

## Caring for the Ties of Humanity

By Kathryn Fearnside

My favorite definition of hospitality comes from Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, author of an 18<sup>th</sup> century French encyclopedia. "Hospitality," he writes, "is the virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity."

What a delicious definition. "The virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity."

The root of hospitality is the latin word *hospes* which can refer to "a host" or "a guest" or "a stranger". This same root also gives us our word hospital, ...which I find interesting because I am a nurse, and I know hospitals.

Hospitals used to be understood as "chambers of guests", like inns. Hospitals these days are not like any inn I have ever stayed in. But think about it. What is a guest if not a person who is entering the unknown in one way or another, and isn't a defining quality of all guests vulnerability?

The guests in a hospital are called patients. They are people who have been washed ashore in a seemingly foreign land, where the customs can be mysterious and the language often indecipherable and confusing.

The vulnerability of guests and patients makes them both reliant on the kindness, caring, and help of the locals. In the "foreign land" of the hospital, the locals would be the nurses and doctors and other personnel they encounter.

So, if we see hospitals as chambers of guests, in which the staff are hosts and the patients are guests, then we can understand hospitality as the caring relationships between strangers.

In these chambers where strangers meet in moments of need, the ties of humanity are forged and leveraged all the time. In hospitals, it is often me and my fellow nurses who forge, protect, and nurture these ties.

There is an incredible intimacy in the nurse-patient relationship. It is not built on the length of the relationship, but rather on the intensity and immediacy of need. This is one way to understand the bond between strangers in the guest/host relationship, ...a brief and intense intimacy. And these bonds are the ties of humanity. The strands that make up the web of life.

I have a vivid memory of a day from my work on the the high risk obstetrics unit at UNM Hospital. I was assigned a patient, I will call her Luz. Luz's son had died a few hours after being born due to physical problems that made it so he could not survive outside the womb.

For me as a nurse, every encounter with a new patient is an encounter with a stranger. Each of these encounters carries me into the unknown. With Luz, I was not only entering the room of a stranger, but I was entering the room of a woman from another country, who spoke only spanish, and who was grieving the loss of a child.

Grief is its own strange land, where perhaps we are all strangers. So I had a little bit of extra trepidation on this occasion, but I also carried with me curiosity, openness, a willingness to see what is, and a desire to connect.

As I entered, I spoke my greeting. “Buenos días, señora. Soy Katí. Soy su enfermera para hoy” “Good morning, ma’am, I am kathryn. I will be your nurse for today.”

“Hablas español?” she asked, with some disbelief in her voice.

“Sí, señora, hablo español” I responded.

And then, with a slight smile, she said to me, “Que lindo tu acento”, “how lovely your accent”. This made me smile, and so we found a warm tie, a smile in this space of grief, a bond between strangers.

We carried on a conversation, and Luz cried freely as we talked about the death of her child. I did my nursing tasks, and as I was finishing up, Luz asked, “cuando me lo vas a traer mi bebe?” “When are you going to bring me my baby?”

One small gesture of hospitality this hospital offered was to give mothers and families the opportunity to hold their beloved children for a while before the funeral home would come for them.

In that moment, in Luz’s eyes, and in the yearning that forged the bond between us, I remember seeing and feeling the depth of love that grief makes known. I was invited in with this grieving mother, a mother who, honestly, is unusual in our world, who did not shy away from her sadness, and who trusted me with this grief and this love, and who knew that she needed my help to grieve.

This was a brief and intense intimacy. This was the hospitality of the hospital.

In thinking of that moment I am reminded of the words of Dr. Dean Ornish when he said “During the times that we feel most vulnerable, that which is invulnerable within us becomes uncovered, becomes more apparent.” This invulnerable thing ties us together.

I will never forget Luz, I am shaped by my memory of her. This intense experience was an invitation to share life, to be with each other, to affect one another, to experience the invulnerable together. This is what the strands in the web of life look and feel like. This is how we care for each strand, and as we care for each strand, each bond, each tie, we care for the whole universe.