

Hospitality – Creating Space for the Stranger

Estrangement, a feeling of not belonging, is one of the hallmark characteristics of the experience of homelessness. One becomes separated from usual activities, relationships, and sense of place and purpose in the world. Literally, one becomes a stranger. The longer homelessness persists, the more deeply ingrained this sense of alienation becomes.

“Offering the gift of hospitality” is a useful way for care provider’s to think about overcoming this estrangement. In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen defines hospitality as “*creating free and friendly space for the stranger.*” This definition takes us well beyond images of tea and sandwiches being shared in a pristine setting. Instead it points us towards new and deeper relationships in our lives.

Hospitality offered to the stranger is an invitation to a relationship – a relationship that provides a welcoming face and presence – that creates a sense of refuge from an often impersonal, hostile world. Hence, the person experiencing homelessness can have a taste of being “at home” in the context of a safe, friendly relationship.

A hospitable relationship comes with no strings attached. It does not pass judgment and does not make demands. Instead, it provides a space in which the other can freely explore one’s own needs, abilities and hopes. Such a relationship becomes both a “resting place” and a “guiding light.” It provides a place of self-reflection and restoration. It instills and renews hope.

The power of hospitality lies not in coercion but in careful listening, reflection, information and kindly persuasion. It encourages, but does not force. It is built upon the trustworthiness, competency and integrity of the provider.

When we think of our own experiences of being graced with the hospitable presence of another, we remember it as calming, orienting and renewing. It is like remembering who we are – returning to our

true home – so that we can once again move ahead more confidently in our lives. The absence of such a presence often leads to isolation, dis-orientation, confusion and despair. Like all of us, people experiencing homelessness need hospitable relationships in their lives.

Hospitality is offered in many ways – sometimes by a simple gesture of acknowledgement, a warm smile, a cup of coffee, listening patiently without interrupting, offering information, a word of encouragement, or simply by being present with the other person in silence. Hospitality requires time, patience and kindly persistence. It cannot be rushed. It sees the “bigger picture” rather than seeking the “quick fix.”

As trust within the relationship builds, a sense of companionship develops (see Rennebohm’s Relational Outreach and Engagement Model). Time is spent together on a more predictable basis. The homeless individual shares more and more of his or her story. Small tasks are shared. Inquiries are made about other resources. In time, hospitality leads to increasing the “circle of care” to help the individual access needed resources and services. In this manner, medical, housing, financial, counseling and other treatment and social service needs are met.

Over time, as the individual progresses toward greater stability, the relationship moves into a phase of increasing mutuality. It is not just one-sided. Once a stranger, the individual has now become a neighbor and friend. We discover that our stories are interwoven and that we are bonded by our common humanity. In this mutuality, each person is recognized for the strengths and gifts that they bring to the relationship as well as to the larger community.

In the end, hospitality that is given becomes hospitality received.

- Ken Kraybill