Hospitality in the Context of Academic Life

Peter R. Gathje

Writing about hospitality in the context of academic life runs the risk of seeming trivial by comparison to the practice of hospitality in many other settings. A university it is not a home or a church, it is not a soup kitchen, a prison, or a Catholic Worker house, nor is it a place where we welcome people greatly different from ourselves.

So, these reflections are offered with the awareness, first of all, that academe does not provide the most profound context for the practice of hospitality. Second, the focus here is primarily upon how faculty might practice hospitality in this setting. This is not to suggest that hospitality in academe should be limited to faculty. Rather, brevity compels this focus, along with my own experience. Despite these caveats, I hope my reflections will support two modest but still important claims. First, faculty practice of hospitality could help to transform academic life so that it will be marked by at least by civility if not by respect for human dignity as grounded in our creation and redemption as God's children. Second, if we as faculty practice hospitality in our academic lives we might in turn become better at hospitality in other settings in our lives.

Christine Pohl in her book, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition,* notes that hospitality as a Christian practice has meant welcoming strangers and responding to their needs. «Hospitality,» she writes, «was understood to encompass physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence and relationships. It meant response to the physical needs of strangers for food, shelter, and protection, but also recognition of their worth and common humanity»(p.6)

The first task of hospitality, given this understanding, is to identify strangers in need. I want to suggest that the practice of hospitality for faculty members in an academic setting primarily involves responding to the needs of three types of strangers: students, staffoespecially maintenance and janitorial staff, and new colleagues. I will draw from Christine Pohl to help us think about four key issues in the practice of hospitality in relation to these strangers: recognition of dignity; the tension between

transcending social differences and yet maintaining boundaries; distributing limited resources; and building community.

RECOGNITION AND DIGNITY

Christine Pohl identifies recognition or respect for «the dignity and equal worth of every person and valuing their contributions, or at least their potential contributions, to the larger community» as crucial in the practice of hospitality (p.61). She urges us to be aware of «the power of recognition» in which «a person who is not valued by society is received by a socially respected person or group as a human being with dignity and worth» (p.62). In academe we need first to see that this is not the same as academic recognition that is tied into evaluation of intellectual achievement. Second, as faculty it is our privileges and social standing that put us in a position of being able to offer recognition to the strangers on campus.

If we are to practice hospitality with our students we may first consider how we speak about and to our students. As Pohl writes, «Hospitality requires polite and respectful address» (p.181). Secondly, hospitality could inform our response to individual student problems. Do we cynically dismiss such problems as «excuses» or attempts to take advantage of us, or do we continue to treat students as individuals in need? Do we harden our hearts and become unwilling to hear and help them as individual persons?

Third, we would need to be sensitive to the vulnerability of our students in our classrooms. One teacher I knew took a class in an area outside of her field each year so that she would remember what it feels like to be a student. She was practicing what Pohl indicates is an important basis for our sensitivity to those in need, namely «our ability to put ourselves in their position» and remember «our own experiences of vulnerability and dependence» (p.65). To practice recognition in our classrooms we need to be aware of the power dynamics in a classroom, how our voice is privileged and how we privilege the voices of some but not others. We need to learn how to invite students to participate in ways that respect their dignity as human beings. We need to remember that we are teaching students first and a subject secondly.

We may also consider the important practice of hospitality that involves sharing a meal. Pohl often points out how central shared meals are to hospitality. This is true for our hospitality for students and others in the academic community. Where do we eat and with whom do we eat? In answering those questions we are answering what kind of community we have and how we practice hospitality. What kind of message is sent if there is a separate faculty dining room to which students and staff are never welcomed? If we never eat together as a college community, do we even have community?

For Christians, the traditional theological grounding for this kind of recognition of dignity and worth has been the recognition in faith that each person is made in the image of God, and that also as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 25, «Christ comes in the stranger's guise.» Perhaps as we age and grow further and further from our time in college, students indeed become stranger and stranger. All the more then are we to struggle to see Christ in them.

John Baptist de Lasalle, the founder the Christian Brothers, emphasized that teachers are to be like Christ for the students.[1] But importantly, he also said that teachers should recognize the students as living sacraments. He was getting at something important in the practice of hospitality within teaching. As Pohl observes, «the gifts of hospitality do not flow in one direction only; hospitality is a «two-way street» (p.72). In our practice of hospitality as teachers we are to recognize and acknowledge how our students minister to us as Christ. They do this as they challenge us to think and speak more clearly, to help them to learn more effectively, and to bring our own lives into line with what we teach. In practicing this kind of respect for our students we do not simply see them as being in need, but also see that they bring gifts into our lives. De Lasalle goes so far as to say that as we teach we are to remember that our salvation is tied into how we treat our students. He writes that on judgment day, «All of them will join in asking Jesus Christ to grant you a favorable judgment, praying him not to delay putting you in possession of the happiness you procured for them by your work and concern» (p.104). Talk about the importance of student evaluations!

