REACHING OUT

The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life

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Chapter 4

CREATING SPACE FOR STRANGERS

Living in a World of Strangers

The first characteristic of the spiritual life is the continuing movement from loneliness to solitude. Its second equally important characteristic is the movement by which our hostilities can be converted into hospitality. It is there that our changing relationship to ourself can be brought to fruition in an ever-changing relationship to our fellow human beings. It is there that our reaching out to our innermost being can lead to a reaching out to the many strangers whom we meet on our way through life. In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings. The movement from hostility to hospitality is hard and full of difficulties. Our

society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still—that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes,* the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced.

A Biblical Term

At first the word "hospitality" might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of coziness. Probably this has its good reasons since in our culture the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down piety than a serious search for an authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings. Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger in our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host. When Abraham received three strangers at Mamre and offered them water, bread and a fine tender calf, they revealed themselves to him as the Lord announcing that Sarah his wife would give birth to a son (Genesis 18:1–15). When the widow of Zarephath offered food and shelter to Elijah, he revealed himself as a man of God offering her an abundance of oil and meal and raising her son from the dead (I Kings 17:9–24). When the two travelers to Emmaus invited the stranger, who had joined them on the road to stay with them for the night, he made himself known in the breaking of the bread as their Lord and Saviour (Luke 24:13–35).

When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of the new found unity.

Thus the biblical stories help us to realize not just that hospitality is an important virtue, but even more that in the context of hospitality guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other.

During the last decades psychology has made great contributions to a new understanding of interpersonal relationships. Not only psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, but also social workers, occupational therapists, ministers, priests and many others working in the helping professions have made grateful use of these new insights in their work. But maybe some of us have become so impressed by these new findings that we have lost sight of the great wealth contained and preserved in such ancient concepts as hospitality. Maybe the concept of hospitality can offer a new dimension to our understanding of a healing relationship and the formation of a re-creative community in a world so visibly suffering from alienation and estrangement.

The term hospitality, therefore, should not be limited to its literal sense of receiving a stranger in our house—although it is important never to forget or neglect that!—but as a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human being, which can be expressed in a great variety of ways.

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Chapter 6

HOSPITALITY AND THE HOST

At Home in Our Own House

The movement from hostility to hospitality cannot be thought of without a constant inner connection with the movement from loneliness to solitude. As long as we are lonely, we cannot be hospitable because as lonely people we cannot create free space. Our own need to still our inner cravings of loneliness makes us cling to others instead of creating space for them.

> I vividly remember the story of a student who was invited to stay with a family while studying at a university. After a few weeks he realized how unfree he felt and slowly he became aware that he was becoming the victim of the crying loneliness of his hosts. Husband and wife had become strangers to each other and used their guest to satisfy their great need for affection. The hosts clung to the stranger who had entered their house in the hope that he could offer them the love and intimacy they were unable to give to each other. So the student became entangled in a complex net of unfulfilled needs and desires, and felt caught between the walls of loneliness. He felt the painful tension of having to choose between two lonely part-

ners and was being pulled apart by the cruel question: Are you for him or for me? Are you on her side or on mine? He no longer felt free to go and come when he wanted; he found himself gradually unable to concentrate on his studies while at the same time powerless to offer the help his hosts were begging for. He had even lost the inner freedom to leave.

This story illustrates how difficult it is to create free space for a stranger when there is no solitude in our lives. When we think back to the places where we felt most at home, we quickly see that it was where our hosts gave us the precious freedom to come and go on our own terms and did not claim us for their own needs. Only in a free space can re-creation take place and new life be found. The real host is the one who offers that space where we do not have to be afraid and where we can listen to our own inner voices and find our own personal way of being human. But to be such a host we have to first of all be at home in our own house.

Poverty Makes a Good Host

To the degree in which our loneliness is converted into solitude we can move from hostility to hospitality. There obviously is no question of chronology. The complex and subtle movements of the inner life cannot be neatly divided. But it remains true that loneliness often leads to hostile behavior and that solitude is the climate of hospitality. When we feel lonely we have such a need to be liked and loved that we are hypersensitive to the many signals in our environment and easily become hostile toward anyone whom we perceive as rejecting us. But once we have found the center of our life in our own heart and have accepted our aloneness, not as a fate but as a

vocation, we are able to offer freedom to others. Once we have given up our desire to be fully fulfilled, we can offer emptiness to others. Once we have become poor, we can be a good host. It is indeed the paradox of hospitality that poverty makes a good host. Poverty is the inner disposition that allows us to take away our defenses and convert our enemies into friends. We can only perceive the stranger as an enemy as long as we have something to defend. But when we say, "Please enter—my house is your house, my joy is your joy, my sadness is your sadness and my life is your life," we have nothing to defend, since we have nothing to lose but all to give.

