



The Hospitality of God in the Hospitality Industry

Simon Carey Holt

This is a letter to a friend. Joanne is a chef who has worked in the hospitality industry for the last 25 years. We commenced our apprenticeships together. She is also a Christian, a person of deep and personal faith. However, Joanne struggles to find connection between her professional life and her religious commitments. Her struggle is a common one. For those who work in this field, what connection is there between the Christian vocation of hospitality and work in an industry that trades hospitality for profit?

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Dear Joanne,

Greetings. I have been anxious to write to you since we talked together last. You have been on my mind. I'm glad we got to talk in the way that we did. There were so many questions that arose from our conversation that I'm keen to keep thinking about. I value our relationship and I want to encourage you.

Can you believe it's been 25 years since we began our apprenticeships? I remember our first day on the job, both looking 'green' in our crisp white uniforms, starched hats and oversized kitchen clogs. For both of us, entering the professional kitchen was like venturing into a brave new world. Moving from the security of high school and home, I remember the anxiety I felt at this new and 'shadowy' place: the late nights and early mornings, split shifts and long hours, hot and sweaty kitchens, the mix and clash of cultures and languages, the noise, the tension, the constant weariness, and getting paid next to nothing for the privilege.

Do you remember our first head chef? Ziggy the Hun we used to call him. He was such a temperamental bloke, but amazingly gifted. He relished the opportunity to abuse us both from morning 'til night, getting more colourful in his language the later it got. Eventually we learned to laugh him off, but only after months of tears and resentment. It was a rollercoaster ride so much of the time: from exhilaration to exhaustion; from five star banquets to peeling potatoes and scrubbing pots; from culinary triumphs to disasters we'll never forget.

As you remind me so often, in the years since then our lives have taken such different paths. To this day you remain a professional chef, and very good one. You've seen incredible success and been awarded for your professionalism. But your work life has been one of consistently long hours, split shifts, weekends and evenings. I know it's taken its toll. And you've spent the last 25 years in inner city Melbourne, though your longing to be back in the country is as strong today as it's ever been.

As for me, it wasn't long after completing my apprenticeship that I left this all behind and headed interstate to Seminary. Though I loved the industry, I couldn't shake the sense that God was nudging me in a different direction. Since then I have studied theology, been ordained, worked in pastoral ministry, lived and studied overseas, and now, with a PhD, I'm back in Melbourne teaching theology. Though I still miss the kitchen, I'm happy where I am, and I know you are too.

Still, you're right: there is a contrast. In our last conversation you highlighted again the difference in our journeys, wondering if I had taken the 'higher' road while you settled for something more ordinary and self-serving—something less spiritual.

It grieves me that you would feel this way. You know that already. Though our paths have been different, there is no sense in which the choices I've made are of any more worth than yours. In fact from where I sit, the path you've taken is one full of theological and spiritual significance. Though we began discussing this together, there is so much more to say. Writing this letter is one way of continuing the conversation.

The Hospitality of God

I know that as a chef you rarely get to see those you serve, but what you provide through your kitchen is, in essence, hospitality. We at least agree on this. It's an interesting word. Apparently it's derived from the Latin *hospes* meaning both guest and host. At its core, it has to do with the nature of exchange between the two. It's the practical business of sharing relationship, space and resources for the benefit of the other.

For Christians, hospitality has a particular potency. Not that we can claim it as a practice unique to our tradition, but when we consider the character of the God we worship, it's impossible to push hospitality aside as something marginal to our faith. In fact, it lies at the core.

I know that you struggle with my bent to relating the hospitality of God to what you do in the

kitchen. I think you called it a leap in the dark! But I still hold that the leap is not as significant as you think.

Do you remember your service of baptism back in your early 20s? I do. I have no memory of where it was, but I remember hearing you say publically that you felt ‘received’ by God and ‘embraced’. That image of God receiving you is a powerful one. I cannot help but picture the maitre d’ who stood at the reception of one of the large hotel dining rooms I worked in. His task was to receive the guests as they arrived. Night after night, he stood at his post greeting each arrival by name, taking their coats and accompanying them to their table with warmth and discretion. For me, there’s something about that image that resonates with my picture of God.

Biblical images of God as host are many. God is hospitable in character, not just in action. The people of Israel—strangers, aliens, a people without refuge or identity—are received into the household of God. In God they find welcome, provision of their needs, a place to call home, and identity as the chosen people of God.

God’s hospitality to Israel points to God’s welcome of all people regardless of race, social status or religious heritage. The Hebrew prophets foretold the day when the nations will gather at the table of God:

“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”

(Isaiah 25:6-8)

It is this image of God as the consummate host that Jesus picks up in his practice and teaching. His opponents labeled him a glutton and a drunkard, for at every other moment he was sitting at the table with people, all sorts of people—religious leaders, tax collectors, the righteous and the sinful. And while he was eating with them he was often telling stories of wedding feasts and banquets. For Jesus this was an

intentional strategy. At every opportunity he was signaling that the kingdom he had come to establish was one in which all people were welcome. In a religious context where the devout were more concerned with guarding their own purity and keeping the riffraff at bay, Jesus’ picture of the hospitality of God was radically open, welcoming and inclusive.

