go. How do we do this? Through the practice of hospitality.

## THE POSTURE OF HOSPITALITY

Welcome was intrinsic in my family. It was not only a spiritual practice, but our everyday posture toward the world—there was always a guest to welcome, and everyone stopped to welcome the guest. For us, this looked like steeped tea, pastries, and fruit always at the ready. It didn't matter the time of day guests would arrive; such items were available at all times, as if by magic. We were prepared to receive guests fluidly, whether unannounced or by a formal invitation. Moreover, this way of being radiated outward from our home. My mom poured out generosity by providing meals for those living on the streets. At restaurants, my dad would always look to pay for the entire meal, no matter who was there. One Thanksgiving, when we were all adults, we had so much leftover food that we immediately started packing individual meals for those in need. We never stopped to talk about whether we would be hospitable or not. We just did it.

This posture of hospitality carries the welcome we have in God to those we encounter in our days. It shows up in how we carry ourselves and how we respond to those around us. It shows up when our eyes have been trained to see the loneliness of another and show friendship. It shows up when our hearts are soft in compassion toward the stranger at the store. It shows up when we pause our agendas for the day for even a few moments to be present to others.

Living into this posture takes practice, awareness, surrender, and action. Think of how we commit to being stronger physically. We have to work out regularly, monitor our food intake, and spend less time sitting on the sofa. Such changes take time and action. When we stay the course, we don't usually see immediate results; but over time, we find to our delight that we are stronger

than we once were and have more energy for the day. If we cultivate a posture of welcome this way, we will find stores of unexpected generosity, welcome, patience, and love.

So how do we start to work toward this posture? We begin with reflecting on our actions. Self-reflection can be uncomfortable and acutely helpful. It offers us a starting point in reality. As a spiritual director, I encourage my directees to see everyday parts of life as a chance to look in a mirror. Below are a few actions and habits that you might not be used to seeing in a mirror. Taking a thoughtful look at these attributes can help us grow in self-reflection and awareness. No judgment involved—simply awareness.

## MIRRORS

### *Mirror one: Movement.*

“We didn’t block off the row for Communion. Should we make the congregants move?”

I heard these words in the middle of a worship service from the head usher and a pastoral colleague. Our other colleague was in the middle of his sermon; he could see the little bit of commotion in the front row, but he kept on preaching.

Our building was under construction, so we had pivoted to new worship services and spaces. But with all the pivots, we missed a detail. This detail would affect the entire congregation of over five hundred people during Communion, so we needed to make a call fast.

Our staff whispered several options to each other. One option was to move everyone in the Communion row to different seats, right in the middle of the service. Nope. That was not going to happen. That was the least hospitable action and most disruptive action.

## *The Posture You Take*

There was another option. We could extend hospitality by allowing the congregants to remain. Instead of moving the people, we could ask the Communion leaders to change the plan. We knew someone was going to be made uncomfortable, so we wanted to ask our leaders to make that shift. The leaders would do the moving.

We made it happen. To this day, our church serves Communion in this adapted way, with roots in a moment of crisis and a choice of hospitality. We never know when disruptions will happen, when chances for hospitality will arise, and when we will need to move. Paying attention to how we move—asking whether we move toward hospitality or away from it—is an opportunity for self-reflection.

### ***Mirror two: Limited sight.***

In one spiritual direction session, my directee Lori came face to face with a spiritual predicament. She said, “God is calling me to practice more hospitality, but I don’t know how. I am a single woman, and my apartment is my safe place. I have worked hard to have one safe place in my life, and I can’t let a stranger in. My friend lives in a huge house up the hill, leaving her door unlocked for anyone to come in. I’m not going to do that. How can I practice hospitality when I have a small apartment, always lock my doors, and I don’t feel safe letting in a stranger?”

Her concerns were legitimate and wise, and she strongly desired to live like Jesus. Why would God ask her to do something that she couldn’t put into practice?

Like all of us, Lori wanted to obey God yet couldn’t see how. In our session, we explored a series of questions that would help her redefine hospitality. We focused on how she could learn to live toward a posture of welcome in spaces other than a large home.

The next day, she sent me an audio text: “Laura, you will never guess what happened!” She told me how she had practiced hospitality with a stranger on a walk with her dog. She then had several more opportunities to extend hospitality. She was elated and felt great freedom to live like Jesus while permitting her home to be a safe place.

