

The Imperative for Intentional Communal Dinners:
A Spiritual, Secular, and Post-Secular Approach to Hospitality

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by

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To my family James, Paloma, Leo, and Margarita

and

Tallu Schuyler Quinn

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*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.
Matthew 14:15*

The Imperative for Intentional Communal Dinners: A Spiritual, Secular and Post-Secular Approach to Hospitality

Every person on this planet needs and deserves a place at the table. It is within the fiber of our beings to share nourishment of the body and soul and have authentic connections. Be it interreligious, interfaith, interbelief, secular, or post-secular¹ dialog, we all have a need for belonging. Many of the traditions in the art of hospitality are slowly fading as we are confronted with the rigors of life. With our world becoming more polarized and reeling from two years of a global pandemic, we have had to excuse ourselves and walk away from the communal table in order to survive. The public health measures and social distancing mandates, although necessary, have caused a major upheaval, bringing weariness, insecurity, loneliness and isolation to our lives. This is an invitation to return to the table safely, and partake of the life-giving communal meal that provides nourishment of our bodies and our souls. This thesis is about the need to reclaim and rebuild our waning communities, reclaim our place at the table that sustains us, reclaim our relationship to the small family farms that provide the food that nourishes us, and work on making fresh, life-sustaining food accessible for all, not just for those who could afford it. It means knowing how to prepare nourishing meals, and knowing how to offer and accept hospitality regardless of your social position in order to revitalize a community that can sustain us. Hospitality can be defined in a multitude of ways including lodging and entertainment. In its most basic terms, it means showing goodwill towards a guest, but for the purposes of this paper,

¹Biljana Popovska, Zhanet Ristoska, and Pablo Payet, “The Role of Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue in the Post-Secular World,” *Academicus*, no. 16 (2017): 38. For this paper I am following the World Council of Religions in distinguishing between *interfaith* (interaction between a range of faith groups) and *interreligious* (interaction between Christian denominations).

I am referring to modest daily or weekly shared meals, not sumptuous banquets or feasts. It is the type of communal eating shared across all cultures.

This paper will explore the liminal realm of being human, our need to belong, our need to commune as people searching for meaning, and we will do that by looking at both sides of a secular and spiritual threshold through the practical experience of sharing the table—eating and communing together—in order to create a more equitable, egalitarian society.

Methodological Considerations

An Anthropological Approach to Hospitality

There were several ways I considered approaching this thesis. One was through a secular anthropological lens using ethnological case studies as taught by Dr. Samuel Cruz as part of my graduate courses at Union Theological Seminary. This dovetailed with my concentration: Religion and Society. According to R.I.M. Dunbar, social eating or communal eating is an adaptive human behavior. It is commonplace in all cultures and eating with “invited guests being regarded as the height of hospitality and an important way of getting to know people.”² Dunbar’s studies suggest communal eating evolved as part of our common ancestry as a means to create social bonds, and people became closer as a result of sharing food, and not the other way around: creating bonds, and subsequently eating together. When we eat communally we are happier, more trusting of others, and find more satisfaction from life. We are able to expand our network of people to depend upon for support as well as being more engaged within our communities. We enjoy better health, and all of these factors together trigger enhanced endorphins as a result of these social bonds.³ These social bonds can offer solace from psychological responses to Covid:

²R. I. M. Dunbar, “Breaking Bread: The Functions of Social Eating,” *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* 3, no. 3 (September 2017): 198-199.

³Dunbar, “Breaking Bread,” 199.

anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances as outlined in a study by Ballou, Gray, and Palsson.⁴ There is, however, a dilemma: not everyone has the wherewithal to develop and maintain social bonds during this time of social distancing during this pandemic. The inequities abound. It was particularly hard for workers to brave public transportation and continue their front-line work while more privileged workers were able to transition to online work at home. Although hospital and death rates are now falling, offering in-person hospitality during the waning period of Covid still poses a risk. Now that the mandates are being relaxed, we can see that most people don't want a *return to pre-Covid / Omicron normal*. In a four part study by Stephan Lewandowsky, Chair of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Bristol, and Ullrich Ecker, Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Western Australia show that instead of *a return to normal*, people strongly preferred a progressive future, a desire is to attain a fairer, more sustainable future.⁵ This fairer, more sustainable future is a secular approach, but it also enhances our way of life where we take altruistic steps to help others.

Sacred, Religious and Secular Spaces

Another approach I considered was to view hospitality and communal eating from the sacred lens. There is a yearning to reconnect with each other in the act of blessing, preparing and sharing meals as a sacred way of being and sharing with others. Yes, we will return to dust, but we are more than flesh. Through our spirituality we have compassion, we can model the

⁴Sarah Ballou, Sarah Gray, and Olafur S. Palsson. "Validation of the Pandemic Emotional Impact Scale," *Brain, Behavior, & Immunity - Health* 9, Direct Science (Volume 9, 10/17/20, 100161), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbih.2020.100161>.

⁵Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich Ecker, "Life after COVID: Most People Don't Want a Return to Normal. They Want a Fairer, More Sustainable Future," *Down to Earth* (HT Digital Streams Ltd., 1/4/22), <https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=columbiau&id=GALE%7CA688549176&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

teachings of Jesus as he addressed exploited agrarian communities. Like Jesus, we can welcome all people to sit and share fellowship at the table.

I chose not to use a strict binary secular versus sacred/religious realm in my methodology because, as a social entrepreneur, my goal is to make this world a kinder and fairer world. For this thesis I using an older definition of secularism from George Holyoke's principles:

Secularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means; measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making the service of others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life—having for its objects the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point, as the immediate duty of society: inculcating the practical sufficiency of natural morality apart from Atheism, Theism, or Christianity...⁶

Although Otto Maduro does not define religion per se, for the purposes of this thesis, I am using his perspective on religion. He posits that no religion exists in a vacuum. Instead, religion is a situated reality, grounded in a particular human context, “a concrete and determined geographical space, historical moment and social milieu.”⁷ When Maduro speaks of sharing religion, he is referring to a shared “collective life of multiple other dimensions—economic, affective, familial, linguistic, political, military, cultural... And these dimensions are closely linked among themselves. They all overlap, they are interrelated.” In this context, if religion is a situated reality that is shared within a social context, does having a religious or a secular point of view matter? Vinoy Paikkattu goes even further to say the dichotomy between sacred and secular is essentially a human construct, a cultural, political and religious construct.⁸ The dichotomy is not a natural

⁶George Holyoake, “The Principles of Secularism Defined,” from *Project Gutenberg's The Principles of Secularism*, (Chapter 3, 1871, Open source via Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm>). Although more modern interpretations of secularism pertain to the separation of church and state, I am using this older and broader definition.

⁷Maduro, Otto, *Religion and Social Conflicts* (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1982), 41-43.

⁸Vinoy Paikkattu, “Dismantling the Dichotomy Between Secular and Sacred: A Wittgensteinian Way,” *Journal of Dharma* 40, 3 (July - September 2015): 295.

development “but has grown through the ebb and flow of human history.”⁹ He follows the Wittgensteinian method in an attempt to “understand the question of the sacred and the secular in a deeper way, neither to exclude one over the other nor to endorse a compromise between the two, *but to see the meaning of both* from the point of view of human person who discovers the meaning in them so that life becomes a ‘lived life in the world.’”¹⁰ Along with Paikkattu’s understanding of hospitality, giving for the sake of giving without expecting anything in return, the gospel of Luke also echoes this sentiment:

When Jesus was invited to the house of the leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath he said to his host: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14).

Jesus also lived within two realms. In Luke’s telling, he dined with the elite, yet in this case they were looking for something he would say that would entrap him. Jesus stood firmly on the side of the poor and oppressed. This is the realm that the Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr calls liminality, an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. We are still in that state of betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but have not yet entered the next. The very vulnerability and openness of this liminal space allows room for something genuinely new to happen.¹¹

I believe this global pandemic is an example of an immense, collective liminal realm where we are in an existential holding pattern until we figure out when we can emerge and commune safely. It has been two years of social distancing mandates, deciphering

⁹Paikkattu, “Dismantling,” *Journal of Dharma*, 296.

