

“Being and Doing”

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Guest at Your Table and New Member Sunday
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“Won’t you come for dinner? There will be a few other friends there and family members too. You’d like to bring something? Oh, just bring yourself this time.....On second thought...”

Who’s the host and who’s the guest? Who’s serving and who is served? Who’s giving and who’s receiving?

This morning we’re inviting each of you to participate in our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee’s “Guest at Your Table” venture. I prefer to call it an adventure. What an opportunity to respond to the questions I’ve posed. We invite into our homes a guest, actually more than one, through hearing and reading the stories of some of our neighbors in this country and globally and the grass-roots groups to which they belong in partnership with members and friends of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The work of our Service Committee is not charity. It’s about being family, extended family, and a functional family in a world where we’re all blessed by life itself and challenged by the brutal realities of poverty and the shadow sides of human nature and Mother Nature.

Nancy Burton has introduced you to how this works. [Hold up box.] Every year, my husband Dan and I bring home a box that symbolizes the “guest at our table.” This year, the Service Committee decided to be eco-friendly and is counting on us to use last year’s surplus of boxes or to make our own. I still have mine from last year. Every evening around dinnertime, we check our billfolds and pop in \$1 or \$5 or even \$10 if we’ve been negligent for a few days. It adds up over the 30 days plus that our guest awaits her/his portion at the table.

What inspires us? Stories of UU Service Committee partners and the transformative work being done through gifts given and received, gifts that support the ongoing work of Danielle Neus, for example, an ordinary woman from Haiti doing extraordinary things.

Long before a devastating earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, our neighbors to the south embodied a people proud of a heritage that included overthrowing the French imposed tyrannies of slavery and colonization. January 1, 1804 is this island nation’s Independence Day. A name change was in order. The indigenous term “Haiti” was chosen, “land of the mountains.”

As Haiti inspired abolitionists in this country, its successful resistance to tyranny also unleashed decades of long-term abuse by U.S. leadership. Liberators are a chronic threat to privilege and power. Fearlessness signals to the privileged and powerful that it’s time to find new ways to subdue and repress. For Haiti this has meant U.S. driven economic war, another brand of violence. Haiti is among the poorest nations of the world; so when the earthquake struck, the infrastructure crumbled—except for those who found strength and hope in solidarity.

I can't imagine a more timely guest at our tables at this season of harvest and Thanksgiving than Danielle Neus. Danielle had been working with the Bright Educators of Delmas, a group of community organizers mobilized before the earthquake hit. A partnership had been struck between the UU Service Committee and the Papaye Peasant Movement. Danielle's discovery of how this movement operated presented a persuasive opportunity for another level of partnership. Danielle and the members of her group connected with the Papaye Peasant Movement and the UU Service Committee and were soon teaching the survivors of Port-au-Prince to grow their own gardens using recycled tires. This strikes a personal chord in me. I grew up believing that the most essential parts of a car were the tires. It was the Gospel According to Dad, who worked over 40 years for Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company. If you don't take care of your tires, your car will surely veer wildly off the road straight into that place we don't believe in.

Tires wear out, but who knew? Who knew that they are just as well designed for framing vegetable gardens for post-earthquake Haiti? If you invited and fed the Guest at Your Table a few years ago, if you invite and honor your Guest this year, you honor the good faith borne of more than 60 families who have already been taught to create tire gardens that hold gardens flourishing with food for homes and the marketplace. Danielle and neighbors working with her continue to realize the mantra of the Bright Educators of Delmas: "We are all one, we remain one, and we will die one."

Who is the guest and who is the host when "we are all one?" The Guest at Your Table campaign provided funds that provided workers who facilitated the realization of these multi-layered partnerships. This story of hope lends inspiration not just to Danielle and other Haitians, but to all of us who seek to actualize hope over futility, long-term strategies over short-term respites, and justice over charity.

It has always seemed to me that the most functional family is extended family, with whom we "gather together to join in the journey." Through the ever-changing partnerships afforded through Guest at Your Table and the growing extended family of this faith and this congregation, we discover and explore what it means to be in faithful community grounded in love. It's a love that holds a delicious paradox, a paradox of being and doing. Sometimes we refer to it as the creative tension between faith and works.

Which is it? As members of this community of faith, do we only matter if we're on four committees and chair two of them or lead worship or volunteer for x, y, and z? Does it matter also if we're simply but not so simply present with one another in even *some* of the many ministries of this congregation? Which is it?

Yes and yes.

The invitation extended to you who joined this congregation this morning was full of verbs: honoring, practicing, accepting, encouraging, searching...enough already! AND it included "drawing hope from one another," "drawing renewed energy from the promise of what can still be," and "drawing from the deep well of abiding love and respect, that is the far-reaching promise of this faith that we share."

"How might we act if we consider ourselves guests in the lives of friends and family?" asks Jeffrey Lockwood in his thoughts on "The Fine Art of the Good Guest." He could as readily have called it "The Fine Art of the Good Host." The delicious paradox is the centerpiece.

We serve and we partake. We act and we are still. Most of us need coaching in saying “No!” as well as saying “Yes!” to the many invitations to do this or that in this congregation of many ministries. It was one of you who graciously gave me a gift that I treasure, a gift that sits atop my desk inviting me simply to press its red alert button. [Do so!]

I believe some of you share one of the liabilities of professional ministry. How many years of therapy or simply candid conversations does it take to strike a balance between doing and being; giving and receiving; hosting and blessedly showing up, sitting down, and entering peace and quiet? Will I ever be enough? Can I ever do enough? According to whose standards? Is it so that the more I do and the more I am, the “better” I will be? It’s only taken me several decades to begin to figure it out, and I still honor this awareness in the breach.

Being a good guest with one another calls for us to partner with “enough.” If I’m so distracted by my to-do list, how can I possibly be present with you? If you’re feeling guilty because you’ve said “No” the last couple of times to invitations to do this or that, what’s the likelihood that you will flee two-legged clipboards during coffee hour? If you’re perhaps reticent about checking out an idea you’ve been harboring for a long time and just don’t know if it would fly, perhaps it’s time to take a deep breath and place it on the table of shared options. Of course you might be invited to head it, but you don’t have to lead alone. None of us does.

“Won’t you come for dinner? We’ll all be family—extended family. You’d like to bring something? What would give you the most pleasure? Above all, I invite you to be *present* at the feast of this faith and the fest of our lives together.

For all you do and are, thank you, thank you, and thank you—
Amen.

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