Redefining Hospitality in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic: Social Connecting and Solidarity

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“Hospitality is indeed in crisis, not simply because our contemporary world may not have enough it, but because it is in the process of being redefined.”

Introduction

The current pandemic and its resulting inevitable and irresistible changes raise questions about whether hospitality is still “a bridge which connects our theology with daily life and concerns.” Why is hospitality still relevant? In what ways is hospitality able to suggest a better way of living? What sort of hospitality should we seek in the context of a pandemic? Since Mireille Rosello asks us to make the effort to redefine hospitality, in this paper I will attempt to present hospitality as a life-giving practice that helps us not only make social connections with others, but also advocate for solidarity with those who are the most vulnerable.

Why Hospitality?
The Nature of Hospitality as Social Connecting

Nothing is more important than survival in the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the scientific data shows that anyone can be a contagious agent transmitting the virus to others, keeping a distance from others has become an imperative. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially recommends social distancing, which means creating “a physical space between one another.” Along with an official request for social distancing, more basic protective measures, such as wearing a face mask or careful and frequent hand washing have recommended, and administrative orders, such as the prohibition of unnecessary gatherings and the closure of non-essential businesses have followed. My concern is that social distancing and its related measures could degenerate into a kind of self-help system that reduces everyone to survivalists. Some examples, such as hoarding daily necessities or buying guns, demonstrate that attempts to protect oneself from the disease can become distorted into winning a survival game. We have become vigilant at all times, seeking to detect or discern if a contagious person is approaching. We are undeniably living in a world of fear.

The hospitality question is truly the question of the stranger and who the stranger really is. Through the study of hospitality, we come to realize that true hospitality is impossible, due to the unknowability of others. In fact, the unknowability of others prevents the exercise of hospitality in encounters with unidentifiable strangers, or at least reduces it to “an act of confirming the boundary” between us and the strangers. Jacques Derrida’s etymological analysis of hospitality is helpful for understanding that hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience. According to Derrida, the Latin word for guest, hosti-pet, is a compound of two words, hostis and hospes. The original notion of hostis denotes “equality by compensation” and “one who repays my gift by a counter-gift.” However, the hostis in Latin interestingly also means enemy, and thus hostis denotes a friend and an enemy at the same time. On the other hand, the literal meaning of hospes is a master, representing the husband in marriage or the chief of a tribe. Through his etymological analysis of the word guest, in which three different figures, i.e., friend, enemy, and master are included, Derrida argues for the entanglement of hospitality with hostility. “Hostipitality,” the term that Derrida coins, reflects the ironic meaning of hospitality; in this sense, he argues that hospitality itself is ethical. Significantly, for Derrida, hostility does not debilitate hospitality; rather, it necessitates hospitality.

Historically, the practice of hospitality has contributed to the creation of secure places where the basic needs of strangers are met. A house, a church, or an institution with fixed boundaries became examples of what hospitality creates for and offers to strangers. Given such secure places, hospitality practitioners work to respond to the needs of strangers. For instance, the one who is in hunger is provided with food, or a refuge is offered to another who is exiled from his/her original country or community. As one of the Biblical models of hospitality, the Great Banquet, exhorts us to welcome those who are more dependent and lived on the margins of society, for the practitioners, the secure places are where God’s Kingdom is actualized: “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

The meaning of a secure place has been greatly broadened to include basic relationships in the contemporary context. In other words, hospitality becomes a way of making connections between a host and a guest. In the broader understanding of hospitality, strangers are provided not only with something to meet their physical needs, but even “their emotional, social, and

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Derrida states, “Insofar as it [hospitality] has to do with the ethos, that is, the residence, one’s home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, ethics is hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coexistence with the experience of hospitality.” See Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 17, and Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 358 – 420.
spiritual needs” are met, which ultimately has to do with their worth and common humanity.\(^\text{11}\) The expansion of the meaning of a secure place implies that hospitality is a fundamental practice of seeking a creative space in which survival is not the foremost goal. The goal is instead finding meaning, value, and purpose in that survival. Referring to some of the Biblical evidences that show how hospitality is committed to recognizing the valuing the stranger, Christine D. Pohl argues that it becomes a “combined practice of care and respect.”\(^\text{12}\) Thomas E. Reynolds puts it thus: “human beings require a meaningful and trustworthy world, a world with boundaries that provide security and that offer a dependable sense that all will be well. All will be well? Let me phrase it differently…the worth of our lives.”\(^\text{13}\) In a nutshell, hospitality affirms that all our lives are worth living.