¹⁰Paikkattu, “Dismantling,” *Journal of Dharma*, 312.

¹¹Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: The Fine Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2004), 135-138.

“pending-further-notice” directives while trying to protect our loved ones, friends, neighbors and the public from the waves of the newly-forming Covid variants.

A Culture of Hospitality

What did Jesus want the world to look like? We know that Jesus sat at any table regardless of the host’s social position, or the guest’s gender, occupation or nationality or religious affiliation. From the apostle’s accounts, Jesus broke religious and secular laws by offering radical hospitality. The parables of Jesus demonstrates that as a prophet, he preached on a level that transcended religion or secularism. He lived in a liminal domain, being born a first-century Jewish teacher, he observed Jewish customs, yet he challenged religious practices and conventional social constructs. Jesus not only *asked* us to take risks, he demonstrated how to take risks. He dined with the rich, and poor, Jews and Gentiles, the lepers and tax collectors, sex workers and priests.

When I think of hospitality, I immediately think of the kitchen of my grandparent’s farm in the central mountains of Puerto Rico. It is a remote region and as a child, it entailed having a four-wheel drive and an adventurous spirit to traverse the steep cow path roads and maneuver around the dangerous hairpin turns. We went back to live on the farm for over a year while my father recovered from a serious illness in New York, and I was fortunate to experience being part of a web of a large extended family for a slice of time. I had siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles and extended family, friends and farm laborers around. I found comfort in the kitchen because it was teeming with life and activity with relatives and neighbors, cooking, eating, making deliveries and picking up cargo. It takes a great deal of planning and perseverance to run a diversified family farm. With all its interconnected activity, it would have been hard to find a

quiet spot in this farmhouse. It was noisy, gritty, with a cacophony of roosters, horses lauding the day and whistling tree frogs at night. I loved that my aunts and older cousins were in charge of the kitchen which was also the hub of the operation. They talked, cared for grandmother, and sometimes sang as they worked. Mealtimes meant blessings, simultaneous conversations interwoven with laughter, logistics for the next day, soothing a fussy infant, and toasts, announcements, sometimes a song or a poem. I spent most of my time exploring the farm with children of the farm workers. We were assigned little chores, plucking beetles out of a tobacco row, and catching a chicken for a stew. We visited farm animals, climbed mango and breadfruit trees, picked avocados to bring to the kitchen, and listened to birdsong. We didn't have toys but we fashioned them from found objects. When I envision what joyous creativity means, I think of these kind, resourceful children and their embodied sense of hospitality. From the way they moved so gracefully through the paths, to the way they interacted with the animals, to the tenderness of how they delivered packages to the elderly widow and stood in line for a piece of candy, everything they did was infused with loving kindness. The aroma of coffee, coriander, garlic and onions as well as the smell of compost, manure and wet charcoal, still reminds me of that carefree, unspoken hospitality of that farmhouse and the children of the workers. I am inspired to maintain a garden, to compost organic matter, and build bonfires simply to keep recreating that feeling of awe, discovery, and teeming-with-life-connection with the earth.

It is almost impossible to be in a rush and be in the spirit of hospitality. Hospitality runs counter to a society that measures a person's success solely by the value of their wealth. Hospitality runs counter to the edict: "time is money." Offering hospitality requires a slower pace to focus on the importance of relationships. The anticipation and preparation for a guest's arrival, attentive listening, making a spiritual connection, enjoying the warmth of a communal meal,

making guests feel welcomed—all of these things take time. We all need more of this in our lives. This time brings me closer to the spirit of my ancestors' hospitality: offering goodwill to everyone in everyday encounters, strangers, acquaintances, or friends, whether they are in need or not.

In my recent visit to Isabella, a coastal town in Puerto Rico, I listened to a bank teller spend a few extra minutes with a client to talk about their families. I was mindful to address every person with a greeting before I made a purchase of any kind. I would never dare to honk my horn unless it was an emergency. I witnessed a group of joggers graciously and swiftly pulling my cousin's car from a deep rut on the shoulder, everyone cheering, exchanging fist bumps, and continuing their jog. The culture of hospitality may change as Puerto Rico becomes gentrified, but for now hospitality still means warmly welcoming anyone that stops by to say hello, offering food and drink. In our home hospitality meant opening up the fold-up cot in the alcove for countless guests that arrived and needed a place to stay. My father once arrived with a 6-year-old boy, a distant relative that lived with us for a year until his widowed father was able to recover from his grief and bring him back home. Hospitality is an act of grace and love to others.

I speak from a liminal place of my youth as well. Being raised in the South Bronx, I was introduced to the extraordinary lives and sometimes paradoxical nature of the adults around me. It was a revelation to discover that adults who did not speak English were as vulnerable as children. I was designated to translate for our neighbors, mostly members of our Catholic parish. Translating was more than just bridging two languages because so much was at stake. I was there to advocate for these families. If I made a simple mistake in translation, or if something was misunderstood, say in a public assistance application, it could potentially cost a family months of missed income, economic hardship, and deeper poverty. If that happened, a mistake could take

months to resolve. At the time, if your electricity or heat were cut off, this meant your children could be taken from you. I discussed this with Rev. Dr. Theoharis,¹² and we agreed, this was the ultimate immoral act anyone can do to a mother.

The early 1960s was a pivotal time politically: the last Jim Crow laws were being unraveled, there were a string of assassinations, and riots broke out at night. This era was marked by blurry images of families in distress while also being vigilant during long waiting periods at various agencies, doctor's offices, and the police precinct. It was a time of fervent prayer. The only clarity I had was that I sensed a grace, blessings from a powerful force that guided me. I had a purpose in life, along with my parents and community, to offer hospitality to alleviate the suffering of the more vulnerable women and children around us.

These families, like my own, were part of the Puerto Rican migration after WW2, a diaspora where roughly 40% of the population of Puerto Rico left the island, and of those who left, 80% had moved to New York City.¹³ It may have seemed like a choice to move, but from discussions with elders, it was more like an expatriation of people from their homes and livelihoods. This separation from the homeland was different because there was no lengthy journey. The migration didn't involve walking, or long bus or train rides, or even a passport. It meant buying an inexpensive ticket, boarding a plane, and being picked up by a relative a few hours later. In a way it's astonishing that so many women like my mother who lived their whole life in a rural area, perhaps never venturing more than a few miles from their hometown, probably washing clothes by the river the day before, are then thrust into the whirlwind of the

¹²Reflections from my interview with Dr. Theoharis on 8/12/21.

¹³Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens, *Oxcart Catholicism on Fifth Avenue: the Impact of the Puerto Rican Migration Upon the Archdiocese of New York* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993). The statistics were from Dr. Diaz-Stevens' lecture entitled "Fuego a la Lata: The Puerto Rican Experience in New York Mobilizing Institutions and of Institutions Mobilizing" at a conference at Hunter College entitled *Culto y Vida: A Conference on Religiosity and Puerto Rican Studies* (2011).

metropolis being directed through the New York subway system to start work in a factory the following day.

I want to be clear about the perspective from where I write. When we arrived in New York in the 1960s, we were part of the diaspora being economically ousted from our homeland. How do you make sense of a new culture that does not welcome you? How do you shield a family from an Empire that solely values exploitive labor? How do you recreate a community to help you make sense of this new reality? We can heed Paul's invitation to open the door to our hearts and welcome everyone in the spirit of Jesus, including showing compassion to the stranger:

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another... (Romans 12:12-14)

We can certainly celebrate our communities, eat, sing, dance, create something new together. Hospitality, as seen in Paul's light, urges us to *lean in* with hospitality, just as Jesus had welcomed them. This seems simple, but what Paul is asking us to do in this passage has several components. Helen Paynter's hermeneutical exploration of biblical hospitality in "Make Yourself at Home"¹⁴ argues that a subtler understanding of the developing and complex biblical view of hospitality will aid the development of a more robust Christian ethic, especially in light of the contemporary challenge of migration." She explains that hospitality themes in the Bible are rife with tensions and contradictions. She defines hospitality as "an accommodation of the vulnerable stranger; the term accommodation is used in the sense of 'making room' or 'adapting to,' in contrast to mere tolerance, co-existence or entertaining. It is therefore a costly action, involving

¹⁴Helen Paynter "Make Yourself at Home: The Tensions and Paradoxes of Hospitality in dialogue with the Bible," from *Bible and Critical Theory*, (Vol.14, no.1, 2018), <https://novaajs.newcastle.edu.au/ojsbct/index.php/bct/article/view/687>

change within the host for the benefit of the guest.”¹⁵ In other words, your effort in hospitality should run deeper than “tossing a coin at a beggar.”

