

"To Welcome the Stranger"
A sermon by C.B. Ortman
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The Unitarian Church of Barnstable, MA

READINGS: ANCIENT & MODERN

Our first, and *somewhat more* modern reading for this morning, "The Guest House," was written by the 13th Century Persian, mystic Sufi poet, Rumi:

This being human is [about being] a guesthouse.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide [perhaps] from beyond.

SERMON: "To Welcome the Stranger"

The ancient reading for today is from the Book of Micah, Ch 6: v 8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Scripture tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. "Who is your neighbor?" my sixth grade teacher Betty Nelson asked us. And she answered, "Your neighbor is every man woman and child." All of them, she made no distinctions. "Every man, woman and child." Funny how some things stick with us all of our lives...

I love stories – both hearing them and telling them. So I want to tell you some stories this morning. We'll begin with a story that's one of the short chapters from my book about a cross-country bike ride I took with a couple of friends, a few years. We rode for 47 days from Carlsbad, CA to Bowers Beach, DE.

We began our 16th day in Springer, New Mexico, setting out early because the weather was supposed to start out ugly and then get worse as the day wore on. We rode out along Maxwell Avenue, heading up toward the highway on the edge of town. Even at the beginning, we rode through a pea soup fog punctuated by driving rain. As we rode past the electronic marquee in front of the Farmer's and Cattleman's International Bank, it said that it was 42 degrees at 6:30 AM. "Oh, my God," I mumbled a quiet prayer to myself.

The weather forecast did not let us down. Things got...well, they did not get any better. The challenges were many. It was cold and rainy. I was soaked to the bone and freezing. My eyeglasses were dripping wet, inside and out, and all fogged up, so that I had to take them off, which is not a particularly excellent thing for me to do. And to top it off there was a strong headwind that put my progress into very slow motion. You might have had dreams like this; I have.

We three riders were all fairly miserable and so each of us kind of went at our own fastest pace, trying to get somewhere, anywhere, so we could get out of the weather. Towns are infrequent in northern New Mexico. Thirty-five miles up the road, what seemed to take an eternity, we arrived, one by one, at the almost *nonexistent* town of Gladstone. I got there about an hour and a half after Bill and about a half hour after Kriss (Wells). I really can't exaggerate about how much slower I am in comparison to them. A lot! They were already well on their way to being warm and dry when I walked in to the Gladstone Mercantile Exchange, which was run by a kindly woman named Thelma.

When Bob Dylan wrote the line, "'Come in' she said, 'and I'll give you shelter from the storm,'" I think he must have had Thelma at the Gladstone Mercantile in mind. She had plenty of hot coffee in a pot on the woodstove and we were welcome to it. She did not mind that we were walking around in our soggy, stocking feet, leaving wet footprints everywhere. She didn't even mind that we had strewn our wet clothes all over her store, so they might dry. She exuded a, "do what you need to do and don't worry about it," attitude. So we did.

I was sore, and wet, and cold, and grouchy and hungry. After a few minutes, I walked over to where Thelma was hanging out and asked if I could get a couple of eggs over easy with some whole wheat toast.

"Sure," she said. "But you should know that, even though we call it *whole wheat*, it really isn't. Is that okay?"

I nodded.

"You want some jelly with that?"

"Do you have strawberry?"

“No,” she said. “But I do have some really good, homemade chokecherry jelly that I think you might like.”

“Yep,” I said, “sounds great.” My meal was perfectly fine and certainly hit the spot. A little later, when we’d finally thawed out and dried up as much as we were going to, and it was time to start riding again, I asked Thelma what I owed her for my meal.

“Well,” she said, “we don’t really serve breakfast here. But I could see that you needed it. Do you think \$2.50 would be okay?”

We were warmed not only by the woodstove at Thelma’s Gladstone Mercantile Exchange, but also by the warmth of her gracious hospitality and generous care. I don’t know how many times we said, “Thank you.” It was quite a few.

When we got back outside, we looked up to the sky to see if there was any clearing in the weather. It looked just exactly as it had when we’d first stopped at Thelma’s – foggy, drizzling, windy and cold. The sky and the horizon were indistinguishable through the rain, and it was still so foggy you couldn’t see the fence posts along the side of the road. You could hear birds singing while roosting on the fence just a few feet away, but you couldn’t see them. It may not have been any colder, but it wasn’t any warmer either. Oh, well...

The thing was though, that now I was warm. I didn’t feel cold again that whole day. Talk about a breakfast that sticks to your ribs!

“I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers,” said Blanche DuBois in “A Streetcar Named Desire.” She’s not alone in that regard. But I suppose that was Tennessee Williams’ point. She wasn’t alone. She depended on others. None of us are in this alone. We all depend on the kindness of strangers.

