

Creating Welcoming Space by Sister Marilyn Lacey

One way of measuring whether our love is genuine, however, is to examine how far we've extended the boundaries that determine whom we are willing to be in relationship with. When these borders reach out as far as they can go, there will be no one left outside, there will be no one cursed. There will be no more strangers. Everyone will be welcome.

Reflect for a minute on what it feels like to be welcomed. The word means, simply, 'come and be well' in my presence. It's a fundamental human experience, and a very crucial one. When I am welcomed, I feel good. I can be myself. I relax and feel unself-conscious, energized, happy. On the other hand, when I am not welcomed, I doubt myself, turn inward, shrivel up. I feel excluded, not accepted, and not acceptable. This is painful. If it happens often enough, I will question my own self-worth.

Hospitality means creating welcoming space for the other. Henri J. Nouwen notes that the Dutch word for hospitality, *gastvrijheid*, means 'the freedom of the guest.' It entails creating not just physical room but emotional spaciousness where the stranger can enter and be himself or herself, where the stranger can become ally instead of threat, friend instead of enemy.

[...] That precious experience — when contemplated, cherished, and celebrated — enables me in turn to welcome others: I begin to be less fearful of the other; I start to see the stranger as gift. I become willing to create space in myself to invite the other in, and I open myself to the possibility of being changed by the presence of the other.

I invite the reader to sit with any of the wonderful hospitality stories found in the traditions of all the great religions. Mull them over; ask God for insight into them. Then ask for courage to take small steps in expanding your own circle of hospitality. These might be as tentative as smiling at the stranger in line with you at the grocery store, as deliberate as hosting a get-together for all the strangers in your apartment building, or as dramatic as volunteering to foster an unaccompanied refugee child in your own home. It might not cost you much, or it might mean going out on a limb: Can you imagine yourself during Thanksgiving dinner speaking up to your brother-in-law in defense of the undocumented, pointing out that, really, everyone is kin to us, and everyone has a human

right to live where they can support their own family?