

## “Good Guesting”

a sermon delivered by Emma Elliot  
at First Unitarian Church on April 15, 2018

I just returned from spending a month in Europe. It was my first time traveling abroad all alone. Being on my own, meant that I received quite an abundance of hospitality. I have lots of experience being hospitable, but this trip had me on the receiving end of hospitality and I learned a lot about authenticity, vulnerability, and human connection.

My first experience of hospitality on this trip did not go terribly well.

So there I was, in Denmark, jet lagged and feeling vulnerable. I had arrangements for my friend’s family to pick me up at the airport and allow me to stay overnight.

They cooked an amazing traditional Danish meal and we all sat down to dinner. Only my friend and his mother spoke any English, the remaining 6 family members spoke none.

However, no one translated for me. The conversation and laughter flowed, but I felt pretty lost. Feeling unsure, I sat there with no idea what to do. So, I just smiled and nodded.

I found myself being inauthentic. I wished I could get translations or just curl up in bed, but I continued to try to be my idea of a “good guest.”

The first night affected the rest of my visit with them, and I found myself continuing to alter myself to please them, rather than allowing my sincere thoughts and feelings to come through. It was uncomfortable for me and most likely for them, too.

It’s challenging when you feel like you owe someone for being hospitable. But trying to alter myself for other people did not feel right. They were trying their best to be great hosts and I was doing my best to be a great guest. I began to realize that the host’s and guest’s intentions are not that different. They both want to be generous. We both want everyone to be at ease.

Looking back, I believe I should not have been scared to be my true and authentic self. Fear disrupts trust. I discovered that trust is crucial in situations like this.

As soon as I left for Paris, I knew I had to make a big change. I determined that I was going to be authentic with myself and with others. I would be genuine despite my vulnerability. This decision allowed me to change my mindset and I began to open to the possibilities ahead.

Flying into Paris, I looked out the airplane window and through the dark sky, I saw the sparkling lights on the Eiffel Tower. I began to tear up as I realized that Paris was already making me feel welcome.

Fast forward a bit. I've explored and found myself absorbed in my favorite parts of Paris, but there were few days when I found that I had not really talked with anyone.

That's when I encountered an older gentleman who struck up a conversation. I was hesitant at first but I chose not to be scared. I continued our conversation and I am so glad I did. He told me all about where he used to live and all the places in Paris where he thought I should visit. I was genuine despite my hesitation and vulnerability. That allowed this kind gentleman a chance to be hospitable towards me.

It was such a shock to realize how much I had been craving connection. To have someone see me and speak to me filled with me with joyous feeling.

Humans need to feel recognized. I had felt invisible without even realizing it. This gentleman's act of hospitality meant so much. It is very easy to get swallowed by the bustle of a big city like Paris where there are millions of people, but you can still feel alone. This gentleman took the time to recognize me and share his history, his suggestions, and his hope for me to have a positive experience in his city.

No discussion of hospitality on this trip would be complete without including Anne Frank. She is one of my heroes and visiting her house was one of the top things I wanted to do while in Europe.

Anne Frank was a young Jewish girl who went into hiding with her family during World War II. She lived in a hidden annex with only 4 rooms and 6 other people. For the 2 years they were in hiding from the Nazis, Anne was thrust into a situation where her life depended on the hospitality of others.

For example, Miep Gies, one of the workers at Otto Frank's shop spent 2 years sneaking food and supplies to the people hiding in the Annex. She risked her life everyday to bring them the basics and even a few comforts under the most horrible circumstances.

Accepting hospitality requires vulnerability, but Anne and her fellow hiders' lives absolutely depended upon the courage and generosity of people like Miep. I often wonder at her ability to put the comfort and safety of others ahead of her own. It is the ultimate act of hospitality.

It was not my first visit to Anne Frank's Haus, but this trip was so impactful because of my own experiences with hospitality.

Revisiting the extreme circumstances of Anne's life, I felt the importance of hospitality in all of our lives. Anne's story is the ultimate example of being authentic in vulnerable situations and the crucial need to be simply recognized by other human beings. As I was in the Anne Frank House Museum it occurred to me that the museum and her diary are an act of hospitality to the world.

So whether it is saving people from scary situations, or striking up a simple conversation with a stranger who is far from home, hospitality can change the world for the better.

This past month I have learned many new things. About the world, about others, and especially about myself. Authenticity, human connection, and recognition should always be things that we practice.

I have recognized the interconnected web of life in the most beautiful ways because of hospitality. Learning to be a good guest helped me reflect upon the larger impact of being hospitable. Whether the gesture is big or small, whether you are receiving or giving, hospitality ties us all together.