And in turn we have our moment in time of being the stranger, or when it’s time for us to be doing the giving. “All my life’s a circle,” Harry Chapin used to sing. I imagine that means we should take every opportunity, as Thelma did, to care for strangers ourselves. It’s all goin’ around and comin’ around. Today you’re at home and tomorrow... tomorrow you’re the one that’s on the road.

The thing is... there I was a stranger. And there Thelma was, a minister... She was ministering to a bunch of soggy, somewhat beyond middle-aged, vagabond travelers who were passing through... She welcomed us and served us... That was her ministry.

Story number two –

A Guatemalan woman named Rosanna, along with her infant son, Miguelⁱ, began working her way north, through Central America, sometime early this past spring. Rosanna is a survivor of both domestic and gang violence (yes, of the worst sort). She had received threats of further violence and even death, on hers and her baby's lives. With no protection from local authorities, Guatemala was no longer a place compatible with survival.

Imagine that for just a moment. What might you do? What might anyone do? Perhaps America would be a place where they could find safety and asylum, a place where they might start a new life. It was at least a hope where there was precious little room for hope.

Carrying her son in a baby sling, Rosanna set out on her own. She was going to work her way north, stopping in towns in order to work a day or a few days, here and there, and then continue the trek. But then somewhere in southern Mexico, she just by chance happened to hear about a caravan of other asylum seekers. She decided to throw her lot in with theirs.

For several weeks they travelled, sometimes in vehicles, sometimes by foot, sleeping in makeshift camps, in public parks or on roadsides. Donations had been made to sustain the *compas* (the friends) on the caravan. There was enough food for everyone; even formula for Rosanna's and the other babies. It was not easy travel, not by any stretch of imagination.

Eventually they arrived in Tijuana. Then on April 24th they began to surrender themselves to the US ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents at the border in San Diego. Rosanna and Miguel were on the very first busload to go through the checkpoint and they were taken into custody together. The Administration's policy of separating parents from children didn't begin until the following day. Perhaps their fortunes had already begun to change. Perhaps it was a miracle. They were held in detention for a few days in San Diego then flown to a more family oriented facility in Dilly, TX. There they remained for the next month.

Earlier in April my wife Judy and I received an email. The UUSC was working with SURJ (Standing up for Racial Justice). They were looking for potential sponsors for the *compas* who had travelled in the caravan. The email asked if we might be willing. We talked about it for only a couple of minutes, but really, we didn't even need that much time. Yes, we would, we said. But still, neither of us truly thought that it would come to fruition.

A couple of weeks later we received a phone call from a SURJ volunteer. "Would you still be willing," they asked.

"Yes, we would."

"For a family? An individual? A mother and Child?"

"For an individual, or a mother and child," we thought.

"And for how long do you think you might be able to host them?"

Naively we answered, "For a few weeks or even a couple of months, if necessary."

"Okay," the woman said. "We'll let you know if we're able to match you up."

We started to think that maybe this was a real possibility. But we still didn't fully expect that it was a *probability*. We wrote a letter to ICE applying for sponsorship status, and had a host of

other folks write letters of support. By now we were part of an email group with others who had volunteered. We learned through these chats that a couple of months would likely be only the beginning of a much longer stay by the refugees in their sponsors' homes. We watched as other potential sponsors were connected with their compas. So we asked the coordinator from SURJ if she thought we would also be matched. "Oh, you're already matched," she said. "I'm sorry I thought I'd told you. That still doesn't mean it will happen," she added. "That will depend on ICE."

We were given Rosanna and Miguel's names. People. Real people. Real refugees. Real neighbors in need of welcome and safety, healing and love.

The next major hurdle was that Rosanna would have to pass her Credible Fear Interview with Ice Agents. Can you imagine having been brutalized, threatened with your life, travelling 4,000 miles with a baby, and then being asked to prove that your fears have credibility? She was and she did.

Two or three weeks passed. We had two phone conversations with Rosanna. The first one, between Judy and Rosanna, was facilitated by a volunteer translator. I wasn't home, but Judy assured me upon my arrival that it had been a great conversation and that she had a very good feeling about Rosanna. The second call wasn't quite so well facilitated but we were all able to express our feelings of anticipation and hope... and just a bit of... apprehension.

Finally, one day when I was bicycle riding near Rehoboth, MA with a rabbi friend of mine, (funny how bicycles often turn up in my stories) my cell phone rang. I better take this I said. Sure enough, it was an ICE agent.

"Is this Charles Ortman?"

"It is."

"What is your wife's name?"

"It's Judy Ortman."

"And do you both live at... (and they listed our address)?"

"Yes, yes, we do?"

"And are you in fact willing to be the sponsors of these potential refugees, Rosanna and her son?"

"Yes, we are."

And that was pretty much the extent of the vetting, of Judy and me, that was pursued by our government officials. I was then told that I'd receive another call within two to three days

instructing me on how to secure airline tickets in order to fly Rosanna and Miguel to Rhode Island. We didn't actually get a phone call though.

