



HELLO
my name is

WELCOMING
THE
STRANGER

LIVING OUT
GOD'S
SOUL-STRETCHING
LOVE

BY JAN JOHNSON

I liked the idea better when it was only talked about in the leadership meeting. Putting it into action was difficult. That idea, the “three-minute guideline,” suggested that in the last three minutes before the church service began and in the first three minutes after it ended, leaders would greet only people we didn’t know. While I’ve always felt empathetic toward newcomers, I found I really just wanted to talk to the people I knew. It was... easier, more fun.

When I tried talking to newcomers, I couldn’t think of what to say. So I carried a little “cheat sheet” of welcoming and informative things to talk about (parking issues, location of Sunday school or bathrooms). Week after week, I took a deep breath and launched out to greet people I didn’t know. I began enjoying giving them this bit of love, and learning interesting things about people. I saw that many

people were nervous and longed to have someone talk to them. I realized that I had been cocooning safely in my own space and needed to reach out to others.

Such is the spiritual practice of welcoming the stranger, a characteristic activity for those living in the kingdom of God. Not often listed as a spiritual discipline, welcoming the stranger is a practice Jesus emphasizes by how he received all kinds of people and identified with them: “I was a stranger, you

welcomed me... when you did it for the least of these... you did it for me” (Matthew 25:35, 40, RSV). Such welcoming is more than a feeling; it meets tangible needs, such as offering others a cup of cold water (see Matthew 10:40–42; Matthew 18:5, and John 13:20).

To welcome strangers means to cultivate an invitational spirit and offer a sense of “home” to others (see John 14:23). We pay attention to others, inviting them to be at home with us as they unfold themselves before us. “To merely welcome another, to provide for them, to make a place, is one of the most life-giving and life-receiving things a human being can do.”¹

Some call this discipline “hospitality,” but unfortunately hospitality has become limited to inviting others to eat with us or stay in our home. While cleaning, bed-making, and food preparation are valuable gifts to offer others, the core idea of hospitality is to be open and vulnerable to a person’s needs.

Additionally, to welcome the stranger is to reach out not just to friends but to those who for some reason are considered strangers. You see this in Jesus’s way of welcoming people whom others routinely ignored: beggars, hobbling lepers, demon-possessed people. Jesus grouped this practice of welcoming strangers with helping others who are often overlooked:

the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (see Matthew 25:35–36). In the sermon he preached upon returning as a teacher to his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus marked out his purpose to minister to such people: to bring good news to the poor, to free prisoners, to restore sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim year of Lord’s favor (see Luke 4:18–19).

Welcoming the stranger was one of the tender commands of the law. Because the Israelites had been sojourners (immigrants) in Egypt, God laid it down that sojourner-strangers were to be protected by the same laws that governed Israel (see Deuteronomy 1:16; 24:17; 27:19). Furthermore, Israelites were to go above and beyond decent behavior and love strangers (Deuteronomy 10:19). In the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus taught about going the extra mile, and later he applied it to a Roman soldier—clearly a stranger who filled Jews with discomfort and disgust (Matthew 5:41). In God’s kingdom, God knows no strangers, and so he invites us to live such a life here and now.

¹ Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002, 183.

WHEN THE STRANGER DOES THE WELCOMING

Jesus illustrated this welcoming spirit by inventing a story in which someone normally viewed as a stranger goes the extra mile and becomes the one who welcomes. Try to be one of Jesus’s listeners, remembering that to Jews the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. Imagine the shock and revulsion you might have felt (Luke 10:25–37).

Jesus portrayed the one we call the Good Samaritan as being full of empathy. He helps the beaten man, not concerning himself that a Jew wouldn’t want our hero touching him. (I picture him as actor Morgan Freeman or Antonio Banderas.) While some limit their service to acting within

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The Samaritan easily puts himself in another person’s shoes because thinking and feeling with others is part of who he is. He seems to be the kind of person who helps people automatically. He doesn’t have to think, *I’d better do a good deed today* or *What will this cost me?* It isn’t a duty—he’s not part of the Jerusalem to Jericho Road Safety Program. Helping is no big deal to him but routine, easy obedience to God. Making room in his life for wounded strangers is part of how he lives and breathes.

