

Last Word: What does “hospitality” really mean?

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Last year I filled out an endless number of forms on the internet and had my photo taken this way for an American visa, that way for a Schengen one, another way for Britain. I stood in queues to gather freshly stamped documents from my bank, certificates from the revenue service, municipal verification that I own property, a letter confirming my long-term employment, payment slips, certificates of health, insurance, and so on. During face-to-face interviews I felt as if every government agent wanted to tell me: *We know you*—you sly, diseased, and poverty-stricken person, wanting permission to come and sponge off our social security system, to abuse our precious freedoms with your fundamentalist ideas, and to infect our population with your third-world unworthiness.

Standing in those queues, I wondered, what happened to the concept of hospitality? That is, the original meaning of the word, derived from the Latin *hospes*, meaning both “host” and “guest/stranger.”

In South Africa we are very familiar with the word thanks to the hospitality industry, which is a massive creator of tourism jobs. We are indeed very hospitable to those who can afford to tour our country, who pay for and consume what we have to offer. But those fleeing war, terror, or perilous living conditions can only expect hostility. By presenting hospitality as a product for consumption we have destroyed its very meaning; we have attached conditions to it that forever cut any links to conviviality, friendliness, generosity, or gracious amenability.

What happened to the ancient notion of “safe cities” where people could seek sanctuary? Why, in an era where everything is globalized, is it so impossible for people to move to other places? My books and poems travel around the world at astonishing rates, while I, despite various invitations, need to scrape and beg and pay exorbitant fees for visas.

The mere request for asylum, or even an ordinary visa, implicates somebody: A powerless person pins his or her hopes on a powerful person; a helpless person begs for the hospitality of a generous person. It seems to be

an unspoken belief that the millions of people turning up on the West's doorstep must be the useless ones, those with whom you can do nothing except take in like stray cats or dogs, or try to "absorb" with minimal discomfort. Meanwhile, a variety of rules and conditions for acceptance are spelled out around that inimitable word, the word that pushes right-wing political parties into power, and causes Brexit and Trump: "integrate." Successful "integration" absolves us from having to work out why some are never cold or hungry or terrified; why we have time to play and entertain and travel, to keep our bodies fit and our teeth white and straight.

Blithely ignoring diversity and the manipulated imbalances of wealth and power, it seems nations have claimed the right to decide: You may or may not enter my country, my neighborhood, my social-security system. Lodged in the outdated concepts of nationalism, impermeable borders, and the right to private ownership, even more barriers are being erected and conditions laid down—as if land, air, or water could ever belong to somebody specific. As Jacques Derrida phrased it: "All human creatures, all finite beings endowed with reason, have received, in equal proportion, 'common possession of the surface of the earth.'"

Put more bluntly: When will the first world begin to share equally with the rest of the world? Because, of course, everybody wants to live the lifestyle we see in American soap operas and films. We all want to have a house that is safe and equipped with water, electricity, and a fridge with food; we want to live in neighborhoods that have access to transportation, abundantly stocked shops, good and safe schools, pleasant streets, and kind residents. We want interesting jobs, holidays elsewhere, and not to be at the mercy of somebody's tyrannical whim.

For at least four decades it has been possible to produce enough food to feed everyone the world. Why isn't that happening? Most of the illnesses impairing the developing world can be prevented or cured, so why haven't we acted? Why do most human beings live unbearable lives? What is the real question here? One could say that many of the problems the West experiences with refugees come from our inability to imagine ourselves as thoroughly, and irredeemably, interconnected with their world.

So, waiting in these endless queues of humiliation I began dreaming up a plan to bring back the real true character of hospitality: Let us declare across the world a Seven-Year Period of Hospitality. All transport would be free and people could move anywhere after they sign a contract stating that they accept that discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, skin color, and religion is wrong. People could move to another street, into a park

or a millionaire's estate, into palaces, beaches, or forests. They could go wherever they think they could lead a better life. Those who are satisfied with where and how they live—in other words, the hosts—would have to live with these new arrivals for seven years. After that, the period would come to an end. Some people might return to their former homes, some might be evicted, but the world, hopefully, would be more equal.

In one way or the other, all of us are immigrants, having come from somewhere else— even staying in the same place, one may find that things can change so much that you become a kind of immigrant. How much “home” does a person need? Every single one of us needs the world. We need the whole world in order to be fully human and humane. People must be able to move as they have moved across the continents since life first appeared on earth. No nationality should claim us; no border should stop us.

Derrida reminds us that the refugee has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is “not his own,” one imposed on him by authorities. This imposition, he says, is the first act of violence, the moment in which the refugee's right to express himself as best he can in his mother tongue is violated. He is forced to sound incomprehensible and therefore unfathomable, without logic or reason—a second-class citizen in the making. So one needs a law, Derrida says: “the law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfillment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional.”

While there must be a balance between the complete hospitality of the host and the laws that regulate the behavior and demands of the guest, Derrida suggests that no matter how idealistic our assertions of unrestrained hospitality may be, they “must never be completely silenced by claims of impracticality.” He wants porous borders for those who flee, and non-porous ones for those who persecute, and asks that we look continuously for practical ways to become more and more hospitable.

This intricate equilibrium of hospitality and law is dislocated by the indigenous philosophers of southern Africa, who insist that survival lies in embracing, not killing, the stranger, all strangers. Mark Sanders, a scholar of Africa, has analyzed this theme in the work of the black South African writer A.C. Jordan, who cautions that if we want to avoid the disasters of the past, we must continually reinvent the figure of the stranger. Jordan sees it as the intellectual's task to insist on collective responsibility for the

stranger as the figure constitutive of the community. Only viewpoints alien to our own will help us become aware of the perspectives we habitually and unthinkingly adopt.

Hospitality is an opportunity to become, in a limited sense, one who is not one's own; a figure through which one may own oneself. We become who we truly are through the accommodation of the stranger. Re-imagining a society that includes the stranger opens up immense possibilities. The stranger who threatens stability, who puts society at risk, in the last instance also provides the possibility of restoring and saving it. Our survival depends on embracing the stranger, the refugee, even when we see them as threats.