Turning the other cheek means showing our enemies that they can only be our enemies while supposing that we are anxiously clinging to our private property, whatever it is: our knowledge, our good name, our land, our money, or the many objects we have collected around us. But who will be our robber when everything he wants to steal from us becomes our gift to him? Who can lie to us, when only the truth will serve him well? Who wants to sneak into our back door, when our front door is wide open?

Poverty makes a good host. This paradoxical statement needs some more explanation. In order to be able to reach out to the other in freedom, two forms of poverty are very important, the poverty of mind and the poverty of heart.

The Poverty of Mind

Someone who is filled with ideas, concepts, opinions and convictions cannot be a good host. There is no inner space to listen, no openness to discover the gift of the other. It is not difficult to see how those "who know it all" can kill a conversation and prevent an interchange of

ideas. Poverty of mind as a spiritual attitude is a growing willingness to recognize the incomprehensibility of the mystery of life. The more mature we become the more we will be able to give up our inclination to grasp, catch, and comprehend the fullness of life and the more we will be ready to let life enter into us.

The preparation for the ministry can offer a good example. To prepare ourselves for service we have to prepare ourselves for an articulate not knowing, a *docta ignorantia,* a learned ignorance. This is very difficult to accept for people whose whole attitude is toward mastering and controlling the world. We all want to be educated so that we can be in control of the situation and make things work according to our own need. But education to ministry is an education not to master God but to be mastered by God.

> I remember the educational story of a thirty-year-old Methodist minister from South Africa. When this man felt called to the ministry and was accepted by the church, he was sent as an assistant pastor to work in a parish without any formal theological training. But he was so convinced of his insights and experience, and his enthusiasm and fervor were so great that he had no problem in giving long sermons and strong lectures. But then, after two years, he was called back and sent to the seminary for theological education. Reflecting on his time in the seminary, he said, "During those years I read the works of many theologians, philosophers and novelists. Whereas before everything seemed so clear-cut and self-evident to me, I now lost my certainties, developed many questions and became much less certain of myself and my truth." In a sense, his years of formation were more years of unlearning than of learning and when he returned to the ministry he had less to say but much more to listen to.

This story illustrates that well-educated ministers are not individuals who can tell you exactly who God is, where good and evil are and how to travel from this world to the next, but people whose articulate not-knowing makes them free to listen to the voice of God in the words of the people, in the events of the day and in the books containing the life experience of men and women from other places and other times. In short, learned ignorance makes one able to receive the word from others and the Other with great attention. That is the poverty of mind. It demands the continuing refusal to identify God with any concept, theory, document or event, thus preventing man or woman from becoming a fanatic sectarian or enthusiast, while allowing for an ongoing growth in gentleness and receptivity.

What is true for the ministry is also true for other forms of human service. When we look at the daily life and work of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and counselors, we can see how much of their skill consists of a careful listening, with or without instruments, and a continuing concern for not being in the way of their patients. A voluntary poverty of mind makes professionals open to receive constantly new knowledge and insight from those who ask their help. This in no way denies the importance of very concrete and visible help, or the urgency of new structures to alleviate the hunger, thirst, lack of clothes or shelter of millions of people. The contrary is true. When we can work for the poor in a spirit of receptivity and gratitude our help can be accepted without shame. Many people in physical, mental or spiritual need are making it increasingly clear that it is better to refuse help and maintain self-respect than to

accept it while being reduced to the status of a beggar or a slave.