Also, this Samaritan is full-hearted in his welcoming. He gives the innkeeper more than what is needed and doesn’t ask the innkeeper to give him a discounted rate because it’s for a good cause. Best of all, the Samaritan is relational. He takes care of the wounded man and in doing so probably gets himself dirty and has to delay or cancel his business.

Consider how the injured Jew feels when he wakes up at the inn. Is he horrified that a Samaritan has touched him? Would he have preferred to die than be touched so personally by a Samaritan?

OUR STRANGER-SAMARITAN

Jesus challenges us to regard how God has welcomed us and how we welcome others with God's love. To do that we have to let go of self-absorption so we can pay attention to others—and let go of being indifferent to people we don't know or who are not in our group. We ask ourselves: Who do I regard as a Samaritan?

Today the Samaritan might be a sex offender. A few years ago, my friend asked me to look at a website that listed sex offenders in our area because her son had been convicted of Internet child pornography and she wondered if he was listed there. I didn't find her son, but the first name and picture on the list was my favorite client at the Samaritan Center (a drop-in center for the homeless) where I volunteer. I'll call him Nick. He was always

polite, saying, "Thank you" when I washed his clothes. I wondered why he kept getting fired from every job because I saw how hard he worked doing his chores at the Center. I had even offered to recommend him to someone I knew who needed a good tenant, but he didn't take me up on the offer. Nor did he accept my invitation to join our family for Thanksgiving dinner.

To see Nick's picture on that website horrified me. I had been welcoming this stranger for many months, not knowing his offense.

What would I do now? I prayed that I could surrender the situation to God.

When my weekly volunteering day came around, I told the director about this and she was surprised—yet she wasn't. "That must be why he comes here beaten and bruised most Mondays," she reminded me. "On the weekend, people find him and beat him up." When Nick arrived I found myself ready to greet him as always. Washing his clothes did not go so well. I began sobbing as I did so. I wondered what had happened to Nick as a child for him to respond this way?

For years I had easily welcomed all our clients—some

of whom have been in jail for drug-related offenses—but with Nick I hesitated. I was able to welcome him only by picturing how Jesus would have welcomed him. That connecting moment with God allowed me to abide in Jesus and for Jesus to abide in me. In previous months, I had been praying that God would give me a heart of greater compassion, to let everything in me that rejects people go away. Praying for Nick and serving him was clearly part of my soul-school.

WHO ARE OUR STRANGERS?

People appear to us as strangers for different reasons, but usually they fit into one of these categories:

Outcasts. While most rabbis threw stones at lepers, Jesus welcomed them (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-15; 17:11-19). He touched these untouchables. Outcasts are the people for whom acceptance into normal society is almost unthinkable to us, in the same way that touching a leper was completely unthinkable to Jewish society.

As for *wrong-doers*, Jesus not only greeted Zacchaeus (a tax collector—today's equivalent of a mobster) in his

hidden spot in the tree but also made himself the host, inviting himself to be Zacchaeus' dinner guest (Luke 19:1-10). The notoriously immoral past of the Samaritan woman did not disqualify her from relationship with Jesus, either. In fact, Jesus went out of his way to extend himself: he had to go through Samaria (John 4:4). He welcomed this person who was a stranger both in ethnicity and in gender. Not only did he have a conversation with her, a woman, in public, but he also invited her into a deepened relationship with God.

People outside their home territory. At one time Joseph, Mary and Jesus were political refugees, having

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to leave their homeland—the sacred space of God's chosen people. Imagine their fear as they slipped out of Bethlehem by night and made a two- to three-week journey on a route frequented by robbers (especially in light of their three treasures, some of which they probably used to pay expenses). This Jewish couple mixed with non-Jews and they had to trust God every step of the way. They were also in grief, weeping over the slaughter of the innocent babies (Matthew 2:13-23).