To speak of hospitality from a Christian perspective, then, is to speak of the welcome and acceptance that we have received from God and therefore extend lavishly to others. In this sense, hospitality lies at the heart of the Christian mission. The prophet Isaiah speaks of hospitality as “widening the tent”, creating room for all of those in need who come our way. The Catholic writer Henri Nouwen describes the obligation that lies at the heart of our mission to offer “an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.” Perhaps we can imagine our vocation as waiters at the table of God—inviting strangers into friendship with the host and aliens into the community of the table.

Yes, I know, this is all heady stuff. How on earth do we get from here to the kitchen? You are entirely right to point to the contradictions between the hospitality I’ve described and your work in an industry where hospitality is commodity. While ‘the leap’ may be less than you thought, it is still challenging.

The Hospitality Industry

This whole notion of hospitality as an industry is relatively new. Do you remember our first classes at trade school? Though at the time most of it went over my head, our instructors did their best to help us understand the history of our work.

In reality, it wasn’t until the mid 19th century that hospitality became a reputable service to provide in a professional way. Until that time, establishments of hospitality were generally looked upon as morally suspect. For most of history, hospitality to the stranger was the informal responsibility of all people, whether providing a meal, a bed, or some momentary

refuge from cold or danger. In fact, offering hospitality was considered a part of one's humanity, essential in most religious frameworks as an expression of the human spirit in community. Literature from the 11th century shows that certain European communities judged the lack of hospitality to the stranger as no less than a capital crime.

Today's picture is so different. With the development of an industry ready to serve every possible human need, the informal, home-based and spontaneous hospitality of the past is now the exception rather than the rule. What's changed?

The nature of the household for one. For so much of history the individual household was a place of extended family, work and semi-public life. There was minimal distinction between public and private worlds. Today the lines are clear. The home is private space plain and simple. Inviting a stranger into today's home is a risk many people are unwilling to take.

Our understanding of what hospitality is for has changed too. Gradually, and most especially from the Middle Ages, hospitality as welcoming the stranger gave way to a strategy of garnering influence with the 'right' people. Hospitality got muddled with 'entertainment'. For the host, making the right impression was the primary concern.

Then there was the whole professionalization phenomenon. The development of hospitals, hostels and hospices gradually institutionalised the caring of the needy and the stranger. The step to offering hospitality for profit got significantly smaller.

Whatever the reasons, hospitality today has developed into an industry all of its own. And there's money to be made! In this city of Melbourne there are now in excess of 3,000 licensed restaurants, not to mention the plethora of unlicensed and BYO cafes. There are more than 1,000 places of accommodation from five star hotels to backpackers' haunts. For the most part, it is an industry where profit is the motivating factor. On a national level, the annual

combined profits rank in the tens of billions. At the top end of the hotel industry there is in excess of \$1.5 billion spent every year on building new and better facilities. You know better than I just how many people are prepared to pay exorbitant amounts of money on something as simple as dinner. A large part of the industry is geared toward serving and pampering those at the top end of the financial and social ladder.

At the same time, as an employment sector the accommodation, cafes and restaurants industry has the lowest labour cost of any industry division in Australia, spends the least amount of money on the training and development of staff, and has one of the highest proportions of unskilled employees born overseas who work with little opportunity for advancement.

They say there are now in excess of 100,000 professional cooks and chefs in Australia with a shortage of approximately 2,000 at any given time. Current employment growth in this sector is estimated at 3-5% a year. And yet, as you well know, the number exiting the profession—some 13% per annum—is chronic. The long hours, poor working conditions and relatively low pay stand in stark contrast to the glamour of a profession idealized by the advent of the celebrity chef.

So, in summary, you are right. The leap is still a leap, and a challenging one. But you'll not be surprised to know that I still think it's a leap worth making.

Forging Connections: A Spirituality of Paradox

The Christian faith is riddled with truth that can only be plumbed in the midst of contradiction. In my view, if drawing together the hospitality of God and the hospitality industry is like trying to combine oil and water, then we are probably in a good place to start.

Paradox lies at the heart of our Christian experience. Think of the poles of truth that give body to our faith: transcendence and imminence, holiness and grace, judgment and forgiveness, life and death, eternal and temporal, darkness and

light, heaven and earth. Christian spirituality is, in essence, about connecting with the divine and eternal in the midst of the messiness and ordinariness of human existence. It's about discovering and responding to God in the fleshliness of life here and now. It is incarnational. We live the reality of our faith in the 'in-between' places, in the shadows of what is and what is not, the Kingdom present and the Kingdom yet to come.