Social distancing provides an important clue for finding a way to redefine hospitality in the COVID-19 pandemic context. The clue is found in the current discussion on the implications of social distancing. Political scientist Daniel Aldrich is concerned that the term “social distancing” is semantically misleading. Aldrich says, “some people think the term social distancing literally sounds like ‘If I had friendship before, it is time to hunker down. Or, if I were a member of a church or synagogue, it is time to pray by myself. … But the covid-19 order is going to be around for a while, and we need to feel connected.”\(^\text{14}\) Instead of using the term social distancing, Aldrich suggests an alternative term, “physical distancing,” which is more productive and encouraging in strengthening the social ties that are crucial for “getting through disasters.”\(^\text{15}\) The World Health Organization (WHO) has come to the same conclusion and made a quick decision to replace the term social distancing with that of physical distancing. At the March 20 daily press briefing, an epidemiologist Maria Van Kerkhove, who works at WHO, agreed that “we’re changing to say physical distance, and that’s on purpose because we want people to still remain connected.”\(^\text{16}\) Clearly, people seek to connect with one another even in the midst of disaster, which instructs us to hope that we all are friends who are working together to encourage, care for, and support one another.

I would like to define hospitality as a way of making connections with one another to promote our wholeness. Since it prevents us from having opportunities to see others in person, social distancing inescapably brings about a sense of loss. However, hospitality provides us with others as gifts. We come to realize that our vulnerability “creatively holds together equality, difference, common sharing, and the gift of distinctiveness, and opens out into a relationality of interdependence.”\(^\text{17}\) Online classes, services, or meetings are good examples of showing how, in making and sustaining mutual ties, hospitality is achieved. Further, mutual transformation is

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{12}\) Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; Pohl, Making Room, 71.

\(^{13}\) Thomas E. Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 49.


\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

made in the process of making connections. The mutual ties unmask the myth of independence and transform us into whole selves. HyeRan Kim-Cragg asserts that “a person cannot be totally self-sufficient and self-reliable. A whole self is achieved only through the support of communities and multiple tangled and situated relationships. A wholeness of personhood is only formed and sustained by depending on others.”

Hospitality, therefore, can be a site and meaning of healing, in which well-being and flourishing are much more promoted than curing.

**Which Hospitality?**

Seeking Just Hospitality as Solidarity

Although we are all fundamentally vulnerable to the highly contagious virus, we are not proportionately affected by COVID-19. In other words, the effect of the virus is unequal. We currently find racial minorities are more seriously harmed in both number and degree. This is because health emergencies exploit inequalities in some contexts: Maura Dolan, a writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, informs us that Latinos are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than other ethnic groups in San Francisco. According to Dolan, at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, more than 80 percent of the hospitalized coronavirus patients are Latinos. They usually make up only about 30 percent of the hospital’s population. Dolan believes that the large number of hospitalized Latinos is caused by their lower incomes, which push them to go out frequently to workplaces. In another example, Richard Morgan, a writer for the *Washington Post*, notes that the Bronx, where many African Americans live, has now become “New York City’s coronavirus capital.” Pointing out that most of the residents of the Bronx are minimum-waged African American workers, Morgan reports that the this area, home to more than 60 percent of New York City’s very lower income residents, suffers the highest case fatality rate for the COVID-19 in the metropolis. As we get a glimpse of these cases in the United States, people with fewer resources and who have experienced institutionalized stigma and discrimination such as racism are more at risk of getting sick. Undoubtedly, the effects of COVID-19 are not equal.

Classism is another decisive factor in the unequal effect of COVID-19. Robert Reich, a columnist for *The Guardian*, argues that the COVID-19 pandemic sheds light on “a new kind of class divide and its inequalities.” According to Reich, four new classes have emerged during the pandemic crisis: the Remotes, the Essentials, the Unpaid, and the Forgotten. The first class, the Remotes, consists of professional, managerial, and technical workers who can put in long

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19 Reynolds makes an explicit distinction between curing and healing and explains that curing means “a restoration of function” and healing promotes wholeness as well-being. He continues to argue that hospitality is a mean of healing. See Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 223 – 224.


hours at their laptops, have online meetings, and collect about the same pay as before the crisis. Many belonging to this group are well off compared to the three other classes. The second class, the Essentials, to which nurses, care workers, and food processors belong, have to work even with a lack of adequate protective gear or paid sick leave. The third class is the Unpaid who are furloughed or have used up their paid leave, are demanding reopening of the economy even though their choice of putting food on the table might endanger themselves. Lastly, the Forgotten class is those for whom social distancing is nearly impossible because they are packed tightly into places most people do not see, such as prisons, detention centers for undocumented immigrants, Indigenous reservations, homeless shelters, and nursing homes. Reich concludes that “not surprisingly, the Essentials, the Unpaid, and the Forgotten are disproportionately poor, black, and Latino and they are disproportionately becoming infected. … These three groups aren’t getting what they need to survive this crisis because they don’t have lobbyists and political action committees to do their bidding.”