Lori had found a way to take hospitality wherever she went. In spiritual direction, she was able to look into a mirror and see her limited sight. She was able to expand her vision of hospitality: from the limited perspective that it required a big house with unlocked doors to the expansive perspective that hospitality could take place as she walked through her neighborhood.

Limited perspectives on hospitality are common. Think of the limited views that hospitality can only really occur in beautiful homes, or that hospitality is only a woman’s job, or that food must always be involved in welcome. All of us can expand our limited sight to understand hospitality as something to carry wherever we go and regardless of what we have to offer.

***Mirror three: Only me.***

Western culture has long privatized and individualized spiritual practices and services. We often think, *How can I be hospitable?* Of course, this is not the wrong question to ask, but it is not the only question we should ask. Hospitality is best practiced in the community, alongside others who value it. It is a posture to hold together, not alone.

Author and professor Christine Pohl says of the early church communities that they worked together to provide space for others: “There was never an assumption that individual households alone could care for large numbers of needy strangers.”

## *The Posture You Take*

These early church communities never assumed that one household could care for others all by itself. We so readily assume that problems are to be solved by individuals, rather than by a robust community of both strangers and friends working together.

Each year, our neighborhood high school has a march-a-thon. During this march-a-thon, the marching band goes up and down the streets, playing a few of its competition and rallying songs. If you donate significantly to the band, they will stop at your home and play a few songs. My family has paid this significant donation over the last few years, and it has led to far more people congregating on our front lawn than could ever walk into our house. Now, if you told us that we had to host over a hundred people inside our home, all on our own, we would be overwhelmed. We'd say, "No way." But we don't have to do it this way. Instead, we put out coffee and a few breakfast items on our front lawn and ask our neighbors to share their yards. The parents of kids in the band are delighted to come over and help host. By extending hospitality outside our home to multiple yards, and with the help of other community members to host, we can host an event for all.

We can become people of welcome who then invite others to join us in being people of welcome: friends, neighborhood, church community, and beyond. The strength of hospitality increases in community. We're not meant to be hospitable on our own.

### ***Mirror four: Interruptions.***

A final mirror to our understanding of hospitality: interruptions. Interruptions give us a quick glimpse of our posture. They have a way of getting under our skin, but can help our posture if we choose to let them. This mirror is not new to our time or culture.

Jesus often used stories to interrupt us, revealing the posture of our heart toward the stranger.

In the Gospel of Luke, a lawyer asks Jesus honest questions about eternal life. Jesus responds with his own questions, helping the lawyer to consider what it means to love one's neighbor. The lawyer thinks eternal life is about checking off the boxes of being good and Jesus shares with him a story about love that permits interruption, requires mercy, and stops and cares for the stranger. It's a story of mercy, in which the merciful one cares for his neighbor until he is fully restored (Luke 10:25-37). It is just like Jesus to break down our boxes.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteers advocate for children who have experienced abuse and neglect with the hope of helping them into safe and protected homes. They come to mind when I think of those who have expanded their box of hospitality to include heart, compassion, and care. These men and women allow themselves to be affected by our youngest neighbors. They advocate in unjust systems, care for those who have been abandoned, and spill their own tears with the heart-break of those who suffer. When we allow Jesus to break down the walls of our box of hospitality, we welcome the vulnerable and open ourselves up to the stories of those we care for. It is not only our schedule that hospitality interrupts, but our hearts and agendas as well. We often want to keep the box closed and clean, a mere checkmark to be completed without any personal cost. Having a limited understanding of hospitality is far easier and more comfortable. It keeps us safe and unaffected. But such a perspective not only denies joy and hope for others; it also diminishes our own experience of life.

## *The Posture You Take*

Self-reflection with a mirror can be uncomfortable and even painful. Yet looking in a mirror can be an incredible gift. The mirrors mentioned above give us the opportunity to be honest, bring our self-knowledge to Jesus, and work with others toward a posture of hospitality. Welcome can be so much more than we have imagined. Pay attention to what you find through self-reflection, and allow these mirrors to open up the possibility of what might be. And Jesus is the master of possibility. When Jesus expands our definition of hospitality, he deepens who we are and extends who we see. In this way he takes hospitality and multiplies it through us taking greater joy, love, and grace into our worlds. This moment when the deepening begins is the hardest and requires honest questions and curious exploration. And it is worth it. Your heart and the hearts of others are well worth it.