The Poverty of Heart

A good host not only has to be poor in mind but also poor in heart. When our heart is filled with prejudices, worries, jealousies, there is little room for a stranger. In a fearful environment it is not easy to keep our hearts open to the wide range of human experiences. Real hospitality, however, is not exclusive but inclusive and creates space for a large variety of human experiences. Also here the ministry can serve as an example of the value of this form of poverty. There are many people who claim to have had a religious experience which showed them the way to God. Frequently, the experience is of such an intensity that it is no longer possible for such a person to realize that his or her way is not necessarily *the* way. Just as God cannot be "caught" or "comprehended" in any specific idea, concept, opinion or conviction, he cannot be defined by any specific feeling or emotion either. God cannot be identified with a good affectionate feeling toward our neighbor, or with a sweet emotion of the heart, or with ecstasies, movements of the body or handling of snakes. God is not just our good inclinations, our fervor, our generosity or our love. All these experiences of the heart may remind us of God's presence, but their absence does not prove God's absence. God is not only greater than our mind, he is also greater than our heart, and just as we have to avoid the temptation of adapting God to our small concepts we also have to avoid adapting him to our small feelings.

Not only in the ministry but in all other helping professions as well we have to remind ourselves constantly that an inflated heart is just as dangerous as an inflated

mind. An inflated heart can make us very intolerant. But when we are willing to detach ourselves from making our own limited experience the criterion for our approach to others, we may be able to see that life is greater than our life, history is greater than our history, experience greater than our experience and God greater than our God. That is the poverty of heart that makes a good host. With poverty of heart we can receive the experiences of others as a gift to us. Their histories can creatively connect with ours, their lives give new meaning to ours, and their God speak to ours in mutual revelation.

Johannes Metz describes this disposition well when he writes:

> We must forget ourselves in order to let the other person approach us. We must be able to open up to him to let his distinctive personality unfold—even though it often frightens and repels us. We often keep the other person down, and only see what we want to see; then we never really encounter the mysterious secret of his being, only ourselves. Failing to risk the poverty of encounter, we indulge in a new form of self-assertion and pay the price for it: loneliness. Because we did not risk the poverty of openness (Matthew 10:39), our lives are not graced with the warm fullness of human existence. We are left with only a shadow of our real self.[1]

Poverty of heart creates community since it is not in self-sufficiency but in a creative interdependency that the mystery of life unfolds itself to us.

Boasting of Our Weakness

So hospitality requires poverty, the poverty of mind and the poverty of heart. This might help us to under-

stand the importance of a "training" for hospitality. There are many programs to prepare people for service in its different forms. But seldom do we look at these programs as a training toward a voluntary poverty. Instead we want to become better equipped and more skillful. We want to acquire the "tools of the trade." But real training for service asks for a hard and often painful process of self-emptying. The main problem of service is to be the way without being "in the way." And if there are any tools, techniques and skills to be learned they are primarily to plow the field, to cut the weeds and to clip the branches, that is, to take away the obstacles for real growth and development. Training for service is not a training to become rich but to become voluntarily poor; not to fulfill ourselves but to empty ourselves; not to conquer God but to surrender to his saving power. All this is very hard to accept in our contemporary world, which tells us about the importance of power and influence. But it is important that in this world there remain a few voices crying out that if there is anything to boast of, we should boast of our weakness. Our fulfillment is in offering emptiness, our usefulness in becoming useless, our power in becoming powerless. It indeed belongs to the core of the Christian message that God did not reveal himself to us as the powerful other, unapproachable in his omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. Instead he came to us in Jesus Christ who "did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself . . . and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Philippians, 2:6–8). It is God himself who reveals to us the movement of our spiritual life. It is not the movement from weakness to power, but the movement in which we become less and less fearful and defensive and

more and more open to the other and his world, even when it leads to suffering and death.

While the movement from loneliness to solitude makes us reach out to our innermost self, the movement from hostility to hospitality makes us reach out to others. The term hospitality was used only to come to a better insight into the nature of a mature Christian relationship to our fellow human beings. Words such as creating space, receptivity and confrontation, poverty of mind and heart were used to show that the spirituality of the Christian not only is rooted in the reality of everyday life, but also transcends it by relying on the gift of God. To help, to serve, to care, to guide, to heal, these words were all used to express a reaching out toward our neighbor whereby we perceive life as a gift not to possess but to share.

This finally leads to the most important and difficult aspect of spiritual life, our relationship to him who gives. God has been mentioned already, in fact more and more as we moved from loneliness to solitude and from hostility to hospitality. The emphasis until now, however, was on the question: how to reach out to our innermost self and to our fellow human beings? But can we reach out to God, the source and giver of our own and our neighbor's life? If the answer is no, then solitude and hospitality remain vague ideals good to speak about but unreal in daily life. The movement from illusion to prayer, therefore, is the most crucial movement of the spiritual life undergirding all that has been said thus far.