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The Ethic of Hospitality

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Hospitality: n. friendly and generous reception of guests or strangers, or of new ideas.

– *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*

The idea of hospitality is evident in several types of human behavior including obligatory duties, commercial activity, and prosocial action. These are intertwined and revolve around the commitment to caring for others whether they are relatives, guests, or strangers.

A Sense of Duty

The duty of hospitality is to family or tribe, as well as to strangers for whom cultural norms often mandate an obligation to host. This branch has a physical, social, and spiritual context. Such duty often incurs a personal cost, one based on the emotional commitment of kinship or honor. We come

together because we are supposed to, but also because we feel a connection with others who are like us, a bond with those who share a common heritage. Many social or cultural bonds are built on the duty to family above all else, including shared meals and ceremonies.

It can be observed that most, if not all, of human ethical, religious, or moral teachings include some form of service to those outside the family or kinship unit. In ancient Greece, the responsibility to provide hospitality (*xenia*) defined behavioral duties for both the host and the guest. The application of this duty (*philoxenia*) is still defined as the hospitality revealed in love (*philia*) for the stranger (*xenos*). While thousands of years old, this is still

a crucial component of our modern mobile social structure, in which everyone is a stranger at some time and place. The principle is especially important when applied to the traveler, the immigrant, the exile, or anyone considered to be an outsider.

Consider the American day of Thanksgiving, an iconic national holiday during which families gather together to consume turkey with all the trimmings, the ultimate comfort food. The traditional, near mythical, New England roots of this festival are well defined. Images of Pilgrims and Native Americans sharing the bounty of the harvest have been exported to the rest of the nation and are now completely woven into our cultural tapestry.

In late November, we put aside our familial differences and sit for a few communal hours, hearing stories from otherwise ignored uncles and aunts, or even sisters and brothers. Many families welcome strangers to their midst, such as the college roommate of a child or sibling, who in turn praises the host who has been gracious enough to open their homes in hospitality. As the New England poet Robert Frost wrote: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

A Commercial Activity

The commercial is the branch that we associate with the business of welcoming paying guests at hotels or restaurants. The business of hospitality also extends to anyone who we compensate to care for our physical and emotional needs, including health-care or social workers. There is a fine line between the innkeeper and the hospital administrator. We pay people to care for us when we travel, need to eat outside the home, or become ill. Any time our family is physically or emotionally unable to fulfill their duty to care for us, we rely on others for our welfare.

New England has strong roots in all facets of this commercial hospitality realm. The role of public inns as a mainstay of community life is well documented. As noted in previous editions of *Boston Hospitality Review*, the region claims some of the oldest surviving inns (Wayside Inn, 1716), restaurants (Union Oyster House, 1826), and hotels (Parker House, 1855) in the nation. The New England Inns & Resorts Association has origins dating to 1907, and precedes the founding of the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

The same is true of professional healthcare. The Massachusetts General Hospital (1810), one of the three oldest hospitals in the nation, was proposed by John Bartlett as a facility to care for the poor and indigent. The Boston Lying-In Hospital (1832)

was one of the first hospitals dedicated to women and maternity. The Boston Home for Aged Women (1850) was formed to assist elderly single women, who might otherwise be consigned to the poor-house.

A Prosocial Orientation

The third branch, the prosocial, is intertwined in the principles of the other two. Often termed altruistic, the term prosocial is defined by psychologist Nancy Eisenberg as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another.”

Being in service to others, whether for duty or compensation, requires awareness of the needs of others and empathy toward them. The difference in the case of prosocial hospitality is that there is no expectation of reciprocity or personal gain from the behavior. The act of helping others who are either unknown or unrelated to the giver at the time of the act, involves a sense of hospitality that is genuine, but often inexplicable. Recent research suggests that prosocial behavior may be initiated after receiving signals from an organization or another individual. However, altruism appears not to be something that can be taught or even learned. It is often just simply done.

As is true with many professions, a proclivity for certain emotional rewards may be indicative of employee association and alignment. While there are many intervening variables, people with a desire to help others may naturally gravitate towards lodging, restaurants, health-care, or other service-oriented employment. This could come from a sense of duty, a desire for economic gain, or simply because of a need to engage in prosocial work. But when that work involves volunteerism at non-profit events, including time spent working for charities and social organizations, the focus often changes from a duty or the commercial to prosocial hospitality.

New England is home to many organizations providing hospitality in a prosocial manner. Two examples are Community Servings in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts and the New England Center for Homeless Veterans in Boston. These organizations were founded to help small targeted populations, but each has expanded to benefit thousands of individuals through the generosity of volunteers and donors.

Community Servings produces and delivers free meals for individuals too ill to provide for themselves or their families. Over time, the organization has also been able to offer job training skills for people who may enter into the foodservice industry.

Their work is done by a small professional staff and thousands of volunteers.

The New England Center for Homeless Veterans was founded as a way to offer emergency lodging and shelter assistance to homeless men who had served in the armed forces. Today it has expanded to include psychological counseling, job training, and other social services for both male and female veterans. Much of the hospitality comes from volunteers and donors.

Conclusion

Hospitality is certainly a business, but it is also a calling. Hospitality is often a duty, but sometimes it is nothing more than offering a hand to help the person beside us. For thousands of years, *philoxenia* has been recognized as the best that humanity has to offer. ■



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