



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Every Consideration”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A sermon delivered on May 31, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:1-2*

*This being human is a guest house. Welcome everyone as a guide from beyond. Rumi*

*How should one live? Live welcoming to all. Mechthild of Magdeburg*

### Sermon

Five years ago the members of this Fellowship voted to call me as your next settled minister. Happily, I accepted. But before that vote, I met with your Search Committee online, by phone, and finally in person during a pre-candidate weekend. During that weekend the Search team observed me leading a Sunday morning worship service in what is called a neutral pulpit, meaning anywhere but Athens. I thought to share that worship service with the rest of you to mark our fifth anniversary together.

But when I led that service, I didn't know you or the Roswell, Georgia, UU congregation where it took place. I delivered that service to strangers. In preparing for today's service I realized I couldn't give that sermon without changing it to fit our current relationship. We are no longer strangers. We've had five years to get to know each other.

Except not everyone present today has been here that long. Some of you may feel like strangers. Some of you may be trying to find your place here. Some of you may wonder if you want to stay here or not.

Whether you move from being a strange newcomer to a familiar long-timer has a great deal to do with how hospitable you feel we are. And that takes me directly to my topic of five years ago.

Hospitality comes from the Latin root word *hospes*, meaning stranger, and refers to the act or art of generously providing care or kindness to a stranger or someone in need. At its most trivial, it means putting out the welcome mat at a hostel or hotel. At its most significant, it means being

cared for at a hospital or hospice. And in between these two lies the hospitality offered by a host, which you, the members of this Fellowship, are on Sunday mornings.

It may not surprise you that the word hostile shares the same root as hospitality. We're often wary of strangers because we're unsure what strangers will do. Welcoming strangers into our home comes with risks. We're warned not to open the door to strangers.

But inviting in people who we simply don't know yet can be a blessing. A stranger can become a new best friend. I've seen that happen here. A stranger can bring new perspectives, new talents, new ideas, and new inspiration. I've seen that here, too. We gain a great deal by letting a stranger into our lives and hearts. We lose a great deal by keeping others out. And shutting our doors on the stranger or newcomer here means they lose out on the gifts and blessings of this community.

In his book *Reaching Out*, pastoral psychologist Henri Nouwin writes, "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place." And helping each other change, to become the person they wish to be, to develop friendships with like-minded people, to create greater meaning and purpose in our lives especially through service to others – that is UUFA's mission. And it can't be completed with closed and locked doors.

Being good hosts to newcomers must have us go beyond giving out nametags and offering cups of tea or coffee in red mugs. It must include making room for those who have found their way here and those yet to come. It must mean treating newcomers as if they were honored guests, even gods or angels in disguise.

In Japan the making of a simple cup of tea for a guest developed into a highly ritualized art that epitomizes radical hospitality. *Cha-no-yu*, or the tea ceremony, begins with a guest leaving the day's busy-ness by calmly walking down a simple garden path to a special tea hut or room used only for this purpose. To enter the tea room guests must bow low to wriggle through a 3-foot high door. This short door was added by Sen no Rikyu, an influential tea master of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

His reason: it required guests to bow low, thus performing a symbolic act of humility. Bowing reminds a guest not to become arrogant by the gift of being served. It helps equalize the role of host and guest. I'm thinking we should re-size our entry doors to encourage greater humility, too. What do you think—shall we retrofit our front door and make it shorter to increase our humility?

Once inside the tea room, strict rules apply. The guest first contemplates a hanging scroll containing a word of wisdom or poetry by a revered Zen Buddhist. Additional bowing occurs between host and guest. The guest compliments the beauty of how the tea utensils are arranged for the ceremony, on the graceful presence of a simple seasonal flower, and also on the choreographed elegance and efficiency of the tea-maker's actions in preparing the fire, boiling the water, and brewing the tea.

When the tea is ready, the tea bowl, a cup without handles, must be presented with the bowl's design element facing the guest. But, / when the guest drinks, he or she must turn the bowl so that the design now faces the host, thus each perform an act of mutual respect.

The entire ceremony is performed with both host and guest's mind fully present and focused on nothing else but the ceremony, typical of Zen Buddhist spiritual practices. No discussion of war, politics, the economy, or even family matters is permitted during what can be a four-hour ritual. The demands upon the host to perfectly perform the tea ceremony communicates that the guest is the host's only concern. The ceremony asks participants to find deep meaning in making a cup of tea, one simple act of daily living—another Zen concept.