### **GOD STOPS AND SEES**

The story of Jesus and a desperate and discarded woman illustrates the depth and extension of hospitality. Jesus was on his way to heal a desperately ill child, and a woman interrupted him along the way. She longed for healing, but had had her hope dashed for twelve years. She didn't want to bother Jesus; maybe she felt like she had been a bother to everyone else for the past twelve years. She reached out for what she needed, and didn't ask for anything. Yet Jesus paused his schedule and lavished healing on her in more ways than one (Mark 5:25-34). After restoring her physically, he restored her socially to make her faith public before the crowd. Her act of reaching out made her vulnerable. In calling her to speak, Jesus invited her to greater vulnerability—and then he gave her more than she could have imagined.

Jesus gives us so much when we include him and serve with him. And then he empowers us to offer so much to those around us. Hospitality provides and restores far more than what a person can see. When we see and extend hospitality to those around us, wherever we are, we extend God's love and mercy beyond the boxes and buildings. We are restoring a part of their humanity that may have been broken. We offer healing to their inner wounds of invisibility when they have long felt unseen. We extend love and dignity as we listen to their story and hear their faith. As we see the unseen parts and help make them whole, we meet them practically in care and love. When we hold the posture of hospitality, we provide and make space for a restoration that is even more than we can imagine. Let's dive in.

### **THE SHAPE OF THIS BOOK**

At the end of each chapter, you will find a spiritual practice that will strengthen your posture of hospitality. The practices are varied in length and type, inviting you to grow more deeply in your relationship with God, knowledge of yourself, and service to others. As you finish each chapter, spend some time engaging with the spiritual practices. Slow down and allow space for self-reflection, interaction with God, and the Holy Spirit to transform you.

In addition to the spiritual practices at the end of each chapter, there is a group discussion guide at the end of the book. This is a helpful tool to create conversation with a small group, a staff team, or friends and family.

## The Spiritual Practice of Reflection and Redefinition

Much as I guided my directee Lori, I'd love to guide you in a practice of reflection and redefinition. We will use this practice as a mirror to reflect and redefine our definition of hospitality in order to align our posture to the heart of God.

The following reflection questions will take you on a journey of remembering so that you can arrive at a redefinition of hospitality. From this redefinition, you can practice taking hospitality wherever you are. We will explore our contexts soon; for now, we will look toward the transformation of our minds and hearts to transform our posture.

As we begin, I ask for one thing: be honest as you look in the mirror, for it will lead to freedom.

Start with this base definition of *hospitality*: "Hospitality is a posture of welcome we take wherever we go."

- \* Set aside twenty to thirty minutes in a quiet, uninterrupted space for this reflection and redefinition time. Allow these questions to guide you through your current image of hospitality.
- \* Before diving in, take a few minutes to be silent and allow your heart, mind, and body to settle a bit.
- \* As you settle in, think back to a time you felt welcomed, loved, and cared for—a time when you were most free to be you, without fear of consequences or judgment. This may have been a time of great need, fun celebration, or maybe even both. Think back to this time and imagine being there again. Take as long as you need to get back into that head and heart space.

## *The Spiritual Practice of Reflection and Redefinition*

- \* As you keep your heart and mind in that place, look around you at what is happening. Take in the environment again and the people you are with. Who is there, and what are they doing? What is the atmosphere like? Does it feel or look a certain way? What is being provided for you?
- \* Write down the environment, the people, and the moment you felt most free and seen. Perhaps this moment was short, or it may have extended many minutes.
- \* As you reflect on this moment, what were you being given? How did it feel? What was it like? Write this down.
- \* Now consider what it took or what it cost for that person or those people to extend this gift to you. What does this tell you about who they are? Use adjectives to describe their actions and write them down.
- \* Take these adjectives from the answered questions at that moment and fill in the blanks with your own words.
- \* When I was extended hospitality, I felt \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
- \* Those who extended hospitality were \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
- \* Now, take these adjectives and include them in our understanding that hospitality is a posture of welcome we take wherever we go. Use this example if helpful:  
To have a posture of hospitality is to extend \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ to another.
- \* Sit with this definition with God in prayer. Hold onto it as we move into our next chapter of considering our contexts.

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