This recognition of dignity is perhaps easiest to extend to our new colleagues, and even with students (or at least some students) it is perhaps not that difficult. But do we extend such recognition to staff - especially maintenance and janitorial staff? Do we know their names? Do we take the time to stop and talk with them? Do we speak with them in ways that indicate our respect for them as persons and not just as workers? Do we ever eat with them? Do we ever interact with them in social functions on campus? Are they included in any way in the governance of the institution? When persons are honored at the end of the year for their service to the university, or other awards, are there separate events for faculty and staff, or are these recognized together? Are we concerned that their wages and benefits are just?

THE TENSION BETWEEN TRANSCENDING SOCIAL DIFFERENCES AND YET MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES

We are already seeing that practicing respect through the power of recognition moves us beyond social differences and toward expressions of a common humanity. Given that such differences are often established and maintained through boundaries that mark group and individual identities, a major practice within hospitality involves extending invitations to cross borders. Likewise a major tension within hospitality is between keeping those boundaries and recognizing common humanity. Christine Pohl notes that «Boundaries can be literal doors and walls, but they can also be rules, policies, or mission statements. They are shaped in relation to space, resources, relationships, roles, commitments, and identity» (p.129). In extending a welcome across social differences, boundaries are not necessarily simply set aside or lost, but instead of being barriers they serve as thresholds for welcome. A door can be shut to keep others out, or a door can be opened to invite others in. Hospitality invites others in, even as it likely preserves an «in» into which others are invited. A university, like any community, cannot exist without boundaries. Likewise, the boundaries inherent to being faculty members are important if we are to be able to be effective teachers and scholars. Yet, how do we invite others across these boundaries in ways that respect the boundary and those we are inviting across?

In terms of the physical grounds, for example, we could consider how often and in what ways is our campus open to the public. For example, what are legitimate security concerns, and what are racist and classist ways in which we keep certain types of people off our campuses?

For faculty, our office space is an especially important place that marks our identity and power, our social difference. How do we make our office space a place of hospitality, so that the student who feels he or she is a stranger will find welcome? An open door is a sign of welcome, but so are simple tasks, such greeting students by name, constantly encouraging student visits, and keeping one's office hours. But think too of something as simple as standing up when a student enters our office as a way to show respect and to be inviting.

Transcending social differences in our practice of hospitality also includes staff and colleagues, especially new ones. Some of the practices I suggested certainly apply to those persons as well. Further, with new colleagues we might want to consider the very allocation of office space. How often is a new faculty member welcomed to the university with the worst office available? There is a social pecking order, and the person lowest in the order gets the worst. So whether it is with students, our own colleagues or others on campus, the basic issue is the same. Do we welcome others so that we do not use our differences as the basis for domination, and instead invite them across those differences to join us in respectful relationship?

That this is to be a respectful relationship reminds us that the boundaries serve an important purpose not just in terms of identity but, as Pohl points out, «Boundaries are an important part of making a place physically and psychologically safe» (p.140). This can be important to remember in terms of setting limits. We cannot respond to every student need, or to every request made of us. Christine Pohl helpfully reminds us that «ignoring limits can be a form of arrogance, a refusal to recognize finiteness» (p.134). Sometimes we must close our office doors. Pohl quotes Edith Schaeffer of L'Abri Fellowship who writes, «because there are more people than we have time or strength to see personally and care for, it is imperative to remember that it is not sinful to be finite and limited» (p.132). Here the issue of boundaries runs together with the issue of distribution of resources.

DISTRIBUTING LIMITED RESOURCES

How is hospitality practiced in the distribution of a university's limited resources? Such distribution includes not only money in the form of such things as various budgets, salaries, benefits, and financial aid, but also among other things office and classroom space, parking spaces, dormitories, athletic facilities, and time. Christine Pohl writes that «In offering hospitality, practitioners live between the vision of God's Kingdom in which there is enough, even abundance, and the hard realities of human life in which doors are closed and locked, and some needy people are turned away or left outside» (p.131). In academe the hard realities are not a matter of life or death, but these softer realities can still create real conflicts that threaten community, and exclude some while including others.

Consider the following for discussion. Higher faculty salaries could lead to higher tuition, and thus the exclusion of lower income students. If faculty press for higher salaries, not on the basis of real need but simply on the basis of comparison with «peer institutions» and this leads to higher tuition, then

hospitality for these low-income students is threatened. Or, how much community can there be if faculty salaries across disciplines are significantly different? Or, too, how welcoming is a place in which maintenance and janitorial staff are insufficiently paid and have minimal or no benefits? A commitment to hospitality should bring us face to face with these kinds of issues.