Tea came to Japan along with Ch'an or Zen Buddhism by the mid seventh century. To break the Chinese monopoly on tea, Japanese Buddhist monks returning from there may have smuggled tea seedlings under their robes along with Zen ideas they carried in their minds. Centuries later, when radically refining the tea ceremony, including its doorway, Sen no Rikyu created its seven basic rules. Their simplicity belies the difficulty of adhering to them. They are:

- Make a delicious bowl of tea.
- Lay the charcoal so that it heats the water.
- Arrange the flowers as they are in a field.
- In summer suggest coolness; in winter, warmth.
- Do everything ahead of time.
- Prepare for rain.
- Give those with whom you find yourself every consideration.

These rules speak to efficiency, preparedness, and beauty, and are summed up in the last rule: Give those with whom you find yourself every consideration.

'Every consideration' means being fully present for another and their needs. This phrase lies at the heart of radical hospitality. No matter who you are with, you are to give them your full attention, your most sincere hospitality. Whether in your own home or here, these tea ceremony rules can guide our welcoming. As Sen no Rikyu advised practitioners, "Serve the tea with insight into the souls of your guests."

If we treated each other this way, it would transform our lives as well as our congregation. Doing so would go above and beyond our Unitarian Universalist First Principle which affirms the inherent worth of every person and asks us to treat everyone with respect and dignity. Imagine being that fully present to another, whether stranger or friend.

Buddhist author Jack Kornfield tells of an account in Sukotai, Thailand, where an ancient clay statue of Buddha had been carefully tended to by monks for hundreds of years. This clay statue was not particularly beautiful, but because it was so ancient it was well taken care of and revered. In recent years the clay developed some cracks. While repairing it, a curious monk shined a flashlight into one of the cracks. He discovered something shiny inside the statue. Like breaking open an egg to reveal its golden treasure, he discovered the statue's plain clay façade hid a beautiful solid gold statue of Buddha—the finest in all Southeast Asia. So much time had passed no one knew exactly why or when the gold statue had been covered up or that it existed beneath its plain exterior. I assume it was to protect it from theft, war, or other concern. [*The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*, by Jack Kornfield, pages 11-12.]

We too have solid gold interiors; something of worth and dignity no matter what our exteriors—no matter our ethnicity, our sexual orientation, our ability, our gender, our class, or our appearance. And the tea ceremony, this ritual of extreme hospitality, recognizes one’s golden interior, one’s inherent worth, by treating the other as honored guest.

If we adopted *chado*, or the Way of Tea, at the Fellowship it might mean we would not expect a stranger to assimilate into the culture of those already present. Instead, we’d welcome the ‘strangeness’ of the other; we’d not expect conformity in all things. We say we welcome diversity, but that may not be wholly true. When others challenge our way, our personal truths, we feel uncomfortable. Radical hospitality would require us to care more about the stranger or guest’s comfort than our own. I know we already work hard at being welcoming. But we can do better. We can be radical. And we UUs should know how to be radical!

I believe we are ready to grow into a new way of being with others here at UUFA, out in the larger community, and in our daily lives. Even so, giving ‘every consideration’ to those in our midst will not be easy. We will stumble and make mistakes. We will forget. Sen no Rikyu has another word for us.

A tea grower once invited Sen no Rikyu to have tea. When Rikyu and a few students came, the grower led them into the tea room. As he served Rikyu, his hand trembled in his excitement and he dropped the tea scoop. He knocked the tea whisk over. The students snickered at his mistakes. When the ceremony was over, Rikyu thanked the grower, telling him it was the finest ceremony he’d ever attended.

Heading home, Rikyu’s students asked, “Why were you impressed by this shameful performance?” Rikyu replied, “This man did not invite me with the idea of showing off his skill. He simply wanted to serve me tea with his whole heart. He devoted himself to completely making a bowl of tea for me, not worrying about errors. I was struck by that sincerity.” [*Tea Here Now*, by Donna Fellman & Lhasha Tizer, [www.teamuse.com/article\\_060201.html](http://www.teamuse.com/article_060201.html)]

Rikyu wrote poetry describing the experience or expectations of the tea ceremony, some included earlier in our Readings. In this poem Rikyu makes room for our imperfections.

Though I sweep and sweep,  
Everywhere my garden path,  
Though invisible  
On the slim pine needles still  
Specks of dirt may yet be found.

Just as the path may yet contain dirt, we need not be perfect. We can simply be sincere and share our whole hearts with strangers and friends, wherever we meet them.

May our hearts be that generous. May we find in a bowl of tea the courage we need to welcome all among us. May it be so.

## **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Describe your initial welcome at UUFA. Did it meet your expectations? Why or why not?
2. How might UUFA change in order to be more welcoming to those not here already? What would that mean for you? What would you need to do differently?
3. What have you changed (or might you change) in your own life to welcome or include proverbial strangers – those who are not like you?