

Finding Grace in Hospitality

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St Luke's Church, Evanston, Illinois
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So grateful for this opportunity.

Met your rockstar rector at a recent Evanston clergy meeting, where I had gone as a representative of Turning Point, where I serve at the CEO. Turning Point is an outpatient mental health center in Skokie, and we are honored to be part of the Evanston community, too. One of our programs is called the Living Room, a drop-in center for adults in crisis, whom we call guests. Thanks to many members of this congregation and to others in this community, we will open a Living Room in Evanston before this year ends.

When I was beginning to learn about psychotherapy, I tended to grab onto key ideas as handholds in what felt like the steep and treacherous journey toward establishing a solid therapy relationship.

One of my favorite ideas comes from the work of Stephen Mitchell, who said that we are constantly demonstrating who we are and what we believe – he encouraged us to be curious and available to our clients' words, attitudes and appearances. Mitchell called these self-descriptions gambits or invitations and he urged us to say and show that we accepted these invitations an enthusiastic yes!

I'd like to use that advice as a guide to thinking about Martha, as she is portrayed in today's Gospel reading – and to extend that advice as a recommendation for understanding mental health care, particularly in the context of our Living Room program.

So please consider this an invitation to the Living Room at Turning Point: what it looks like, what happens inside, our experiences with guests and the results of their visits.

The best kinds of living rooms are welcoming places and sanctuaries. When you cross the threshold, you feel safe, accepted, recognized. Our Living Room looks and feels like this, and it features comfortable places to sit, soft lighting, artwork on the walls and even an aquarium. Tea, coffee, water, and snacks are offered and there are even calming toys to play with if you feel fidgety.

Our Living Room guests come to the door, where they are greeted and screened for safety by a clinician. Entering the space, they are welcomed by a peer who is known as a Recovery Support Specialist, an adult with lived experience of mental illness. From that moment forward, the guest chooses what to do from a variety of options, including talking with the Specialist about their crisis, listening to the Specialist's account of their own mental health journey and recovery, and sorting through possible solutions or means of understanding their crisis. Other guests may wish to quietly rest in an alcove adjacent to the more public space in the Living Room.

Our guests might learn about skills derived from methods like cognitive behavior therapy, dialectic behavioral therapy or mindfulness. They might listen to a meditation program or learn some calming yoga postures. If they need food or healthcare benefits or assistance with school- or work-related issues, the Specialist may suggest that they use the computer lab to look up resources. Like a loving Sherpa, the Specialist is always close by, listening and encouraging, helping the guest to go wherever their journey takes them.

Most guests stay for about two and a half hours. When they leave the Living Room, they return to their homes, their families, their work and hobbies and all that gives their lives meaning. This happens ninety-nine percent of the time. Ninety-nine of one hundred guests do not need to seek a higher and more expensive level of care in an Emergency Department. They are not picked up by a public safety officer or arrested. They have had a confidential visit as a guest where they have been able to express and process their concerns and their distress.

So. What does this have to do with Martha? John offers only two words when describing her in today's Gospel, but they are potent and clear: Martha served.

This is the essential work of our Living Room program and the team that greets our guests: they serve.

Many years ago, when I was a student at St Olaf College, my friends and I become completely absorbed in the life and work of Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest who was well known for his work in social justice, his tenures at Notre Dame and Yale and Harvard and his prolific writing.

My favorite Nouwen book is called *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, because there he describes the essential perspective and commitment of the servant: hospitality.

Here is what Nouwen says:

“[I]t is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings” (65), to convert hostility into hospitality, “the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced” (*ibid*).

Nouwen stresses the mutuality of giving and receiving, the sacramental quality of caring about the guest, making a free but bounded space for careful listening with full attention. He describes creating a space where something happens to us because in this space, we are all, in some measure, guests and hosts, engaged in sacred activities of giving and receiving hospitality.

Our Living Room at Turning Point may be described in more secular terms but this an accurate description of our commitment and our efforts. And it is an honor to provide a space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and be welcomed as fellow human beings.

So here we are, making our way through Lent, heading toward the Feast of Christ's Resurrection. Maybe it's a good time to consider Martha's attitude and activity as a model for us as Christians. The world seems pretty chaotic right now. It is easy to be derailed by hostility and ambivalence. My hope for all of us is that we can see ourselves, together, as human beings who provide for one another a creative and fearless space for faith and courage and hospitality.

I am very grateful for your kind attention this morning.