

## “Come To The Welcome Table”

We begin with a wish:  
 How I wish you could have tasted my grandmother’s baked  
 Sweet potato and apple crisp,  
 Made with sweet potatoes as large as my head and green, tart cooking apples,  
 Nutmeg, cinnamon, whole milk, brown sugar,  
 spread out in a baking dish,  
 a layer of cornflakes on top to give it that  
 Midwestern crunch (in the Midwest everything has cornflakes),  
 baked at 375 for 45 minutes,  
 Let cool for 20 more minutes,  
 Kiss the grandchildren before serving,  
 Offer a prayer of thanksgiving,  
 And then serve.  
 I hope you are taking notes. This is the recipe.

It wasn’t dessert; it was made to accompany the meal,  
 An island of sweetness there in between the green beans  
 And the two other kinds of potato, and the smoked turkey,  
 And the German sauerkraut (not exactly a kid favorite, and which  
 I discreetly hid in my napkin),  
 And the cranberry, fresh, never canned,  
 And the gravy,  
 And because it was the mid-west,  
 Always some kind of mysterious casserole.  
 Can we say carbohydrate overload?  
 Can we say food coma?  
 Never mind. It doesn’t matter.  
 What the food police don’t seem to understand  
 Is that food isn’t just for the body; it’s for the spirit, too, it’s for the soul.  
 Am I right?

In order to get to table we had to walk over the threshold  
 And through the foyer,  
 A foyer that was filled with photos of faces,  
 Some of them familiar, some of them my own immediate family,  
 But also other photos,  
 strangers in black and white I had never met who seemed to share my nose,  
 My eyes, my toothy smile.  
 Long since gone, gone before I ever arrived,  
 These faces watched me and welcomed me year after year,  
 Through childhood, through adolescence, through college,  
 Through marriage, through the arrival of babies,  
 Through changes, through good times, through hard times,  
 Through loss.  
 They watched me and welcomed me especially  
 The year my grandmother died and we crossed that familiar threshold,

Walked through that familiar foyer  
 And went to that welcome table to eat the potluck meal  
 Prepared in her honor,  
 And even though her body wasn't there, her spirit was.  
 "Sit," she would say. *"Eat. More sweet potato?  
 More cranberry? Did you eat ALL of that sauerkraut already?  
 Where did it go?"*

*"We have crossed many thresholds to arrive at this space and time,"*  
 Says Rebecca Parker,  
*'coming across distances, boundaries,  
 Coming with our loves, our children, our memories,  
 Coming to our senses, our awareness,  
 Coming again to decisions, to hopes.  
 Come, we are not alone, she says.  
 Come, we are not alone.*

And now, this morning, I am thinking of  
 All the thresholds we cross and all that we bring with us,  
 So much of it unspoken – the hunger, the decisions,  
 The losses, the joy, the disappointments, the hopes,  
 The thirst.  
*'Come on in,' we tell each other, 'how are you?'*  
*How have you been?'*  
 And oh how Thanksgiving this year would be different  
 If we really answered truthfully that question;  
 If we really listened truthfully to the answers given us.

But I get ahead of myself.  
 I am thinking first of the houses we will visit next week,  
 The rooms, the foyers we will walk through.  
 I am thinking of the tables we will sit at,  
 The meals, the food.  
 I hear us talking.  
*"Come on in!" we say. "Welcome! How are you?  
 Sit. Eat. Want more? Seconds?  
 Still hungry? Get enough?  
 Here, let me fill your glass.  
 Here, have another slice of pie.*  
 I love what my daughter says.  
 She says, *"the dinner side of my tummy is full,  
 But the dessert side is totally empty."*

And oh how we might be different, and not just during the holidays,  
 If we applied this same honest assessment,  
 these same questions,  
 This same hospitality  
 To the hunger and the thirst in us that is deeper than stomach,  
 Deeper than body,

Deeper than any one meal can fill.

Imagine the meal with me

*Still hungry?* We are asked, and imagine saying: *Yes,*

*But enough turkey, enough bread.. Do you have you have instead a little time?*

*I am hungry for conversation, for friendship; for someone to talk to.*

*Still thirsty?* We are asked. *Yes, but enough wine.*

*Do you happen to have tucked in the back a vintage bottle of hope?*

*Have you seen the job market? Have you seen the economy?*

*I am so thirsty for a vision to get me past these rough times.*

*Have you felt welcomed?* We are asked.

*Yes, but I bring not just myself.*

*I bring my loves, my losses, my questions, my decisions, my mistakes,*

*My joy, my hopes, my fears.*

*I am so hungry for a table where all of me is welcome.*

*“We offer bread,”* says our reading,

These words originally written for a Unitarian Universalist

Combined communion and Seder Service,

But I think they apply to so much more.

*‘let all who hunger come and eat.*

*‘We offer drink; let all who thirst come and drink.*

*We come to break bread. We come to quench our thirst;*

*We come to make peace.*

*All our worthy. All our welcome.*

And though it is true that by and large we are a people who live in a land of plenty,

And we sit at banquets, and we clink glasses,

And we eat and drink our fill,

I wonder sometimes if we are also still famished.