As political refugees, they needed to make a life in Egypt for possibly two years. Some benevolent Egyptian must have hired Joseph as a carpenter, even though he was a Jew. Did Egyptian women befriend Mary? Any kindness they were shown would have influenced how Mary heard the positive references to Gentiles in Jesus's sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19). Unlike the other listeners, she had rubbed shoulders with Gentiles and probably received their kindness. They weren't strangers to her.

Anyone who isn't like me. When we see or meet people who differ from us politically, ethnically or theologically, a little "ping" may go off in our heads that says, *Ooh, different. Step back.* Ponder what Jesus's disciple Simon the Zealot must have thought when Jesus healed the Roman centurion's servant and then praised the centurion's faith. Simon would have viewed the centurion as a prime candidate for assassination and "fuel for the fires of hell."² As we draw circles of who's in and who's out, we may make strangers of those who worship Christ from a different corner of the kingdom.

A stranger may just be someone of a different economic class or living situation. In a church full of homeowners, an apartment dweller often feels like a stranger. A disabled person is a stranger in the midst of fitness buffs, as is a non-reader among well-read folks. Military kids or missionary kids, parolees or drug rehab graduates may all qualify as strangers among those without that experience.

Anyone we're tempted to exclude and ignore. Strangers are often people in power-down positions: "children as opposed to adults, women as opposed to men, minority races as opposed to majority races, the poor as opposed to middle-class, the middle-class as opposed to rich, lower-paid workers as opposed to highly paid workers, less educated as opposed to more educated, blue-collar workers as opposed to professionals."³ The elderly are easily overlooked. When my quiet 80-year-old mother-in-law came to visit, our other dinner guests never engaged her in conversation. I wept later to think of the many times I have neglected to speak to an older person.

If we're honest, we want to push away some people because of their personality. C. S. Lewis comments about the boring person: "It's so much easier to pray for a bore than to go and see him."⁴ Or we may avoid pushy people, people who talk too long about themselves, those who scream and pout for what they feel they deserve, know-it-alls, or people who let their kids run wild. In any "us versus them" situation, "them" are the strangers.

The shocking thing about Jesus is that he did not merely tolerate such different people, Jesus offered himself to them in self-giving love.

THE LEAST OF THESE OR ASSOCIATING WITH THE LOWLY

Related to the discipline of welcoming the stranger is *associating with the lowly*. While describing love, Paul wrote: "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but *associate with the lowly*; do not claim to be wiser than you are" (Romans 12:16, NRSV, emphasis mine). The Message puts it: "Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. *Make friends with nobodies*; don't be the great somebody" (emphasis mine). Jesus went out of his way to mix with people we might avoid—crossing the Sea of Galilee to the region of the Gerasenes to heal the demon-possessed man, as well as refusing to ignore the shouting, insistent Bartimaeus but turning to him and saying, "What can I do for you?" (Mark 5:1-20; 10:46-52).

Associating with the lowly means making friends out of those normally overlooked and those not normally sought out. To befriend such a one transforms us. It keeps us from pretending to be wiser than we are because "those we are caring for become our teachers. Personal contact with persons who are disadvantaged in some way can be a powerful means of transformation for Jesus's apprentices."¹ So this practice is not only about *helping* those deemed lowly, but forming a reciprocal relationship with them so that we *learn* from them and from Jesus how not to be haughty or think we're wiser than we are.

The lowly are the needy for whom God is a guardian (Psalm 12:5). God gives mercy to the poor, and urges us to create a sense of home as "a father to the fatherless" and "a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). To oppress the poor (such as passing laws that prohibit "camping" within city limits when sleeping under a bridge or bush may be one's only option) is to show "contempt for their Maker" but to be "kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31). God insists on justice for these persons: "defend the weak and fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed" (Psalm 82:3).