All this to say, Joanne, your work is a reflection of this paradox. You work in an industry that is riddled with apparent but hidden contradictions, rarely acknowledged and often disguised. The hospitality industry is one that succeeds upon its ability to project a veneered reality of prestige and glamour, yet the unreality lurks just beneath the surface.

A dining room in a fine restaurant may be the picture of perfection, order, beauty and serenity. Yet in the kitchen out the back, it's chaotic, hot, tense and messy. The spacious interior of the dining room exists at the expense of space for storage, production and preparation. Consequently, kitchens are often small, cramped spaces that offer only inches of room between work surfaces and people. The sophistication of the dining experience is maintained only as the physicality and rudimentary nature of the preparation and clean up is hidden from view.

Similarly, we have worked enough banquets and receptions together to see first hand the dramatic contrasts in those we served. Guests arrive to a perfectly set banquet room that creates that all-important first impression of opulence and occasion. They enter looking, themselves, perfect in their finery. By the end of the evening, though, the dining room may look more like a battleground, with guests slumped around in various sates of drunkenness. For hosts and service providers, the task is to keep some semblance of order while maintaining a spirit of gracious service.

A writer in the pages of *Quadrant* recently mused on the contrast between her life in the academic world and her work as a functions manager on weekends. In this reflection she

describes "the gross materiality" she confronts every evening in those she serves:

Mess, vomit, rotten food, garbage, sour smells, burnt offerings, and drunken bodies regularly confronted me at the end of the night. Quite literally, I had to put my hands in the muck that other people had left behind. My job was to sort refuse, dispose of it, then create a picture anew, as if it had never taken place.

Those who work in hospitality must also stay in touch with the fact that they are the modern, professional, servant class. No matter how dressed up it might be, hospitality professionals are about providing the most basic of services to their customers: feeding them, providing them with a bed to sleep in, or laundering their dirty underwear. While the glamour of the five star hotel and the rise of the celebrity chef might camouflage this, the truth is never far away.

One of the challenges you face is to balance your professional competence with the humility inherent in your role. You must live between taking pride in what you do—being a professional and competent artisan, manager and business person in an increasingly complex industry—and maintaining a traditional subservience when it comes to the demands and needs of your customers. At one moment you are in charge, directive, firm and professional, and at the next you are bowing to the unrealistic demands of an unhappy or irrational—sometimes drunk—customer. "Yes, ma'am. No ma'am. Certainly sir. I am sorry sir, I'll see to it right away."

Further, as a gifted chef you routinely create beauty, art and perfection. Yet in minutes your work can be disregarded, destroyed or ignored. I know that sense of 'throwing pearls before swine' night after night is often numbingly discouraging. More than in most professions, you confront the temporality of what you do on a daily basis, only to do it over and over again.

These are some of the paradoxes of your work, Joanne. Yet in none of this is the eternal worth of what you do as a hospitality professional negated.

Nor is the possibility of touching at the core of what Christian hospitality is about. In fact, I would argue that it is the paradoxical nature of your work that sacred connections are most obvious.

Certainly you are remunerated for what you do, but so are priests, pastors and missionaries. Certainly your service is within the context of a profit-based industry, but your experience of vocation is hardly diminished.

To speak eloquently about the Christian ministry of hospitality as an embodiment of the hospitality of God does not take away from the very practical, routine and earthy nature of what it is. Though they may issue from a profound spiritual experience and calling, acts of hospitality are fundamentally practical and hands-on. It is this fact that you are much more in touch with than most.

In your work you can't afford, nor would you tolerate, the luxury of romantic idealism when it comes to the nature of hospitality. It is messy, chaotic, mundane, ordinary, filled with contradictions and loathsome tasks. It is sometimes deeply fulfilling, even exhilarating, but mostly commonplace and routine. Occasionally it is received with genuine gratitude and affirmation, but more often than not with indifference, complaint or hostility. Those to whom you 'minister' will sometimes be at their best, finding some degree of renewal and comfort from your service, but often at their worst when your contribution seems to change nothing and mean very little. Perhaps in all of this you begin to touch the nature of grace—the underserved and often unwelcome kindness of God.

I have said enough. I look forward to hearing what you make of all this. Perhaps you will want to tell me that my head is still too much in the clouds! I would hope, however, the thought of finding the presence of God in what you do in the kitchen is enticing enough to warrant further discussion.

Let me conclude with some words from the respected Australian food writer Michael

Symons, who happens to believe that your worth as a cook is more than gold!

As people who embody the human virtues of warmth and generosity, cooks warrant our gratitude. As people who command an enormous range of knowledge and skills, they demand to be admired. As people committed to our pleasures, cultural development and survival, they are to be worshipped ... If 'we are what we eat', then in making our meals, cooks make us.

Granted, the thought of being worshipped is probably a bit of a stretch. Perhaps, though, the possibility that what you do in your work points us beyond you to the one who made and calls you is one worth considering.

Sincerely,

Simon

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