Puerto Rico is marketed for its hospitality. By tourist standards, it meets the full checklist of what paradise should look like. Being a U.S. territory makes it an easy travel destination for Americans as no passport is needed. It is stunning in its geological diversity: two bioluminescent bays, beaches, mangroves, rainforests, salt flats, a majestic mountain range with flora, fauna and enough wildlife to suit any type of traveler. However, Puerto Rico’s liminal political status is also a social justice issue that needs to be examined. As a commonwealth, to this day, it is neither a state or an independent island nation. Unfortunately, it is a hegemonic in-between nation, a politically liminal nation. Although called a commonwealth, its legal status is an unincorporated colony of the U.S.

If we examine the Jones Act, a precarious amount, over 80% of the food, now is imported,¹⁶ making it dependent on imports, even when there is fertile soil and a year-round growing season. This makes Puerto Rico’s dependence on Empire for almost all its food a key aspect of its colonial status. When my parents were children they survived the Great Worldwide Depression followed by WWII which caused wide-spread devastation to this U.S. colony. The transition to mass scale development and urbanization displaced the poor that were working in the farming sector, causing this mass displacement. Edgardo Meléndez explains that the Puerto Rican migration experience is quite unique. Ironically, it is where the government of a non-nation state was engaged in promoting the migration to the U.S. of which they are

¹⁵Paynter, “Make Yourself at Home.”

¹⁶ Israel Meléndez Ayala and Alicia Kennedy, “How the U.S. Dictates What Puerto Rico Eats,” Opinion, Guest Essay, *New York Times*, 10/1/2021; Other sources say the rate of imported food is more than 90%, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/01/opinion/puerto-rico-jones-act.html>

technically citizens, assisted by U.S. policy.¹⁷ This U.S policy destroyed the agricultural sector on which most people worked. There are recurring waves of people forced to leave, drafted during WWII and the Vietnam war, and driven out by economic factors.

The last wave to leave the island was in part due to a series of natural disasters, Hurricane Irma, followed by Hurricane Maria which compounded the problems of the recession. The migration was also partly due to the public debt passed on to the residents by a succession of corrupt governing bodies, and austerity measures imposed by a federal board (appointed by the U.S. congress) which resulted in cutbacks to basic services. If you factor in an earthquake and the pandemic in 2020, yet another wave of people left the island. What happens to the souls of people in a liminal place of whom are outwardly poised to straddle the imperial practices of the U.S.? I can attest to the fact that many of us are deeply steeped in nostalgia, longing to be with family in Zion, singing a communal lament, questioning “how shall we sing the Almighty’s song in this strange land.”¹⁸

The Intersection Between the Spiritual and the Secular

Soli Salgado covered interesting facts about a new interest in monastic practices among a diverse group of laypeople. She interviewed Judith Valente, a Benedictine oblate¹⁹ with the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchinson, Kansas, who leads contemplative retreats online and in person throughout monasteries across the U.S. Valente found it interesting that “lay people—whether Catholic or spiritual-but-not-religious, married or unmarried, male or

¹⁷Edgardo Meléndez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States*, (Ohio State University Press, Global Latin/o Americas, 2017), 25-121.

¹⁸From the lyrics “By the Rivers of Babylon” a Rastafarian folk song referencing Psalm 37:1-4.

¹⁹Oblates laypersons who follow the Rule of St. Benedict in their daily lives as far as their way of life permits. *St. Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries*, Translated from Latin by Leonard J. Doyle, St. John’s Abbey Press, Collegeville, MN 1948).

female, outnumber the monks and sisters about three to one.”²⁰ Valente explained this phenomenon:

There is a hunger out there for genuine communion. Not just communication, but genuine communion, and one of the biggest monastic values is hospitality. Here, they suddenly feel valued, like they belong here.²¹

What is interesting is that this diverse group of lay people are participating in a contemplative retreat alongside religious participants and other monastics. They are housed and feel welcomed by religious monastics. The retreats are successful because of the hospitality offered by the monastics. Hospitality, especially for participants of an intentional community, can transcend secular or religious affiliations. It enables all to commune in a meaningful way. Salgado highlighted Adam Bucko’s work as Co-founder of the Center for Spiritual Imagination, a monastic community that weaves Benedictine, Franciscan, Cistercian, and Carmelite traditions with other spiritual influences. I bring this theme of intersection because it is important to make a distinction. Bucko believes “how someone feels about churches isn’t a predictor for how they feel about God, spirituality or the mystical quest for meaning and purpose.”²² He found that these people who identify as *not religious* are not attending services in churches only because they have found God, or spirituality, in other places: “in nature, in activism, in joining people who are fighting for justice, in what could be called less religious spiritualities, like mindfulness.”²³

²⁰Soli Salgado, “Monasticism Sees a Renewal as People Seek Meaning in a Rushed World,” *Crux, Catholic News Service* (2/19/22), (<https://cruxnow.com/cns/2022/02/monasticism-sees-a-renewal-as-people-seek-meaning-in-a-rushed-world>)

²¹Salgado, “Monasticism Sees a Renewal.”

²²Salgado, “Monasticism Sees a Renewal.”

²³Salgado, “Monasticism Sees a Renewal.”

When the Irish Nuns Came to Dinner (or The Praxis of Liberation Theology)

I was always comfortable in a busy kitchen because kitchens are the life source of energy, food and sustenance, a place to learn, to laugh, and a place of comfort from sorrows. My mother introduced me to the basics of cooking *comida criolla*, Puerto Rican comfort food. When we moved back to New York I had supper ready for everyone when she returned from her job. She arrived every evening with a large laundry bag of *piecework* from the factory, smaller projects that were paid by how pieces she completed each evening. It ensured our family had enough money for us to attend Catholic school. My father was a server at an upscale restaurant and showed me countless tips from baking breads to setting a table. He was in the institutional hospitality business. I enjoyed discovering new foods, anything he brought back from work. We lived in low-income housing projects, and we could not afford to eat out, much less dine at a posh restaurant. That did not deter him from showing us the basics of dining etiquette. At the time it was unusual for Puerto Rican men to share the kitchen, but my parents combined their knowledge and cooked Sunday meals together. Sometimes it was a sumptuous meal, sometimes plain, but we opened with a prayer and connected with extended family and friends that would drop by. As a family we also prepared food for many of the events at the Catholic parish as well as for the many parties we had at home.

It was only after studying liberation theology at Union Theological Seminary that I became aware that the Catholic parish priest that came to our parish was a Liberation Theologian. He was active in the civil rights movement, joined demonstrations, including the March on Washington in 1963, and marched with Rev. Martin Luther King in Selma. He was deeply committed to the tenets of Vatican Council II. This coincided with his appointment to our parish, a rapidly changing, white-flight-ethnic-shift from Irish to Puerto Rican parishioners. He

followed in the footsteps of Liberation Theologists, learning Spanish, even incorporating the jazzy sing-song Nuyorican dialect, and stood bravely, firmly, ardently by the poor in the South Bronx. When the services changed from Latin to English, my parents joined a group to petition for a Spanish mass, and once granted, this jarred the monastic community. The altar then faced the parishioners, and the nun's habits became optional. Some younger nuns were exhilarated by the change and started wearing lay persons' clothing that were popular in the 60s. I helped the nuns with their weekly food shopping and pushed the food cart alongside them to their kitchen. This is where I noticed how some of the older nuns seemed bewildered, confused and reticent, unprepared for these sudden changes in their parish. The Irish immigrant families had all but a handful moved out. These nuns could not comprehend how the world they had known so well changed so quickly with all the indigenous-looking Brown and Black black bodies filling up the pews.

