

"Hospitality and an Improbable Feast".
Address to the Australia Day Multifaith Commemoration
Brougham Place Uniting Church. January 26, 2011
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May I begin with a blatant act of self-promotion!

I have recently written an account of my experiences as chaplain at Flinders University over the last thirteen years. The book is with the publishers and should be available in early March.

It describes a movement from what was, at the time, an essentially Christian paradigm. For centuries, Western universities had had Christian chaplains. But now, due to the internationalisation of universities, and society in general, the university community had become multi-faith and multi-cultural.

For me, the emerging human question was: "how are we now all going to live peaceably together?"

The religious landscape I saw in the university was not unlike that portrayed in the recent SBS series "Immigration Nation - The Secret History of Us". Just substitute for "*White Australia*", "*Christian Australia*".

The Christian chaplains came to the pointy end of that question when the newly formed Flinders University Pagan Association informed us that they wanted to appoint their own Pagan chaplain.

There are various ways one can go when confronted with such a challenge.

You can ignore it and hope it goes away.

You can oppose it and defend the status quo.

Or you can agree to see if you can find enough common ground for living "peaceably together".

All of these options were chosen by various stakeholders of the Religious Centre at Flinders at that time.

I'm glad I chose the latter, even though it led me to unknown and sometimes threatening places. But it has been one of the richest of journeys.

I don't know if you've ever gotten off the well-beaten tourist track overseas and been invited into the home of a complete stranger.

I have heard some describe how embarrassed they were to have abundant food lavished on them, when the host family appeared to have only the most meagre and basic resources.

Or of regretting that they had admired some object in their host's home, only to have it thrust upon them as a gift, despite every protest - and in the knowledge that it would mean 'excess baggage' at the airport, or it would never get past Customs!

I recall overhearing a student talking with friends about his summer holidays in Saudi Arabia. He had got on a bus and went to pay his fare, only to be told that someone had already paid it for him! He was the stranger and was therefore their guest. He was gobsmacked!

Anyone who has experienced this kind of generosity when they were the stranger takes with them an indelible memory that binds them to their host forever. They are forever friends. That is the spiritual dynamic of hospitality. Strangers who through separation might see each other as enemies, become bonded as friends. The memory of it stays with us - forever!

In Australia it often seems to take fire or flood to bring out this generosity and this seeming spontaneous over-riding of difference. In the face of devastating tragedy, how magnificent these recent stories of courage and compassion, of self-sacrifice and service! We look on, our hearts broken with grief, but then our spirits are lifted by these actions! We face our day with gratitude to live in such a land, where neighbour pitches in in the moment of need.

The question I leave with us is this:

Could such a culture of generosity to the other who is different from ourselves, a culture of hospitality, already deeply embedded in the traditions of all of the ancient religions, be the central ingredient we need in response to the question of how we might live peaceably today?

Could it be that simple *recognition*, even *respect*, is **not enough**? - that without the *act* of hospitality, without the unconditional embrace of the other, separation and silent passivity, and its inevitable co-partner suspicion, will fester, to eventually come out with spite or anger some future day.

I conclude with some thoughts from the writings of the Catholic pastor and priest, Henri Nouwen.

Nouwen introduces us to the idea of hospitality as "making space".

According to Nouwen:

- When we offer an invitation to someone to come to our home for dinner, or an invitation to gather together, as Brougham Place Uniting Church has done today - hospitality creates **physical space** for the other.
- When we open the front door, invite our guests inside and offer refreshments, we create **social and emotional space** for the other. Hospitality wants our guests to feel as much at home as possible.
- Hospitality creates **intellectual space** when ideas are encouraged, even tender or provisional thoughts may find a safe home; we don't crush them or rush conversation to some well-worn conclusion.
- When we greet someone of another faith without prejudice, putting aside any pre-judgement, we create **spiritual or religious space**.

Hospitality, (Nouwen says) ... means primarily the creation of a 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. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It

is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt a life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find their own.

At Flinders, hospitality became the enabling dynamic of our chaplaincy, binding us together as a community of colleagues of many faiths. It is therefore no surprise that the title of my book "An Improbable Feast" is subtitled - "the surprising dynamic of hospitality at the heart of multifaith chaplaincy."

May the dynamic of hospitality surprise us all as we are hospitable to each other. May what now seem improbable - the healing of broken or suspicious relationships - through the act of hospitality, bond us together as friends forever and lead us to an *Inevitable* Feast... together!