Jesus's example of welcoming these lowly strangers tells us that donating money is good, but it is not enough. Always relational, Jesus looked people in the face, sat down with them, ate with them, and listened to them without running over them. He understood reciprocity in relationships, asking the outcast Samaritan woman for a drink of water. As we abide in Christ, we are enabled to welcome such strangers by opening ourselves and being willing to be helped by these persons today.

¹ Baker, Howard. "Associating with the Lowly." Workshop. Spiritual Formation Forum, May 2006.

² Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1. The Daily Study Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958, 298.

³ Johnson, Jan. *Growing Compassionate Kids*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2001, 26.

⁴ Lewis, C.S. *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1964, 66.

We hear a voice inside us asking, Am I trying to impress people or love them? As a result, we gradually become unself-conscious, easy and automatic in loving the people we encounter everyday. Eventually no one is a stranger to us.

FROM HOSTILITY TO HOSPITALITY

Welcoming the stranger may require that we examine what holds us back and ask God to help us explore why particular people make us uncomfortable. It could be old prejudices or it could be that we're shy. The latter was my dilemma with the three-minute guideline at my church. But in trying it out, I rediscovered a truth I already knew: newcomers were relieved that I spoke first because they were shy also. By practicing the presence of God in the midst of being in the company of strangers—asking God, What do I need to know to reach out to this person?—I overcame the shyness and things flowed naturally or even supernaturally.

Jesus's way of welcoming strangers shows his deep empathy with others. He sought to know how people felt and he thought about how he could help them. The practice of welcoming strangers schools us in this empathy as we look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). It helps us learn to care more about how the other feels than how we look (should I talk to my neighbor if I'm wearing torn pants or my hair is wet?) or how our home looks (should I ask that person to step inside if my home is not neat and clean?). Meeting people's needs becomes most important. We hear a voice inside us asking, Am I trying to impress people or love them? As a result, we gradually become unself-conscious, easy and automatic in loving the people we encounter everyday. Eventually no one is a stranger to us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jan Johnson is the author of twenty books including *Invitation to the Jesus Life* and *Abundant Simplicity* and a thousand articles and Bible studies. She speaks at retreats and conferences, and teaches (adjunct) at Azusa Pacific University and Hope International University. Also a spiritual director, Jan holds a D. Min. in Ignatian Spirituality and Spiritual Direction. She lives with her husband in Simi Valley, California. You can visit her at JanJohnson.org.

EXPERIMENTS IN CONNECTING WITH GOD

TO RECEIVE GOD'S WELCOME TO YOU

Meditation: Read Luke 10:25–37. Picture it happening. Write down the feelings you would have had if you had been the innkeeper, the beaten person, or even the Samaritan.

Meditation: First, consider who is the last person you'd want to see on the side of road needing your help. Picture Jesus helping them. Feast on Jesus's heart of compassion. As you're ready, see yourself beside Jesus helping the person.

Prayer: Consider the times you have been a stranger. Thank God for the people that welcomed you.

TO BECOME ONE WHO OFFERS SUCH WELCOMING TO STRANGERS

Fellowship and reflection: Ask a friend to help you identify who the strangers are in your life. Don't balk at odd ideas your friend may bring up. Pray that God will then show you how to welcome certain strangers a little more.

Intercessory prayer: Look through your newspaper for stories about anyone who is a "stranger" to you, especially immigrants, the disabled, or people who are in trouble with the law. Read the article with an effort to understand their world. Pray for these persons' wholeness in Christ and pray for your increased capacity to welcome them in your life.

Practicing the presence of God: Greet a newcomer at work, in your neighborhood or at church, asking God to show you this person's needs.

