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Extending Hospitality When We Fear

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Half a century ago, my parents were expatriates in Brazil during a volatile time of that country's history. My father was a university chaplain and my mother a nurse in the local *favela*. Reflecting on what has unfolded in the US over the past weeks, my mother wrote to me: "We watch with anxiety what is happening in your country. I remember in Brazil, the amount of distrust that was growing because of the political unrest in the country. Neighbors distrusted neighbors and the very fiber of community was disintegrating. Even within the church, folks could not trust each other. It became toxic and disturbing."

She gave words to the unsettled feelings I have been experiencing. I have watched as fear and skepticism have become a current hallmark of US society. Friends, family, and colleagues from across the nation, the world, and the political spectrum, observe with concern.

Tragically, higher education has not been exempt.

I love being in the world of higher education. For the past years it has gone through a season of challenge, redefinition and clarification of its mission, purpose and intent. Few institutions are at the point where all their questions have been answered and strategies developed. Change, unpredictability, and insecurity define our times. Falling enrollment, tightened budgets, and elimination of programs impact our college communities weekly, sometimes daily. Changing job descriptions and duties, unexpected furloughs, and fear of layoffs are parts of our lives and communities.

Colleagues have used words such as *fear, distrust, futility, shock, dismay, anger, resignation, grief, suspicion, skepticism, territorialism, and cynicism* to describe their communities and environments. They cringe and lament when they acknowledge this reality. Unfortunately, these feelings are too familiar in our society, communities, and (sadly) in the lives of our students.

There has been a cultural shift away from collegiality, community, and consideration for others. This fear and defensiveness are antithetical to the values many of us want to bring to our roles. As an administrator, I want to do my role so well that no one notices. David Brodhead recognized that “the deep aim” of administration is “to make itself disappear.”¹ In a certain way if an administrator is doing well, they are not noticed. My work should enable and facilitate others to do their work in such a way as they can focus on their work and rarely need to be aware of my role.

This has changed.

The need to demonstrate the value of our roles is often desperate and paramount. It feels like survival— others need to see that we are essential

and valuable. The fear and instability of this past year has been real—“Will I have a job next year? Next semester? Next week?” There is the sense that others need to know that what I am doing is vital and indispensable for the campus community’s health and mission.

Throughout my whole life I have been challenged by mentors and models (personal, living, historical, and even fictional) not to embrace this fear and suspicion.

Hospitality and Kindness:

Over the years I have had men and women stand in my corner through high and lows. They sought my success and were creative about the opportunities they presented to me. Those were my models. I hope that in the manner in which I do my work, I honor them and their investment. I have encountered this altruism and kindness from others. I experienced hospitality and kindness. Nouwen notes that hospitality is “one of richest biblical terms.”² He reminds us of the biblical imperative to welcome the stranger into our homes and spaces (Luke 24). Further he observes: “Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”³

John Bennett noted that higher education is sometimes characterized by self-promotion and self-protection.⁴

He suggested that this was an unfortunate part of the culture of academia. He acknowledged that it was not always recognized, but it was present. I resisted this observation, but in time saw it had some truth. Henri Nouwen, who Bennett draws from, describes as a pervasive loneliness and fearful hostility. In campus politics, systems, priorities, promotions, recognition, affirmation and power, self-promotion and self-

protection exist. Sometimes it is under the radar, sometimes it is “in your face.”

What Bennett described is a culture of fear which sometimes inhabits an academic community. It manifests itself in a cycle of self-protection and self-promotion that can permeate our campuses. Bennett affirms that this cycle is contradictory to the ideals of a community—the academic *collegium* and the idea of a committed group of scholars.

The unknown, unfamiliar, and the stranger are reasons we use to assume danger and leads to fear. Sheila Wise Rowe in her discussion of racial trauma, explains how fear can lead to what I would describe as a type of paralysis affecting our ability to engage with ourselves and our communities. “When fear enters, love and compassion flee. Feelings of fear and anxiety may or may not be rooted in an actual threat, they range from mild to severe. The emotional symptoms of fear include nagging thoughts about potential threats, which become anxiety when they fill our minds and keep us from feeling present in our bodies and fully engaged in life.”⁵ Sometimes these threats are real, sometimes we assume they exist when they do not. Sometimes we see malice behind hard decisions when the complexities and priorities are numerous.

Bennett suggests a strategy to counter this fear. He suggests the need to pursue relationships with others, seek the common good, and desire to deepen the community. Echoing Nouwen, Bennett puts forward *hospitality* as an alternative to fear. Simple, but profound. It involves extending and receiving kindness; and it is void of arrogance. He notes that hospitality treats others as “worthy” of notice and attention (Heb 13:2). He suggests that it involves communicating that others matter and “eschews quick dismissal” of their perspectives. In my words, hospitality recognizes the dignity of others. It is a model where men and women acknowledge their own strengths and aptitudes, and are committed to understanding, empathizing, and relating to those around

them.

While knowing there may be risks (great and small), the one extending hospitality is willing to pursue new relationships. It can be hard work. Hospitality sees that the potential value of interaction and reconciliation with others far outweighs the potential risk and labor.

Hospitality reflects the biblical values of grace and mercy in a profound and startling way. One cannot ignore this image. It demands pondering, reflection, and acknowledgement. Hospitality draws others into discourse, desires to learn from them, suspends its own expertise, and learns and interacts with others. The ones extending hospitality do not abandon their beliefs and convictions. They suspend them to hospitably interact with others. It involves welcoming the stranger and unfamiliar into our spaces, home, families. It does not require agreement or endorsement, but it does involve respect, recognition, and acknowledgment of who they are.

As a believer, confident in God's kindness, grace and concern, it is unsettling when I feel the need to highlight the value I add to my community. There is sadness and lament in acknowledging this reality.

The suggestion about hospitality is not complex. This remedy to fear may not be dramatic. It is hard. It requires looking beyond ourselves and our own circumstances.

Not so final words

Each morning as I walk out our front door, my eyes are drawn to words my wife placed over the door frame a decade ago. It reminds me to "be kinder than necessary" (similar to Proverbs 3:27). They are also simple words. They remind me to extend grace and kindness daily—to my students, community, strangers, and myself. They encourage me to be slow to speak, intentional to listen, more willing to understand.

While the words do not cite scripture, I believe *kindness* (and the challenge) reflect the heart of God. The words above our door remind me that hospitality and kindness are a way to resist the fears our community's encounter.



Footnotes

1. Richard H. Brodhead, *The good of this place: Values and challenges in college education* (NewHaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 84.
2. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching out: The three movements of the spiritual life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 51.
3. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 51
4. John B. Bennett, *Academic life: Hospitality, ethics and spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).
5. Sheila Wise Rowe, *Healing racial trauma: The road to resilience* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 71.

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