

Every guest is a missing part of ourselves – to develop the idea a psychoanalyst friend recently provided, that every missing child in a recent dream was a missing part of myself. This friend, of course, was a missing part of myself too, and in giving her hospitality I was discovering parts of myself which would otherwise have remained unknown. This, in turn, will be true for her also. In entertaining guests we discover the depths of our own inter-relatedness, and this applies, not only to the ‘good’ bits but to the ‘bad’ bits as well; to those bits we fear as well as to those we like. For this to happen, as wide a range of guests as possible is to be preferred:

All visitors who call are to be welcomed as if they were Christ, for he will one day say: ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’ (Matt:25)

But then the Rule of St. Benedict qualifies this with:

..especially to those of the household of the faith and to those from foreign parts. (RB 53)

One has to start somewhere: we first learn the skill of hospitality with our immediate friends and family – the bits of ourselves we like; but we have to go on and develop this skill with others of, one might say, increasing strangeness to discover those bits of ourselves we fear the most; those bits from which we are most estranged. Christ was no stranger to this process. One thinks of his initial reaction to the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30) and how he had to learn to pass from hostility to host. She was teaching him something about himself he did not know. The present Covid 19 situation challenges and yet, also, highlights this fundamental need we have for one another – our ‘hyper’ sociality as the scientist Celia Deane-Drummond puts it, and goes on to say

...there is nothing explicitly evil about Covid-19. It is doing what it is made to do; multiply in its hosts, keeping many alive to pass it on to new hosts. It does not ‘intend’ to kill. It’s impact is a consequence of our daily decisions and relationships, many of which, like our daily actions which contribute to climate change, may seem to us innocuous but have devastating consequences for other innocent parties. We are now learning the depth and delicate balance of these relationships, of which indigenous communities living within fragile ecologies have long been aware. (Jesuits & friends summer 2020)

Playing host, then, can be a risky business but not playing host is riskier still, for entertaining others, strangers as well as friends, is a defining characteristic of being human. It makes us who we are. It’s lack is now teaching us of its need and we have to find ways of emerging from our ‘aloneness’ – which for many has been an experience of loneliness, too – in order to once again find our security in others; or, as Barbara Taylor puts it, building on the work of the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott,

Liveable solitude is underpinned by care...As a small child matures, this caring figure is internalised to serve as an inner presence, a self-companion, when the child is alone... “the state of being alone paradoxically always implies that someone else is there.”

(The Politics of Loneliness Guardian Review 27 June 2020)

To put this simply: we need to be loved in order to love. ‘Aloneness’, that is: the ability to be alone, is a gift of inter-relatedness and given to be shared.

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