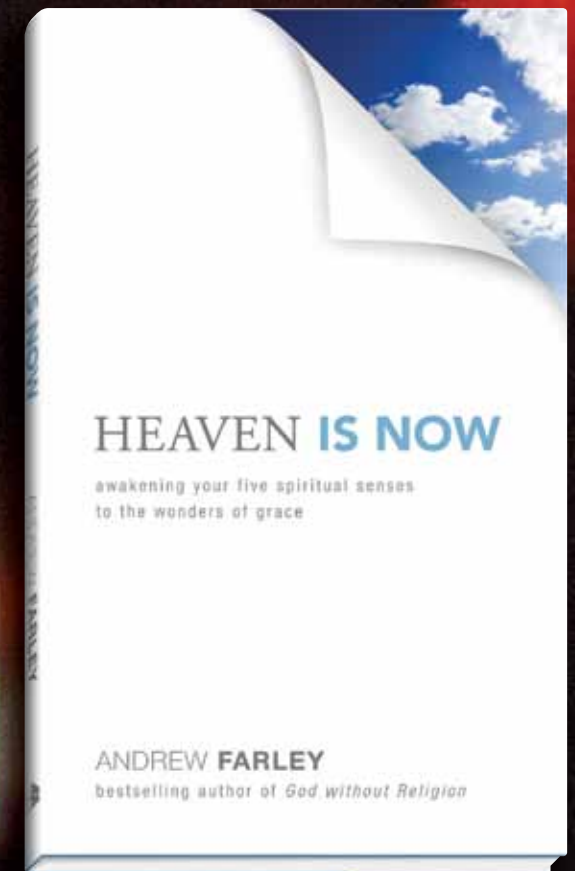
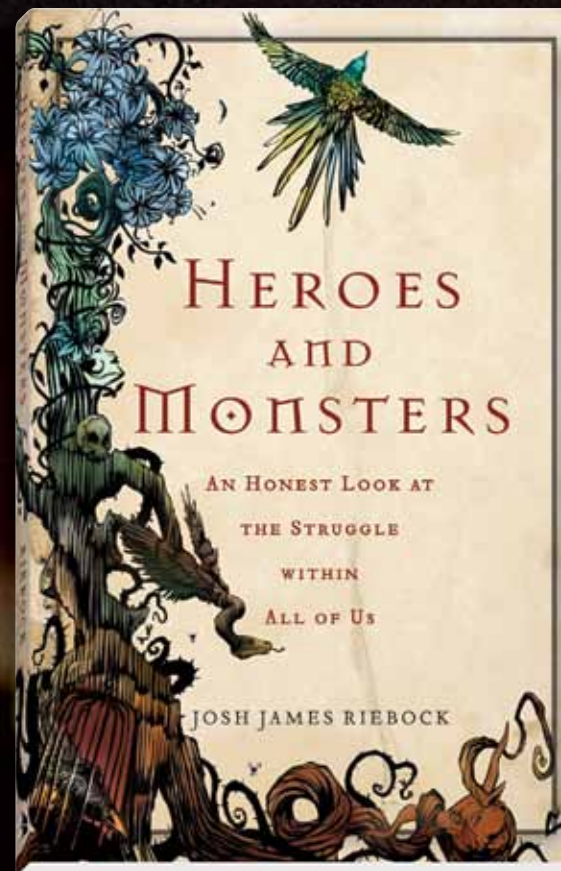
Welcoming the stranger: Look into the eyes of the next homeless person or two you pass and smile at him or her. (Most folks don't look into their eyes, even if they give them money.)

Welcoming the stranger: Choose someone who is a stranger to you in some way. Pray for that person and then ask God to show you how to engage him or her in a conversation, beginning with a warm greeting and a question.

In darkness find beauty.

We are all faced with dark and trying times in our lives. Every one of us is shaken by changes, losses, gains, insights, desires, mistakes, and transitions. The world we inhabit is both beautiful and twisted.

Let Josh James Riebock and Andrew Farley show you that pain and beauty are so inextricably linked that to lose the former costs us the latter. Feel the grace of heaven, even in the midst of trouble here on earth.



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www.andrewfarley.org
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