Instead, a few days later, I received a text message written threateningly in Spanish. My Spanish was good enough to discern that our actions were critical to Rosanna's release, but not good enough to comprehend the exact steps that had to be taken in order for that to take place. Later that afternoon, we were able to connect with an English speaking ICE agent by phone and the process was made clear.

Rosanna and Miguel arrived at T.F. Green Airport a few days later, very, very late at night on Memorial Day. They have been with us since then and, unless the administration has its way prior to then, they will likely be with us for at least a year or two, before they are able to establish an independent life of their own. Oddly enough, our government assures their dependency by denying any sort of work permit that might allow for independence. The system is not structured to promote a successful outcome.

With a fourth-grade education, Rosanna is one of the smartest people I know. She is strong and resilient, tough as nails. She is gracious and generous, thoughtful and grateful. And she's really a good cook, which is a very nice plus! Miguel is about as pleasant a baby as I've ever known, and I've known lots of babies! Sure he fusses sometimes and, as he grows, he gets into more things than we are always keep up with. But he is a breath of fresh air and he brightens any room he enters. Our first encounter each morning is like the gift of a rainbow, even when it hasn't been raining.

On hearing our story, many people respond that they think Judy and I are doing something almost saintly by having invited Rosanna and Miguel into our home and our lives. My response is often that there was a need, that we were capable of responding to that need, and so... how could we *not* respond? It's not saintly to do what you're called to do. It's merely welcoming an opportunity, the possibility that might help you to grow your own soul. And that is what we're all here to do, right? To grow our souls.

I have to share a pet peeve of mine. I'm not sure where it began or even when, but there is a message that our culture has taken on as a mantra and which we impose upon our children. I think it's an enormous mistake. It is the message that our children should *never trust a stranger*. "Don't ever speak to a stranger," we tell them.

Besides teaching our children that they/we should always fear whom and what we don't know, this message defies the universal religious principle that we are constantly saved by strangers. I'm not saying that we or our children should ignorantly put ourselves in harm's way. I am suggesting that we all need to learn how to encounter the stranger with integrity, with good will and in good faith. Who is our neighbor? Every man, woman and child.

Here is what I would want you to know, Rosanna and Miguel have been an incredible blessing in our lives. In this current climate of celebrated Narcissism and bullying, of self-serving interests and fear mongering racism, Rosanna and Miguel offer Judy and me a way of resisting all of that

hate. In these troubled times, that's an incredible gift – to be able to do something positive in the face of so much evil.

I don't know how often I hear people say, "Gosh, I wish there were something I could do to counter all of the horrible things that are being done in this country and around the world -- *in our names!*"

I have to think that there is something for all of us to do, if we pay attention. And I have to think that, whatever it might be, it likely has something to do with loving our neighbors as ourselves; it has something to do with being a worthy guesthouse, welcoming our neighbors and every possibility that comes along, that might help us to grow our souls.

We take turns at being the minister and being ministered to. I don't know what I might have done for Thelma that morning back at the Mercantile Exchange in Gladstone, but I have to guess there was something in it that was good for her. And I can assure you that it was good for me. And it's as easy for me to see, at home now, what good we are doing for Miguel and Rosanna, as it is to see what good they are doing for us.

Both of these stories are loaded with implications of salvation. Saved from what? I don't think that's the question. I think the question is saved FOR what? And the answer to that question is... well, I think that's your story to tell. And I wouldn't want to spoil it for you. But I would surely welcome and encourage your consideration of it.

A rabbi once asked his student how he would know that the light of dawn had come. The student answered, "When you can tell the difference between an olive tree and a walnut tree?" Good answer, but no. "When you can tell the difference between a dog and a goat?" No. Then the rabbi explained, "It is when you can look on the face of a stranger and see the face of your brother or sister. [See the face of your child or grandchild. See your own face.] *That* is when you will know daylight has finally come." (Dan Yashinsky)ⁱⁱ

Once again... "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," said Blanche DuBois. She is not alone in that regard. And that was Tennessee Williams' point. She wasn't alone. She depended on others. None of us are in this alone. We all depend on the kindness of strangers.

This being human is a guest house... You want to know how you might respond to the madness that surrounds us in this country and in the world... Pay attention. Your invitation is in hand. And it is up to you, whether to welcome it or not.

ⁱ The names Rosanna and Miguel are pseudonyms, used in an effort to maintain some semblance of anonymity.

ⁱⁱ Dan Yashinsky is a storyteller and the author of *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps – Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century*, and the recently-published *Swimming with Chaucer – A Storyteller's Logbook*. He founded the Toronto Storytelling Festival in 1979, and 1001 Friday Nights of Storytelling in 1978. He currently works as the storyteller-in-residence at Toronto's Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. www.tellery.com E-mail: dan_yashinsky@hotmail.com