Let me turn from this very difficult institutional example of distribution of resources, to an example that is more at the level of personal relations, namely, the distribution of time. Christine Pohl writes, «Hospitality requires making time in our lives for others, yet many of us feel that time is our scarcest resource» (178). How does our use of time indicate our priorities as faculty?

Our use of time for class preparation, and then to teach with knowledge and passion indicates our level of respect for our students. So too does our commitment to being available to students outside of the classroom. Do we see students as an interruption or another problem or as persons? Do we also support our students in their other endeavors as related to the school, attending athletic events, theatre and music performances, etc.?

With our colleagues, do we offer ourselves as resource persons for new teachers? Do we offer to carry our fair burden in terms of committee work? Do we make ourselves present in faculty gatherings, faculty meetings, etc.? In answering these question in terms of hospitality we need to keep in mind what Pohl writes, «To give someone our full attention means that we view the person as a human being rather than as an embodied need or interruption» (p.178). In this type of recognition we are already beginning to be engaged in the building of community, but what else is required?

BUILDING COMMUNITY

How does our offering of hospitality help us to build community life together? Christine Pohl observes that «People know they are welcome when hosts share their lives and not just their skills or their space» (p.180). How might we share our lives as faculty members in ways that are respectful of our differences and the legitimate boundaries we have already discussed?

Sharing our lives entails our willingness to be with others in ways that reveal multiple dimensions of our humanity. This may mean, for example, being willing in certain contexts to share with colleagues and/or students some of our struggles, questions, and convictions beyond the merely intellectual. For instance, this past Lent several faculty members and students were invited to tell their faith stories as part of a Campus Ministry Lenten luncheon series. At another college where I used to teach, faculty, students, administrators and staff were invited to lead a weekly chapel service. Such events provide settings in which we are may relate to each other not simply as persons engaged in academic work, but as persons engaged in life beyond academics and in a spiritual journey. If we are to create community we must have such times and spaces in which the sharing of our lives beyond the intellectual is encouraged, supported, and protected.

This sharing of our lives is risky. It makes us vulnerable. It is also one of the most difficult and yet central tasks of hospitality. If we do not share our lives, then we are not fully encountering others as

persons. One of the challenges in academic life in terms of creating community is that many of our relationships and friendships in academia are transitory and thus we avoid the sharing of our lives. Our own schooling and work lives involves us in many moves, and our students too come and go, in our classes, and via graduation, or sometimes less publicly acclaimed exits. There are so many separations and then the effort yet again to welcome other persons into our lives.

As we go through life, the end of relationships is perhaps a kind of death. We experience a loss or at least a distancing of a person's presence in our lives and this creates an absence in our lives. These little deaths are a foretaste of actual death and they challenge our willingness to be open to others entering our lives, much less to befriend others. How are we empowered to continue the practices of offering hospitality, but in particular this effort to create community?

It is here that the faith basis for hospitality is so crucial. Hospitality is a practice of hope in the face of death; it is a practice of resurrection. It is a recurrent theme in the Bible that the basis for our sharing of resources, including the sharing of our very lives, is grounded in God's loving generosity. We see this in the Old Testament as the Israelites are called to practice justice as God has been just with them. In the New Testament, Jesus states, «Love one another as I have loved you» (John 15:12). St. Paul continually urges us to welcome others as God has welcomed us, to be generous as God has been generous with us, to forgive as God has forgiven us (Romans 15:7, 2 Corinthians 8:12-15, 9:7-8; Colossians 3:12-17). These practices express our faith in a God who is loving, just, and redemptive. We are empowered to share our lives, because God shares God's life with us. Common worship is thus perhaps the most important starting point for the creation and sustaining of community on campus. If we are to share ourselves beyond the intellectual, to share ourselves in ways that make us vulnerable, we need to be grounded in a faith that empowers and supports such risk-taking.

CONCLUSION

It is my hope that this brief reflection will begin a discussion on how hospitality might be practiced in an academic setting. I have tried to identify, with the help of Christine Pohl's categories, some of the many opportunities for hospitality in our academic lives. I hope that I have least raised an awareness that much of what we do brings us into the practice of hospitality, despite important differences with traditional settings for hospitality. We are still trying to respond to basic needs of other human beings in ways that respect their dignity as human beings. If we will fail to engage in this practice, then our lives together will be significantly diminished. But if we do practice hospitality in our academic lives we will find ourselves transformed by the gracious presence of the God revealed in Jesus Christ who invited us to open our lives to the «least of these.»

NOTE

1. De Lasalle writes in his *Meditations for the Time of Retreat,* «Since *you* are ambassadors and ministers *of* Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples [students] to see him in you and receive your teaching as *if* he were teaching them» (p.54).

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Address correspondence to:
Peter R. Gathje
Dept. of Religion and Philosophy
Christian Brothers University
650 East Parkway South Memphis, TN 38104
e-mail: pgathje@cbu.edu

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