Then came the day when my parents told us to be on our best behavior because we were having the nuns over for dinner on Sunday. This was one of the Latin American Liberation theological values of the church the priest instituted. He encouraged the clergy to get to know the community they were serving, how we lived, worked and how we worshiped at home. My parents were nervous as we never had anyone other than our family and friends over. We prepared our regular Sunday fare, bacalao (codfish), rice with pigeon peas, and viandas (an assortment of typical root vegetables: yucca, yautia, sweet potatoes, green plantains) and rice pudding.

The three nuns arrived exactly on time, and I was relieved they were in habits because it was awkward seeing them in their lay outfits, the colorful, swirly psychedelic tops and bell-bottom jeans. We had moved some of the furniture to the bedrooms. The borrowed fold-up

tables took up most of the living room. We didn't want them sitting family style, which meant food casually balanced on our laps. My father, being accustomed to serving, was poised and very formal. "Please, sisters, have a seat," he said as he held the chairs out for each of them to sit. We blessed our meal, and fortunately, one of the nuns, Sr. Ann Michael, my former first grade teacher and my father talked through most of the meal. My father explained everything as it was placed on the table, like he was explaining the menu at his work at the restaurant. Sr. Ann Michael was animated, asking engaging questions, smiling. The other two nuns were polite, nodded, and barely touched their plates. My mother did not speak much English and was unusually quiet and reserved. I had just learned English the year before in Sr. Ann Michael's classroom, but was too shy to speak. By the time my mother served coffee and dessert, the atmosphere was more relaxed. That was when my youngest sister took a little plate in one hand, and a big chunk of turrón, a traditional almond wafer in her other hand, held them out in front of her and waited until she had everyone's attention. With all eyes on her she said decisively and solemnly "De body of Christ," as she lifted the plate and the turrón eucharist higher as an offering to the nuns. "Take dis ... in Henry of me." It was a moment outside of time and her eyes were shining with intensity. My mother covered her mouth, aghast, holding back one of her boisterous laughs. One of the quiet nuns pushed her rice pudding aside, took the turrón from her and said "Amen." She then broke off a piece, ate it, and repeated the liturgical phrase to the other quiet nun, "Take this, in Henry of me," who responded "Amen," and they laughed. We went around the table and each of us broke off a piece of turrón and tried to repeat the phrase in a serious manner which made everyone laugh even more. The awkwardness melted away knowing we shared something special. We were in awe at the beauty and the earnestness of that proclamation, and moved by the prophetic voice that came from my sister's 4-year-old soul. I

pose this narrative to elucidate the fundamental element of this proclamation: acknowledging the divine. It was heartfelt, funny and irreverent. It was my sister's way of showing hospitality, and the nun reciprocated. It demonstrated to everyone that we could hold on to our humanity and sacredness at the same time. It was certainly an act of communion.

The Universality of Hospitality

My friend Selena and her family showed me the broader world of hospitality. Selena lived near the high school we attended, was born in Guyana and had lived in various cities abroad, and was worldlier than any other person my age. Her family had a large apartment in a pre-war building in the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. It seems odd now, but her parents were jewelry makers and traveled for business, and other than an aunt who would have groceries delivered, she was left to manage on her own for long stretches at a time. We had a peaceful, well-stocked kitchen to ourselves. This gave us time to experiment with food, share what we knew about cooking. When her parents were home, we would help prepare steaming, savory entrees which were arranged on the special rug in the middle of the sunken living room. Sitting at a designated place alongside the rug was an invitation into their world, a world filled with aromatic food, stories from their travels.

We started hosting friends to try out recipes and took pride in our scratch-made meals. We had the autonomy to plan a menu, go to indo-Guyanese specialty shops in the city, cook, set a creative table and host friends. I can't remember what we talked about during those small dinner parties. I do, however, remember their philosophy: The meals we serve, and how we serve them, are a reflection of our ancestors' lives and our cultural and spiritual values. Her father was Hindu and her mother was Muslim. I witnessed how seamlessly, and lovingly they integrated hospitality

with their religions, with their vegetarian principles, with how carefully the food was prepared. The hospitality and the food were interwoven with their trust in Selena to complete her studies and go on to culinary school. Selena's parents were in many ways like my family. They demystified the concept of hospitality and revealed the sacredness and universality of hospitality, the means of letting everyone know they are welcome.

Food as a Catalyst for Change

When I look back at how food played such a prominent role in my life, it doesn't always go back to that tropical utopia of my grandparents' farm. The streets of New York were filled with strife. There was more poverty, more desperation penetrating the little cocoon of our homes. A growing number of families were being evicted, and we could see the misery unfold by looking down from the twelfth floor bedroom windows of the housing projects onto the tenement buildings. First the sheriff arrived with multiple police cars and with a group of men followed by children crying and a woman wailing, as the men hurled black garbage bags from the stoop and moved a sofa, and mattresses, her few possessions onto the sidewalk.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice; to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Once you see the thongs of the yoke, you cannot *unsee* it. Isaiah says that it is a superficial act to fast when people are in need, as it is pointless spiritually, especially while others are without food. Even as a child I knew the woman that was evicted carried generations of heavy burdens, and it was the name of justice that we needed to help her. Instead, the sofa that was left on the sidewalk by the sheriff and his men was moved a block away, under the Bruckner Boulevard Expressway. From the other window in the living room facing south I could see enough of the

entrance to the underpass to see there was a man who set up a few cardboard boxes around the sofa for privacy. He was close enough, across the street, so my family agreed I could bring him a meal in the evening. I was hopeful he had someone that loved him and was looking for him. We would make sure that he, at the very least, had enough to eat until they found him. “I’ll leave this for *El Bon*,” my mom would say in Spanish. She had good intentions but it reminded me of setting aside leftovers for a pet. *El Bon* is the Spanglish vernacular for *the bum*, as in hobo, a homeless person.

Some neighbors said it was an accident: “He may have passed out drunk and his cigarette started the fire.” Another neighbor suggested he dropped a candle that burned his makeshift encampment, “and he probably moved.” Another more strident conjecture was “The gang members set him on fire with his own whisky poured over him while he was passed out. I heard there was a turf war.” I only knew what I saw—the charred remains of a wet sofa. We never did see him again or find out his name. I mourned him because I set a paper plate of food outside the cardboard screen every evening for a summer. I never spoke to him and he never looked directly at me or moved. Seeing the remains filled me with a rage that I could not articulate. He represented the poor, the dispossessed, the evicted, the forgotten. Jesus asked us to advocate for the poor, but as a community we failed. We let this happen. “Then he looked up at his disciples and said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (Luke:6:20-22).” This man indeed had a name, and it was shameful for us to call him *El Bon*. Not knowing his name still haunts me today. The woman that was evicted had a name as well, and her children had names, and they were deserving of a home and of the same nourishing meal we enjoyed at home. They were deserving of love. The rage that welled up in me as I looked at

the remains of his encampment was a watershed moment. It changed how I felt about offering hospitality for anyone less fortunate than me. As Rev. Dr. King says, we need to offer hospitality, not charity in the form of *a tossed coin to a beggar*, but of the praxis of hospitality.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question our fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. *It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.*²⁴

Rev. Dr. King's critique of poverty and charity clearly says that it is clearly a revolutionary act to question our values with regards to charity. If I have the privilege of belonging and finding purpose on this planet, then there is a sacredness in being aligned with the interconnectedness with every person and every aspect of this planet. With my privilege, it is up to me to help others belong and find purpose on this earth, and offering hospitality to a vulnerable person is an honorable place to start. Dr. King said restructuring our lives to actually *transform all of the Road of Jericho* is what we need to do at this time.

I found there are countless ways of restructuring our lives in order to restructure our society. Mine happened to be a translation and advocacy for families. But I knew deep within there was more work to be done to confront the inequities, the hegemony, where the general populace is struggling to make ends meet. It is true, we can certainly reinvent ourselves many times in our lifetime. However, let us acknowledge the vulnerable, the ones that have been so oppressed, so beaten down by homelessness and despair, that they are unable to stand upright. There is something profoundly immoral about living in a society where mothers and children are left on the sidewalk at the mercy of charity. Let us reinvent ourselves in a way that we could ease

²⁴Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence," *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2003), 240-41.

the suffering of others. Let us reinvent ourselves so that we can act as a voice of justice for those that do not have a safety net and are cast out into the street. I pray that the children of vulnerable people learn resilience and are able to recover from adversity. Let us also acknowledge that there is something deeply disturbing when the indignities of a homeless man, a man that is not recognized by a name, becomes fodder for gossip. Let us acknowledge his humanity. Let us honor his memory. He was a man that deserved more than a paper plate of food set on the ground next to him. This woman, her children, the nameless man, and all the nameless people swimming in a vortex of poverty instilled in me the fire to reimagine my life several times: to be aligned with justice, and to be aligned with God.

Restructuring Our Lives: Food Justice

When my family moved back to Puerto Rico I decided to stay in New York. I had just finished high school and knew I would have to work while putting myself through college. In this sense, *reimagining my life* was not planned out. I was lonely and out of sorts watching others blithely go about their studies. My perspective changed when a classmate invited me to volunteer at a soup kitchen in the basement of a church in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It felt oddly familiar, and it was easy to delve right into the tasks at hand, which was simply to offer a healthy, nourishing meal for lunch, and be ready to talk with someone if they wanted to chat. The tasks were clear. Everything that was donated was laid out on a table outside the pantry and fridge and was sorted and logged immediately. It had to be done quickly and efficiently. What needs to be processed first before it goes bad? What needs to be frozen? What goes in the pantry for later? How many people can we feed with this? How can we be resourceful and creative with what we have? Who will cover the administrative tasks, number of people fed the day, week, month, end

of year reports? Sometimes we had a windfall: scores of trays of fresh food that had expired by a day. Sometimes it was modest fare like soup and croutons. Even with minimal donations we still managed to make enough sandwiches to satisfy everyone who came through the doors that day. Once I figured out the rhythm of the kitchen, I was chopping and stirring, browning and roasting, mixing and peeling, making all kinds of broths for soup alongside my kitchen mates. We took turns deep cleaning and arranging for building maintenance. I learned about food safety and storage and became more confident in my ability to cook in bulk. It gave me insight into what I was capable of doing other than office work. I had volunteered in several places, but settled on this particular center because it was welcoming. If you showed up, you were served with love and respect, or you could take your food to-go.

There is a huge difference between engaging with the poor and offering *authentic* hospitality. Some food programs that I visited relied on funding sources that placed restrictions on who was eligible. If someone arrives and is hungry for physical and spiritual nourishment, why subject this person to more indignities? In places like this, the gatekeepers offered help to those they deemed worthy. However, if someone is destitute, there is a chance they do not carry identification so why turn them away? Also, it is demeaning for someone to gather a few pantry items under the watchful gaze of half a dozen volunteers, holding their clipboards like sentinels, instead of offering a kind word. As Marjorie Thompson poignantly points out “Hospitality means giving all guests the freedom to reveal themselves as they choose... [and] *freedom* is the medium of human exchange in true hospitality.”²⁵ I believe in *authentic* hospitality because it is one of the principles of food justice.

²⁵Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 127.

I always sensed that there was an unspoken ideological justification for gutting social welfare programs. It was surprising to find out it was a biblical passage: Sheila E. McGinn and Megan Wilson-Reitz pointed out that 2 Thessalonians 3:10 “anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” is being used to push a political and economic agenda in U.S political debates. It sabotages social services for vulnerable people, especially unemployment compensation, food stamps, and other safety nets for persons who have “fallen through the cracks.”²⁶ McGinn and Wilson-Reitz cite an example of Rev. Jerry Fallwell using 2 Thessalonians 3:10 as one of the ten “Judeo-Christian principles” to push a false narrative about this being the foundation of American democracy. McGinn and Wislon-Reitz counter this argument because these ideologies assume laziness on the part of some refusing to work, leading to poverty, and then needing to live off the wealthy members of the community. These ideologies also assume that the solution is to tell them, “Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12), which McGinn and Wislon-Reitz say “sounds remarkably similar to the Protestant work ethic.”²⁷ Asking someone to pull themselves up from their bootstraps when they are barefoot is not an example of Christian hospitality. It does not acknowledge the inherent inequities woven throughout the fabric of our society.

In my move to Jersey City from Brooklyn I agreed to volunteer to be the coordinator of an organic food cooperative, an aggregated Community Sustained Agriculture (CSA) project for a few months. I was on maternity leave from the *Village Voice* and a fresh starting point in my life with my newborn. In exchange for running the food cooperative I received a free share of produce. The CSA is a model where consumers support a small farmer by buying a share of his

²⁶McGinn, Sheila E., ed. “Thessalonians vs the Ataktoi: A Pauline Critique of ‘White-Color Welfare,’” *Bread Alone: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 186.

²⁷McGinn, “Thessalonians vs the Ataktoi,” 187

organic crop in advance, or sometimes a week in advance. In return, the consumer receives a share of the organic produce. Paying in advance provides working capital for the farm and breaks the farm's reliance on conventional finance. The beauty of this model is that the liability is shared through a membership, so that if a flood, drought, hail or wildlife destroys the crop, the loss is shared by the membership, sustaining the farmer until the following year. It works the other way as well. In this case, members of the cooperative receive an abundant amount of organically grown food, which is common with regenerative farming methods where the soil becomes healthier and more productive.

I dedicated time to this project because I wanted us to have food that was not overrun with harmful pesticides that cause more degradation of the earth, and harm to our bodies. I knew from my spiritual side, whatever we do to improve the condition of this planet, no matter how small, is not wasted. I wanted to have my own garden and this was the next best thing until I was able to grow my own. I wanted more food that made me feel well-nourished, energetic, and I wanted this for my children, my family, everyone. I still believe everyone should have a chance to taste vegetables when they are just pulled from the soil, or a fruit picked from a tree to understand an important concept: When the soil is healthy and the food is biodynamically grown, and if the food does not spend a long time being transported to your table, the results are vegetables bursting with flavor and nutrition, *and this is God's gift to us*. It seems like a luxury, but in reality, with this CSA model, the produce was half the price of conventionally grown food in supermarkets. I researched recipes, how to grow them, how to use these vegetables as a main course, as a side dish as soups, salads, breads, and how to preserve food in bulk. I assigned different volunteers to arrive every other Saturday at 6 am to work for about an hour, provided coffee and maintained a membership list which I shared with everyone. I donated food when

members were away, and hosted potlucks with the food we received. I originally committed to volunteering for a few months but stayed for 6 years. The CSA flourished because there was a need for healthy food. The soup kitchen I volunteered at during college was a stepping stone for this work. I have found that both soup kitchens and the cooperative model at the time attracted volunteers of different faiths that were efficient, responsible and altruistic.

In light of the issue of food justice, it is crucial to acknowledge the work of Black pioneer horticulturist and philosopher Dr. Booker T. Whatley, an agriculture professor at Tuskegee University in Alabama. He mentored many small-scale Black farmers during the late 60s when farmers were still subjected to government Jim Crow policies of the time, unable to obtain loans as their white counterparts were.²⁸ It was out of pure necessity that Dr. Whatley developed the CSA and U-Pick model thereby connecting the consumers directly to Black farmers to keep them afloat. He was a forerunner of regenerative agriculture of farms that were “small and smarter.”²⁹ These models were a lifeline for many Black farmers. There are only 45,000 Black farmers out of the 3.4 million farmers in the U.S. today. There is not much data but in 2002 white farmers accounted for 98 percent of the acres being farmed.³⁰ It is a matter of racial and social justice that we change these figures.

Members of our food cooperative in Jersey City believed that everyone was deserving of this food, and it grew to more locations around Jersey City neighborhoods. These friends and acquaintances also helped me start the first cooperative preschool, renovating a site and creating a place where parents and children maintained garden beds. More of the food coop members

²⁸Bre Holbert, “The Spread of Agriculture Literacy is Rooted in Black History,” AgDaily (Insight Smartnews 9/15/21): <https://www.agdaily.com/insights/agriculture-literacy-is-rooted-in-black-history/>

²⁹Booker T. Whatley, and George DeVault, “Booker T. Whatley’s Handbook on How to Make \$100,000 Farming 25 Acres: With Special Plans for Prospering on 10 to 200 Acres,” *Regenerative Agriculture Association*, (1987).

³⁰Jess Gilbert, Spencer D. Wood, Gwen Sharp, “Who Owns the Land? Agricultural Land Ownership by Race/Ethnicity,” *Rural America* (Vol. 17 Issue 4, Winter 2002): 55-62.

took on new initiatives and collectively started a series of community gardens, and renewal of five neglected parks, and through a series of potlucks at a friend's home, we formed a parks coalition. This enabled us to request and receive municipal funding collectively. We were a diverse group of people that got to know each other well by eating this blessed food communally. Working on all these projects over these potlucks resulted in lasting relationships that anchored us in fellowship over the decades. It was exciting to watch children that had never left Jersey City tending vegetable beds, eating cucumbers and tomatoes plucked from the vine. Watching them play and stop to pick up and examine earthworms from the compost piles, watching them push aside the mulch from a garden row to examine the organisms in the soil, reminded me of what I did on my grandparent's farm.

The community gardens were an alternative paradigm, counter-cultural, subversive, a means to bypass the industries that make us sick with altered foods. When a land is poisoned with chemicals there is a void, a foreshadowing of death because altered food is barren. It is stripped of the sanctity of its life-cycle of reproduction by the greed of an industrial food complex.³¹ Here, power is given to the elite: the corporate scientists are the high priests of our times, the keeper of corporate secrets, the gatherers of knowledge that produce poisons for this planet. These industries are the same entities that started producing barren seeds; hence promoting industrial farming industries that produce barren crops; hence the industrial farms using poisons that destroy the natural cycle of the earth, rendering the soil barren; hence bioengineering crops that withstand these poisons; hence consumers eating food that poisons them. These are God's seeds that have been stolen and enslaved, choked from their life-giving properties through a form of ecological imperialism via bioengineering. Here, the life-giving

³¹Gabriela Pechlaner, *Corporate Crops: Biotechnology, Agriculture, and the Struggle for Control*. 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

seeds are transformed to seeds of domination through the consolidation of power, and providing corporate shareholders short-term gains.³² In Puerto Rico and the Americas as well as many industrialized countries, regular farming practices are subjugated in favor of multinational agribusinesses buying patented seeds from a single source for their monocrops.³³ Food supremacy, storehouses, and manipulation of food, offerings to the gods of Empire runs as a theme throughout the Bible.

However, we showed children that it was possible to live cooperatively on a thriving, biodiverse planet. Every little garden plot that is nourished and nurtured has life-giving fertile soil with beneficial microorganisms that together with the warmth of the sun can put forth vegetation. These fruits and vegetables are grown with life embedded within itself—miraculous photosynthesis-life-giving seed. There is a message of regeneration embedded within the DNA of each of these seeds. It was good. (Gen 1:11-12)

Now that CSAs have been around for a while, they have adapted to changes in the market. Online ordering and the subscription boxes provide more choices for consumers to customize their preferences. However, the fellowship, working face-to-face, getting to know your neighbors is missing from this model when you order online. However, I was fortunate. I realized my dream of having a garden when I moved upstate, and the food justice initiatives grew as I became more experienced in community building. As an educator and activist I was able to continue to help neighbors form more community gardens, farmers markets and healthy food programs. I initiated a county-wide food systems council, and a few years later it expanded to a regional seven-county food hub. We planted little seeds that grew into trees, and these trees are still sending off saplings from their roots, in their cycle of life.

³²There is little information and data accessible to the public regarding Monsanto, (bought by Bayer) except by class-action lawsuits, see: <https://www.baumhedlundlaw.com/toxic-tort-law/monsanto-roundup-lawsuit/>

³³“The Monsanto Company,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monsanto>; the company was sold in 2018.

Theology Around the Table: The Feeding Narratives

The pandemic's death toll showed us that life is fleeting. It showed us that our humanity and everything we have known was at risk. Our histories and our futures were on pause while we peered at the edge of our own mortality. My spouse and I updated our wills and had a discussion with our two adult daughters about what to do should something happen to us. For two years we have had to negotiate and mitigate risks for work and basic necessities to keep the ravages of the pandemic from knocking at our doors. How do we proceed from here? How can we return to the table? How can we negotiate this liminal realm where public safety mandates have been lifted yet vulnerable members of our families and friends, the autoimmune-compromised folks, the elderly, the sick and the front-line workers are still at risk?

To analyze this, there are many feeding narratives in the Bible we could turn to, but first I would like to briefly recount my favorite version of Stone Soup, a secular (and mostly European) folktale. In this version, as told by Gioia Timpanelli, goes like this:

There was once a place where the villagers were still afraid of strangers even after the plague had passed. Their windows were shuttered, their doors were shut, and strangers were shunned. They were coaxed out of their homes by an itinerant Jesuit priest, a stranger, who upon arrival, took a fabric and laid it on the grass. Upon this cloth he proceeded to set out a caudron, a ladle and a stone from his satchel. Then he collected wood and started a fire, and set the cauldron on the fire. The first person to emerge was a curious elderly woman who asked him what he was doing. He explained how he was making stone soup, but in addition to the stone, he needed more water, and so the elderly lady brought him a pail of water. He then said "This soup is good, but it could be made great with an onion." The elderly woman then brought him an onion to add to the cauldron. Slowly the curious villagers began to emerge to question the Jesuit. He repeated how he was making stone soup, and how to make it better: a little salt, a cured meat bone, garlic, potatoes, turnips, and parsley, more herbs. Eventually every villager participated in making the soup even better by adding one more ingredient until they made a full caldron of delicious soup. By this time the wonderful aroma made them so excited that they set up a banquet table, where they placed more food and drink that was stored in the corners of their homes. They feasted, made music and sang. From that day forward the villagers opened their windows and doors to welcome strangers.³⁴

³⁴This is a trans-cultural folktale, told orally by Gioia Timpanelli, author and poet at a pre-covid family gathering. <http://www.californiapoetics.org/interviews/1603/an-interview-with-gioia-timpanelli/>.

This is a narrative of our need to commune together. However, I also view it as the narrative of our global community as we emerge from this pandemic. We are still in that liminal space as there is no clear-cut end to this pandemic, but we know that those who have been vaccinated have fared well, and like the survivors of plague, we are looking out our windows, assessing whether it is safe to gather in the town square. In our hearts and minds we know that we will gradually transition from the economics of *danger, fear and scarcity*, to the economics of *safety, trust and abundance*. The elderly woman acted out of curiosity, but also of bravery. The moment she agreed to bring water to the Jesuit she initiated the transformation, the alchemy of turning water and a stone to something bigger than the two ingredients. It set in place the forward motion towards communal intentionality, which led to communal fellowship. I view the cauldron as a metaphor, a place where we contain our hope. The soup is the metaphor for collective action, a means by which the villagers can express their fellowship by sharing and nourishing each other. Fire, water, stone, carbon/wood, food, wisdom, bravery and trust are the elements needed for this alchemy to take place. The transformative alchemy in this story is powerful: fear dissipates, trust grows, sustenance is shared and consumed communally. Stone Soup resembles three biblical feeding narratives, the first of which is found in Mark 6:33-42, where a crowd was directed to sit on the grass in groups of hundred and fifties. After Jesus blessed the five loaves and two fish, it was enough to feed a crowd of 5,000 with an abundance of twelve baskets of bread and fish leftover.³⁵ I imagine the crowds of hungry and confused people that have gathered being asked to sit in smaller communities of 50-100 people. Perhaps there were self-selected leaders of family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. Like the villagers in the Stone Soup folktale, they rummage

³⁵Angela Stanhartinger, “‘And All Ate and Were Filled’ (Mark 6.42 par.): The Feeding Narratives in the Context of Hellenistic-Roman Banquet Culture” from *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature*, (Eds. Kathy Ehrensperger, et.), 62-82. This chapter introduces an untold socio-cultural context of feeding narratives, namely, that Jesus was not the only one who fed the masses. Stanhartinger cites accounts of other eminent leaders doing so.

through their baskets to contribute for all to eat communally, and in response to sharing they are capable of feeding and feasting again. In the second feeding narrative we note many of the same elements: “there was again a great crowd without anything to eat” (Mark 8:1-9). When Jesus saw the great crowds, in both narratives he demonstrated radical compassion and hospitality. In all these narratives they also transitioned from *hunger and scarcity to compassion, trust, order, community and abundance*. In a way the Israelites’ manna-sharing community in the wilderness is reenacted through Jesus’s feeding narrative. If you followed the communal way, there was enough for everyone. In all the narratives, the sharing was as much food for the spirit as well as the sustenance for hungry bodies, and like the Israelites in the wilderness, they all ate and were filled (Mark 6:42). This also is reflected in Jesus’ concern for safeguarding the natural cycle of human life. He says do not worry about your life, or what you will eat or wear. It will be provided. Just strive for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these things will be given to you (Matthew 6:31-33).

Methodology for Intentional Communal Dinners: Setting the Table

When I read I, *Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, I had an image of the author cooking alongside Menchú as she recounted her life story. It was captured all within a week of ethnographic interviews by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan anthropologist. Menchú spoke at length about the genocide committed by the Guatemalan army in villages during the civil war. These interviews took place in Menchú’s kitchen while they prepared their daily food. A little tidbit in the introduction of the book always stayed with me. Menchú did not trust anyone that did not cook daily, but in particular, she did not trust anyone that did not cook black beans from scratch every day. Cooking alongside Menchú was the only way

Burgos-Debray was able to capture the flow of her thoughts, all the triumphs and trauma.

Although it is simple to prepare dry beans from scratch, it does take some forethought because it necessitates rehydrating them, essentially partially sprouting them, in order to cook them the next day. After so much death I wondered if Menchú soaked a small amount of beans everyday as a symbol of hope—bringing the seeds to life, anticipating, planning, grateful to live one more day.

I highlight this ethnographic setting because I share the top floor of a residential hall, affectionately called the Repenthouse, with about a dozen resident seminarians. We are privileged to have access to a kitchen that has multiple refrigerators, stoves, and counters so three or four people can cook at the same time. We are masked as we go about our duties moving from stoves, sinks, and counters as we prepare our meals throughout the day. Like Menchú and Burgos-Debray cooking and talking side-by-side, it is in this kitchen that we engage in brief but interesting conversations discussing the sacred and the mundane. Even when my guests stop by, there are short, staccato conversations that are woven together throughout the week. We are engaged in the rhythm of life but I wanted more intentional theological discourse³⁶ that moved with us from the kitchen over to the dinner table where we could face each other. I wanted to continue our discussions of *what wisdom was made manifest to us* over a meal and a glass of wine. I wanted these discussions to be part of our lives over a meal in addition to our course work in academia, or in the ministries of the church. I wanted to capture these discussions while metaphorically reclining to the left, but our table in the adjacent room was woefully small, and social distancing was not possible.

³⁶I am using “discourse” in the oral tradition of communicating a free flow of thoughts and ideas in a social setting.

Before I proceed, it is important to understand the two spiritual disciplines involved in an ethnographic theology as posed by academic theologian Natalie Wigg-Stevenson. She defines it as:

a spiritual discipline through which the academic theologian integrates local theological knowledge, traditional theological knowledge, and cultural critique of both to produce fresh theological insights and possibilities for Christian living. Simultaneously, it is a spiritual discipline of critical reflexive process, plurivocal and polyphonic in nature, by which the theologian accounts for her own relationship in relation to the configuration she creates.³⁷

The essence of this theology is that it acts as a conversational discourse around the dinner table with the people we love, or are learning to love and it “it begins and ends in all the laughter, stuff, and news of our lives’ that is shared in and around our conversations about God.³⁸ Wigg-Stevenson says we are merely exploring what happens when we have the right mixture of historical context and help from the divine, which has the potential to bring forth a full, fluid articulation of an insight or revelation:

Thus ecclesial and everyday realms cannot simply be treated as repositories to be mined for academic theological reflection in the conversations I am seeking to create and describe here. In the other direction, neither can academic theologians simply hope that members of churches and participants in broader public life will read our academic texts... good conversation benefits from each partner’s ability to reflect and understand the factors contributing to the creation of her own perspectives... Understanding the relationship between various every day and academic theologies as conversational, then requires that we create a space for that conversation to occur. A dinner table is as good a space as any to begin.³⁹

To this end I considered attending St. Lydia’s Dinner Church in the Gowanus neighborhood in Brooklyn,⁴⁰ as a means of finding fellowship. As I was talking with colleagues I discovered that

³⁷Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “What’s Really Going on: Ethnographic Theology and the Production of Theological Knowledge.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, (2017): 423-429, doi:[10.1177/1532708617744576](https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708617744576).

³⁸Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “Faith in My Bones: An Exercise in Ethnographic Theology” Order No. Vanderbilt University, 2011), 32, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/faith-my-bones-exercise-etnographic-theology/docview/907106131/se-2?accountid=10226>.

³⁹Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “Faith in My Bones,” 30.

⁴⁰Biana, New York Spirit “Hungry for a Connection,” Interview with Rev. Emily Scott (9/8/12), <http://www.nyspirit.com/community-and-nature/hungry-for-a-connection/>.

the founding pastor, Rev. Emily Scott, started a dinner church at Union Theological Seminary. Rev. Scott, in an interview while she was pastor, explained the dinner church process. They gathered and cooked a sacred meal together. They blessed the meal with an ancient Eucharistic prayer. As they gathered around the table they explored scripture together. They also offered prayers and sang. “At the end of the evening everyone works together to clean up. ... a practice that has its roots in the earliest days of the church.”⁴¹

The dinner church concept was intriguing and consumed much of my thoughts for several weeks as I tried to reconcile my need for spiritual enrichment with my faith trajectory that was pointing to a broader inclusion of other faiths. I needed to be situated where anyone *of any faith* could sit and discuss theology, and there should be an affirmation of this, not just an acknowledgement of the need for interreligious engagement. I was not ready to participate in St. Lydia’s dinner church because if I wanted to invite people of different faiths, they would not be able to participate in the eucharistic rites. As Kathryn Tanner points out we need to “seek beyond the context of one’s work.”⁴² She explained that “A theology that starts from, and uses as its toolbox for creative ends, materials gathered from the widest possible purview is, in my opinion, a theology with that imaginative expansiveness.”⁴³

As I was discussing this dinner church eucharist issue with my eldest daughter, we discussed the absence of “eucharistic hospitality” at the Catholic churches we attended as guests. She suggested I take my own advice and “make it happen.” As a practical person I read, explore, and take in the lectures and scriptures to make them part of my living, breathing, complicated, liminal and intersectional life. I had clarity about what I wanted to provide, and that was a safe,

⁴¹“St. Lydia’s—A Dinner Church in Brooklyn, New York,” <https://stlydias.org/>.

⁴²Kathryn Tanner, “Christian Claims,” *Theologians in their own words* D. Nelson, et. al, eds. (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2013) 274.

⁴³Kathryn Tanner, “Christian Claims,” 274.

affirming dinner table, a place where anyone, of any faith, would be free to commune in fellowship. Instead of liturgy, participants would support each other, reflect, and be free to explore the mundane alongside the theologically-nuanced themes. I could make this happen but there were logistical challenges. Having a large number of people cooking, eating and cleaning together in any indoor venue seemed premature. The mask mandate was still in place. After discussing it with several faculty, administrators, and seminarians, an outdoor potluck seemed the best option. Gathering picnic-style at one of the neighboring parks was one possibility, but for convenience, I was given permission to host a series of potlucks on Sunday afternoons 4-6:30 pm in the Davie Terrace, a cloistered area of the inner courtyard. It had the necessary elements of dining *al aire fresco*, flexibility and intimacy to line up several tables in a row, and room for more adjacent tables for the food. With patio lights shining on the stone walls and turrets of this storied seminary, it was an elegant and inviting space. I had volunteers help with flyers and social media posts. My knowing of God comes from contemplation, from deep listening and from fellowship. We would all be able to do all of these things in this space, safely, in Davie Terrace.

Breaking Bread

“Hey Sarah, do you have a prompt ready?”⁴⁴ someone from across the table asked when she walked in.

“Not yet. Let me think about it,” she said, smiling broadly. “But first, some bread, I’m starved.” The seminarians had brought an array of food: casseroles, breads, cheese, desserts, fruit, and three bottles of homemade kombucha. I found that hosting potluck meals in this setting is different from reserving a table at a restaurant or hosting a dinner party in my home where

⁴⁴For this gathering I am using pseudonyms to respect my colleagues’ privacy.

there is a tighter time constraint. The Davie Terrace potluck gatherings are more fluid, with a few that arrive to help set up, others that drop in at various times and help clean up, and a few that stay for the whole event. Although we open with a silent moment of reflection, or prayer, I let the conversation flow naturally. When there are more than a dozen people, they converse in smaller groups. Some prefer to move around to greet others seated further away.

Diana came in looking tired.

“I came straight from work. I’m exhausted. Sorry I didn’t pick anything up,” I reassured her there was plenty of food.

“My people, thank you,” Diana exclaimed as she embraced me.

This is the fourth potluck, and Sarah takes a bowl of soup and a slice of bread and sits by Gabe.

“I came for your bread,” she elbowed his elbow. “It’s still warm.” Sarah at first seemed reserved, but after we started sharing the Repenthouse kitchen she appeared more relaxed at gatherings like this. Sarah started by asking lighthearted questions as icebreakers at the earlier gatherings, but as the potlucks became a weekly event outside at the terrace, she continued with more substantive questions. Sarah signaled to everyone she was ready to start.

“My question today is... Do you have a theology... a theology that you espouse but do not follow yourself?” There was a long silence. In all the prior gatherings I was open to letting the conversation evolve in its own course. In other words, if enjoying a meal together with small talk was all they needed, I was comfortable to let that happen.

“Can you repeat it again?” There were some murmurings because it seemed that the far end of the table did not hear it the first time. When she repeated the question, the discourse for this particular potluck had taken a definitive turn. It quieted down, and if everyone stayed, they were willing to be vulnerable, or at least listen to someone else opening their heart to others. Is

this the direction I wanted us to take? I was concerned that it would become too confessional, in the style of a truth-or-dare challenge. I practice hospitality through a specific lens, and part of this means to gently steer the conversation to a more balanced interchange if needed. I was prepared for awkward moments, and pointed arguments. As a host I have intervened decisively when guests have not shown courtesy to their fellow guests. Yet, here sharing this table I found myself unprepared for this intimacy. To answer it meant detailing how we have failed to live up to our own expectations. Everyone sat quietly pondering the question.

Finally, Molly sitting across from me took a big breath, placed her napkin on the table and said, “I talk about forgiveness, but it’s hard for me,” she said looking up with a squint. “I work on it all the time, but it keeps creeping up...that sense...ugh, that I can’t let go of the hurtful, horrible things people do to each other. I see it in my ministry. I try to transform that energy into a fire...to make it work for me... to turn it into something more productive. And I pray, but it doesn’t always work. So, for me it’s about forgiveness. That’s it. I’m working on it.” She paused thoughtfully between the phrases so it sounded like a poem. As she talked I imagined a circle of fire encircling her chest.

“I hear you,” someone responds and snaps their fingers, and more people around the table snap their fingers, and murmur their affirmation. Molly seemed to have more to say, but patted and rubbed her upper chest and looked around in gratitude instead. Gabe who was sitting next to me waited for a bit then interjected:

“For me, it’s that I’m always busy... and don’t stop. It’s about the Sabbath and I know it’s important. But I’m always doing something...all the time.” As he shared this, I thought about how so much I, too, was in the culture of *doing*.

“Can you tell me more?” asked Jenna.

“I find it hard to rest because it feels like I have so much to do,” Gabe replied.

“Is it because you’re here?” Jenna asked.

“That’s part of it. But I remember a Jesuit priest once asked me ‘Do you ever rest?’ Gabe rubbed his temple.

“When I get to that point, I hit the reset button,” Jenna replied

“Reset? I’m busy, not burned-out.”

“I didn’t word this very well. Let me start again. It’s just that for me...it’s part of how I grew up. I feel strongly about taking time out to rest. My body needs it, and I take it. My soul needs it, and I take it. If you have a history of people, of ancestors that have been enslaved, then you take a day off, any day. And it’s a cool, honorable thing to do. It’s my time. My time to reset, reconnect with God and family.”

“Having agency...” Gabe responded softly.

“Exactly, having agency. As in Genesis. Taking time to rest. Taking a day off means you are no longer enslaved. You are part of God’s people, we are all part of God’s people. But for me it’s also a time for self-care.”

“Gotcha.” Gabe pauses to contemplate her words. Then he breaks the silence with a smile and adds “Well I guess I can take a break from baking!”

“No!” We all shout in unison and laugh.

Conclusion

These seminarians gathered here were conversant about multiple theologies: the social gospel, liberation theology and biblical studies. There was one student that appeared to have challenges in communicating in a socially normative way, and although I am not privy to the

nature of her differences, these seminarians made it clear she will always have a seat at the table. Another student was escorted in via wheelchair and served. I wondered if these seminarians have become practitioners of hospitality before seminary or whether these potlucks appealed to them because they already are practitioners of hospitality and now have an additional venue to practice fellowship. These gatherings generally started with small talk and laughter. However, there was also room to move to the periphery to engage in whispered tellings, wipe away the tears of woes to heal from that sense of brokenness. As seminarians we have asked each other probing theological questions inside and outside the classrooms, the lecture halls, the chapel, and the kitchen. I was reflecting on how I designed this space for more questions and deeper conversations, yet I found myself concerned about how much I would be willing to share about my own humanness, and even more confounding, I was concerned about the depth of their public experiential sharing. There was a shift within me during this last communal meal. I imagined a slight quivering of my spiritual essence, like tectonic plates moving almost imperceptibly, touching the other beings at the table, overlapping, repositioning, settling to let the genuine sacredness of these connections shift to a deeper level, a righteous level. Through this reflexive ethnography I reframed the question internally. I then saw seminarians were willing to be vulnerable and express an authentic form of communion in order to become closer to each other. Like everyone in seminary, we were committed to a more equitable society and this was part of our vocation. I carry out my faith in the doing, thinking, acting, feeling, *the praxis*. However, the simple exchange between Gabe and Jenna made me examine how much of my own life is about *doing*. I had to discern whether my perpetual motion is coming from a mindful place, or merely to establish my self-worth to others.

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge that although we are still operating within the context of a pandemic, it is critical that we return to the communal table and practice radical fellowship throughout and after Covid. This could be done safely, and with intentionality. We could explore, as Tanner says, the theology with imaginative expansiveness, with an openness to change, with a desire to practice deep compassion. At this expansive table I can always hit the reset button, put self-doubt on pause—and just be. The Sabbath wisdom was made manifest within this communion at the table through a young seminarian. Yes, there is clarity at this table. Yes, these shared meals are necessary because they are a noble continuum of humble, sacred, and necessary things.

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