Although I have already suggested that an attempt to make connections with others can be a suitable concept and practice of hospitality for the pandemic context, this is insufficient for welcoming racial minorities or the three emerging classes. From now on, I would like to argue that hospitality should be redefined as solidarity, which seeks to make connections with those who are the most vulnerable. Since one’s vulnerability is reinforced by his/her differences, it is important to look deeply at what it makes differences. The notion of difference that I would like to bring into the discourse of hospitality is the one that is “structured through power relations.”

This notion of difference does not refer to the result of “some quality or feature of unlikeness between two or more things, events, places, or persons” but to “concrete elements in our lives that separate, distinguish, or contrast one group or person from another.” More significant than the definition of difference is what Iris Marion Young argues that some who are designated by their differences in terms of race, gender, class, or other defining factors suffer from everyday practices, not from a tyrannical power coercion. Her argument makes us go deeper to find who is suffered from hospitality working in various places and spaces as a daily practice producing mutual ties.

An idea of justice is necessary to define hospitality not as a daily practice of making violent connections. Instead, a sense of justice fosters hospitality as an everyday practice of “disturbing the violent relatedness” by addressing the social structures of injustice and division in the pandemic context. Justice requires of a practice of solidarity to end oppressions beyond working for the self-defense. Indeed, justice for hospitality should mean more than fairness. The “veil of ignorance,” which is part of the foundation of John Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness, could be used to deprive those who suffer from the coronavirus and its effects critical

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23 Ibid.
28 Kang, Cosmopolitan Theology, 126.
29 Russell, Just Hospitality, 102.
information about their social oppression and inequality. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz makes the point about Rawls’ veil of ignorance that “it is not possible for us to embrace an understanding that, to bring about justice, one starts by neglecting to consider knowledge of any particular facts about their own lives or other persons’ lives, as well as knowledge of any historical facts about their society and its population, level of wealth and resources, etc.” Lack of concern about who suffer from the coronavirus and its resulting challenges the most inevitably ends up romanticizing hospitality. The most suffered, such as people of color or lower-class people, comes to be more likely to lose their lives.

I would like to define hospitality as solidarity with those whom we should not miss. Hospitality as solidarity means more than an indicator that we are here together; it is a way of making life-giving and mutual-supporting connections; it is also a means of taking responsibility for living together. In fact, the word solidarity has its root in the Roman law of obligation and means “equally responsible for a debt.” As Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez argues that “solidarity depends on “how we come together” and “how we understand and enact our responsibilities to, and relationships with, each other.” Solidarity should be the deep commitment to a resistance to the effort that sustains both the white superiority that demonizes Chinese peoples who initially experienced the COVID-19 and the economic privilege of the white that demands reopening economy. Henry Nouwen reminds us of what hospitality has to do; “it [hospitality] is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.”

I understand that solidarity as hospitality does not attempt to change but liberate the most vulnerable from social structures full of racism, ethnicism, classism, and etc. Thus, solidarity can be a creatively re-imagined way of welcoming that transforms our connections into a space of mutual supporting.

Conclusion

While hospitality is a risky or costly practice in the context where peoples are strangers to each other, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, it demands our deep commitment to the costly discipleship of following the hospitality of Christ in the hostile world. However, hospitality is still relevant for suggesting moral ways of living together during the pandemic crisis. As an attempt to connect with and support one another, hospitality can play a significant role in opening up the door to a more desirable world, even though disastrous events are ceaselessly

31 Isasi-Diaz, “John Rawls on Justice,” 149.
33 Ibid.
coming upon us. As journalist, Naomi Klein suggests, crisis awakens the sense of what is possible.\textsuperscript{36} We are forced to think deeply about who we are, where we belong, and who is missing from our communities or relationships. We are invited to imagine new ways of welcoming one another!

\textsuperscript{36} Naomi Klein, \textit{The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008).