Are we starved we are for time, purpose, hospitality?

Are we hungry we are for acceptance, intimacy?

Is the strongest kind of kind of connection we have to something called WI-FI?

Can we read and understand nutrition labels, but wonder more how to nourish the spirit?

Do we know all about how to serve a meal,

but what we really need is a way to serve something

Larger than ourselves?

Or in other words: what does feasting at the Welcome Table actually mean?

Years ago I was taught about this.

This is before seminary. This is before I learned about

the etymology of the word hospitality, before I studied

the theology of welcome with Prof. Wildman,

before I learned how to do an exegesis (seminary word

for analysis) of the hospitality texts in the bible.

In other words, this was before I studied hospitality,

And could, you know, actually experience it instead.

What a novel idea!

It is my first Thanksgiving away from home in my life.  
 I am three months into my two year Peace Corps tour.  
 I am in the Caribbean; there are palm trees instead of autumn leaves.  
 The temperature is 92 not 42.  
 My grandmother's sweet potato, apple crisp is approximately 3,500 miles away.  
 And the only turkeys on the island are the ones shipped down from the states...in a can.  
 I am homesick.  
 I am lonely. I am hungry.  
 These months away my body has been nourished  
 by mangoes and green fig and rice  
 And guava juice and spring water and the local island beer.

But despite all this I am hungry, I am thirsty.  
 And for what I don't even need to tell you because you know,  
 Because you have been there with me in your life:  
 We miss Company, familiarity, family, we miss being welcomed home  
 At the Table.  
*Sit. Eat. Welcome. Want some more? Have another slice.*  
 At the Welcome Table these aren't just words said over food.  
 These are expressions of unconditional love.

I am alone on the island, the meeting of my future wife Karen who will move  
 In down the road from me is still one year away,  
 When down from the upstairs veranda, in the apartment above me,  
 Calls a voice, my landlady. Here name is Ruby.  
 'Natan!' she calls, her accent taking out the 'h' in my name.  
 'Natan! Come up for lunch?' She asks.  
 For food, especially on Thanksgiving,  
 I don't need to be asked twice. Two minutes later I'm there at her door.  
 "that was fast," she says. And then she looks at me in the eye.  
 'Isn't today a big feast for you? Something called Thanksgiving?'  
 "It is Ruby," I say. 'But how did you know?'"  
 "I get CNN," she says. "Every year I watch your president  
 Pardon the turkey.'  
 And then she steps aside and ushers me across her threshold,  
 As if she saying with Rebecca Parker,  
 Come, we have crossed many thresholds to arrive at this time and place,  
 Come into m living room,  
 My dining room, my kitchen.

"Sit" she says. 'Eat. Welcome.'  
 And there at the table is  
 Chicken wrapped and cooked in banana leaf.  
 Baked yam.  
 Rice and beans.  
 Rolls sweetened with nutmeg.  
 Pork. Fried Yellow Plantain.  
 For dessert Ginger ice-cream.

Fresh mango, fresh orange,  
 Fresh banana.  
*'Want some more?' She says.*  
*Let me refill your glass. Here, have another slice.*  
*Tell me, Natan, how are you?*  
*How do you like my country?*  
*How are settling in?*

At Ruby's table these weren't just words.  
 They were expressions of hospitality, of welcome, even of love.  
 I was hungry and she gave me food.  
 I was thirsty and she gave me drink.  
 I was a stranger and she welcomed me.  
 Let all who hunger come and eat.  
 Let who thirst come and drink.  
 We come to break bread.  
 We come to quench our thirst.  
 We come to make peace.  
 And I'm thinking – in response to my question: what does feasting at the welcome table  
 Mean?  
 I'm thinking that sometimes it means something very simple.  
 It means being hungry enough to accept the invitation;  
 It means being hungry enough to own up to just how hungry we are.  
 I could have moped in my dim Caribbean apartment on Thanksgiving.  
 I could have eaten cold rice I planned to eat,  
 along with a healthy side of self-pity.  
 I could have stayed at my table and felt famished in so many other ways  
 that go deeper than stomach, deeper than body.  
 But Ruby saved me that day, as much as anyone can save another.  
*"Natan!" she called. 'Natan, want some lunch?*  
*Want to come up to my table?*  
*To my Welcome Table?*

So this is our Thanksgiving challenge I set before all of us.  
 Ask yourself: who is calling you back to life this season?  
 And who can you call back life to this season?  
 Ask yourself: Who is setting for you a place at the table?  
 And who can you set a place at the table for?  
 Ask yourself: What are hungry for that goes deeper than stomach, deeper than body?  
 And what hunger do you notice in someone else that goes deeper than stomach,  
 Deeper than body?  
 Holding us is this promise.  
 That around this welcome table of our shared faith we say to one another  
 And to a world that is hurting.  
 Come. Sit. Welcome. Let all who hunger come and eat.  
 Let all who thirst come and drink.  
 We come to be restored in love.  
 We come to be made new by love.

All are worthy. All are welcome.  
All are worthy. All are welcome.  
All are worthy. All are welcome.

And let us rise and sing the old spiritual that gives music  
To these words, the lyrics are in your insert: