

The Hospitality of God in the Hospitality Industry: Encouragement for a Friend

Simon Carey Holt

First published in *Vocatio*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2002.

This is a letter to a friend. Joanne is a professional chef who has for the last 24 years worked in the hospitality industry of Melbourne. We served the early part of our chef's apprenticeships together. She is also a Christian, a person of deep and personal faith. However, Joanne struggles to find connection between her professional life and her religious commitments. Her struggle is a common one. Joanne is one of more than 700,000 Australians working in hospitality, 400,000 of those in the more clearly defined accommodation, cafes and restaurants sector. This sector alone accounts for 4.5% of all jobs in this country, and its annual growth rate of close to 5% is second only to the property and business sector. With approximately 8,000 businesses providing accommodation, 22,500 restaurant and cafes, and a further 9,000 bars, taverns and pubs, this diverse industry continues to grow at a breathtaking rate. For those who work in this field, how does the Christian understanding of and commitment to hospitality relate to work in an industry in which hospitality is a commodity traded for profit?

Dear Joanne,

Finally, the opportunity to write. I have wanted to do so since our last conversation. The distance between us makes face-to-face communication far too occasional. You are a dear friend, Joanne, and my main purpose for writing is to encourage you. Believe it or not, your presence in my life has been both sustaining and challenging. Your own journey—though it all feels so commonplace to you—is one I've always respected and enjoyed being gathered up in from time to time.

It has been 24 years now since we commenced our apprenticeships together as budding chefs. Where have those years gone? I remember our first day on the job, both looking so nervous and 'green' in our crisp white uniforms, oversized starched chef's

hats, and kitchen clogs. We discovered early on that we shared a common experience of faith and a commitment to living in response to the call of Jesus. They were good years, and our friendship since has out-last-ed so many others.

For both of us, entering the hospitality industry was like venturing into a brave new world. Moving from the security and predictability of high school and home, I remember so clearly the anxiety I felt at this new and 'shadowy' place: the late nights and early mornings, split shifts, long hours, hot and sweaty kitchens, the constant mix and clash of cultures and languages, the noise, the rush, the tension, the constant weariness, running on adrenalin, and getting paid next to nothing for the privilege. Do you remember our first head chef? Ziggy the Hun we used to call him. He

was such a temperamental old bloke, but amazingly gifted. He seemed to relish the opportunity to abuse us both from morning 'til night, getting more creative and colourful in his language the later it got. Eventually we learned to laugh him off, but only after months of tears and resentment. It was a roller coaster ride so much of the time. From exhilaration to exhaustion, from five star banquets to peeling potatoes and scrubbing pots, from culinary triumphs to disasters we'll never forget.

As you remind me so often, in the days and years since, our lives have taken such contrasting paths. To this day you remain a professional chef, and very good one too. Your career has taken you from restaurant to theatre to sandwich shop to café to hotel and to back to restaurants again. You have been awarded for your professionalism. Your work life has been one of consistently long hours, split shifts, weekends and evenings. I know it's taken its toll. You've spent the last 24 years in inner city Melbourne, though your longing to be back in the country is just as strong.

As for me, it wasn't all that long after completing my apprenticeship that I left this all behind and headed interstate to seminary. Though I loved the industry we trained in, I could not get away from a sense that God was 'calling' me in a different direction. In the years since I have studied theology, been ordained to and worked in pastoral ministry, lived and worked overseas, and now, with a PhD, I'm back in Melbourne in a tertiary institution teaching theology and spirituality. Though I still miss the kitchen and feel an occasional tinge of envy as I see what you've done, I'm happy where I am, and I know you are too.

Still, there is a contrast. In our last conversation you highlighted again the difference in our journeys, wondering out loud if I had not taken the 'higher' road—made the more 'spiritual' choices—while you, though sharing my commitment to faith, settled for

something much more ordinary and self-serving, something essentially less spiritual. As I said to you then, it grieves me that you would feel this comparative sense of 'inferiority'. Though our paths have indeed been divergent and the differences are marked, there is no sense in which the choices I have made are of any more worth than yours. In fact, there is every sense in which the path you've taken is one so full of theological and spiritual significance. Though we began discussing this together, there is so much more we could have said. Writing this letter is one way of continuing our conversation. It seems to me too important an issue to leave it hanging as we did.

The Hospitality of God

I know that as a chef you rarely get to see those you serve, but what you provide through your kitchen is, in essence, hospitality. We at least agree on this. It's a good word, hospitality. Apparently it's derived from the Latin word *hospes* meaning both guest and host. At its core, it has to do with the nature of exchange between the two. It's a very practical business related to the sharing of relationship, space and resources for the benefit of the other. It stands in contrast to that other Latin word *hostis* meaning enemy or stranger. For you and me as Christians, hospitality has a particular potency. Not that we can claim it as a practice or virtue unique to the Christian tradition, but when we consider the character of the one we relate to as Creator and Redeemer, it's impossible to walk away from hospitality as something irrelevant or even marginal to our lives.

I know that you struggle with my bent to relating the hospitality of God to what you do in the kitchen. I think you called it a leap in the dark! Well, indulge me for just a while and see if I can make the leap a little more credible.

Do you remember your service of baptism back in your early 20s? I do. I have no memory of where it was, but

I remember being there and hearing you say that you felt 'received' by God and 'embraced'. I know that in the years since, your spiritual journey has had its ups and downs, but that image of God receiving you is a powerful one. For me, I cannot help but picture the maitre d' who stood at the reception of one of the large hotel dining rooms I worked in, receiving the guests as they arrived, often greeting them by name, taking their coats and accompanying them to their table with such warmth and discretion. For me, there's something about that image that resonates with my experience of God.

Biblical images of God as gracious and generous host are pervasive. God is hospitable in character, not just in action. The people of Israel—strangers, aliens, a people without refuge or identity—are received into the household of God. In God they find welcome, provision of their most basic needs, a place to call home, and identity as the chosen people of God. God's covenant hospitality to Israel points routinely to his welcome of all peoples—regardless of race, social status, or religious heritage—to the feast of the Kingdom. The Hebrew prophets foretell the day when the nations will gather at the table of God:

"On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever."
(Isaiah 25:6-8)

It is this image of God as the consummate host that Jesus picks up in his practice and teaching. His opponents labelled him a glutton and a drunkard, for at every possible moment he was sitting at table with people—religious leaders, tax collectors, the righteous and

sinful—often telling stories of wedding feasts and banquets. In so doing, Jesus was signalling that the kingdom he had come to proclaim and establish was one in which all people would be received into the gracious and generous welcome of God. In a religious context where the devout were more concerned with guarding their own purity and thus keeping the stranger at bay, Jesus' picture of the hospitality of God was radically inclusive.

To speak of hospitality from a Christian perspective, then, is to speak of the welcome and acceptance that we offer as those made in the image of God. As an overflow of the gracious and generous welcome we ourselves have received, we extend the hospitality of God to others as the essence of who we are in Christ. That the practice of hospitality is taken so seriously in both Old and New Testaments testifies to just how central it is to the nature of who are and the character of our mission as people of God. The prophet Isaiah speaks of hospitality as "widening the tent", creating room for all of those in need who come our way. It is this that the writer Henri Nouwen has in mind when he says, "It is ... obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings." (1976, p 63) Perhaps to imagine our vocation as waiters at the table of God—inviting strangers into friendship with the host and aliens into the community of the feast—is an image worth pondering.

Yes, I know, this is all heady stuff. How on earth do we get from here to the kitchen? Theological profundities aside, the apparent contradictions between the hospitality I've described and your work in an industry where hospitality is commodity makes 'the leap' a challenging one.

The Hospitality Industry

Of course, this whole notion of hospitality as an industry is relatively new. Do you remember our first

classes at trade school? Though at the time most of it went over my head, our instructors did their best to situate our profession as chefs in the broader field of the hospitality industry. I have revisited some of this material recently, and discovered again that it wasn't until the mid 19th century that hospitality became a reputable service to provide in an organized and professional way. Until that time any such establishment of hospitality was in most cases looked upon with suspicion as a house of ill repute! It is true that for most of history, hospitality as welcome to the stranger was the informal responsibility of all people, whether is was providing a meal, a bed, or some momentary refuge from cold or danger. In fact, offering hospitality was considered a part of one's humanity, essential in most religious frameworks as an expression of the human spirit in community. We certainly know this from the biblical accounts where offering a meal to someone was akin to offering life-long relationship ties. Interestingly, literature from the 11th century shows that certain European communities judged the lack of hospitality to the stranger as no less than a capital crime.

Today's picture is so different. With the development of an industry geared up to serve every possible human need, such informal, home-based and spontaneous hospitality is the exception. What's changed? The nature of the household for one. For so much of history the individual household was a place of extended family, work and semi-public life. There was often a muddled distinction between public and private worlds. Today the lines are clear. The home is private space, clearly separate from the worlds of work, business, and public interaction. Inviting a stranger into today's home is a risk more and more people are unwilling to take. Our understanding of what hospitality is for has changed too. Gradually, and most especially from the Middle Ages on, hospitality as gracious welcome to the

stranger gave way to hospitality as a maker of social status and a way to garner power and influence with the 'right' people. Consequently, hospitality today is often confused with 'entertainment'. Making the right impression has become the preoccupation. Then there's the whole professionalization phenomenon. The development of hospitals, hostels and hospices gradually institutionalised and professionalized the caring of the needy and the stranger. Thus the step to offering hospitality for financial gain was significantly smaller. Whatever the reasons, today hospitality has developed into an industry of considerable breadth. And there's money to be made!

You know better than I what an industry it has become. In this city of Melbourne there are now in excess of 3,000 licensed restaurants, not to mention the plethora of unlicensed and BYO cafes. There are more than 1,000 places of accommodation from five star hotels to backpackers' haunts. For the most part, it is an industry where the profit margins are the motivating factor. On a national level, the annual combined profits rank in the tens of billions. At the top end of the hotel industry there is in excess of \$1.5 billion spent every year on building new and better facilities. You know better than I just how many people are prepared to pay, and routinely so, exorbitant amounts of money on something as simple as dinner. A large part of the industry is geared toward serving and pampering only those at the top end of the financial and social ladder. At the same time, as an employment sector, the accommodation, cafes and restaurants industry has the lowest labour cost of any industry division in Australia, spends the least amount of money on the training and development of staff, and has one of the highest proportions of unskilled employees born overseas who work with little opportunity for advancement. They say there are now in excess of

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

Making Connections: A Spirituality of Paradox

With the challenge acknowledged, you'll not be surprised that I still believe the connections are possible! In fact, my experience is that the Christian faith (along with the faith of many other traditions) is riddled with truth that can only be plumbed in the midst of contradiction. In my view, if drawing together the hospitality of God and the hospitality industry is like trying to combine oil and water—if work and faith seem oddly matched—then we are probably in a good place to begin our endeavour. At the heart of our Christian conviction and experience is paradox. Think of the poles of truth that give body to our faith: transcendence and imminence, holiness and grace, judgment and forgiveness, life and death, eternal and temporal, darkness and light, heaven and earth. Christian spirituality is, in essence, about connecting with the divine and eternal in the midst of the messiness and ordinariness of human existence. It's about discovering and responding to God in the fleshliness of life here and now. It is incarnational. We live the reality of our faith in the 'in-between' places, in the shadows of what is and what is not, the Kingdom present and the Kingdom yet to come.

All this to say, Joanne, your work is, in its own way, a reflection of this paradox. You work in an industry that is riddled with apparent but hidden contradictions, rarely acknowledged and often disguised. The hospitality

industry is one that succeeds upon its ability to project a certain veneered reality, yet the unreality lurks just beneath the surface. A dining room in a fine restaurant may be the picture of perfection, order, beauty and serenity. Yet in the kitchen out back, it is chaotic, hot, tense and messy. The spacious interior of the dining room exists at the expense of space for storage, production and preparation. Consequently, kitchens are often small, cramped spaces that offer only inches of room between work surfaces and people. The sophistication of the dining experience is maintained only as the physicality and rudimentary nature of the preparation and clean up is hidden from view.

Similarly, we have worked enough banquets and receptions together to see first hand the dramatic contrasts in those we served. Guests arrive to a perfectly set banquet room that creates that all-important first impression of opulence and sense of occasion. They enter looking, themselves, perfect in their finery. By the end of the evening, though, the dining room may look more like a battleground, with guests slumped around in various states of drunkenness. For hosts and service providers, the task is to keep some semblance of order while maintaining a spirit of gracious service. A writer in the pages of *Quadrant* recently reflected on the contrast between her life in the academic world and her work as a functions manager on weekends. In this reflection she describes "the gross materiality" she confronts every evening in those she serves:

*Mess, vomit, rotten food,
garbage, sour smells, burnt
offerings, and drunken bodies
regularly confronted me at the
end of the night. Quite literally, I
had to put my hands in the muck
that other people had left behind.
My job was to sort refuse,
dispose of it, then create a*

picture anew, as if it had never taken place.

Those who work in hospitality, especially today, must also stay in touch with the fact that they are the modern, professional, servant class. Now matter how dressed up it might be, hospitality professionals are about providing the most basic of services to their customers: feeding them, providing them with a bed to sleep in, or laundering their dirty clothes. The glamour of the five star hotel and the rise of the celebrity chef will too often camouflage the very rudimentary nature of what they provide. With this in mind, one of the challenges you face is to balance professional competence with the humility inherent in your role. You must live in the middle of taking pride in what you do, being a professional and competent artisan, manager, and business person in an increasingly complex industry, while maintaining a traditional subservience when it comes to the demands and needs of your customers. At one moment you are totally in charge, directive, firm and professional, and at the next moment you are bowing to the often unrealistic criticisms and demands of an unhappy or irrational—sometimes drunk—customer. “Yes, ma’am. No ma’am. Certainly sir. I am sorry sir, I’ll see to it right away.”

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

These are some of the paradoxes of your work, Joanne. Yet in none of this is the eternal worth of what you do as a hospitality professional negated. Nor is the possibility of touching at the core of what Christian hospitality is

meant to be about. In fact, I would argue that it is the paradoxical nature of your work that sacred connections are most obvious. Certainly you are remunerated for what you do, but so are priests, pastors and missionaries. Certainly your service is within the context of a profit-based industry, but the sense of vocation that you can bring to it is not diminished by this fact. To speak eloquently about the Christian ministry of hospitality as an embodiment of the hospitality of God does not take away from the very practical, routine and earthy nature of what it is. Acts of hospitality, though they may issue from a profound spiritual experience and calling, are fundamentally practical and hands-on.

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

I have said enough. I look forward to hearing what you make of all this. Perhaps you will want to tell me that my head is still too much in the clouds! I would hope, however, that at least the thought of finding the presence of God in what you do in the kitchen is enticing enough to warrant further discussion. Let me conclude with some words from the respected Australian food writer, Michael Symons, who happens to believe that

your worth as a cook is more than gold!

As people who embody the human virtues of warmth and generosity, cooks warrant our gratitude. As people who command an enormous range of knowledge and skills, they demand to be admired. As people committed to our pleasures, cultural development and survival, they are to be worshipped ... If 'we are what we eat', then in making our meals, cooks make us. (p. 351)

The thought that you would be worshipped is a probably a bit beyond your pale. Perhaps, though, the possibility that what you do in your work of hospitality would point us beyond yourself to the one who made you and calls you is one worth considering.

Sincerely,

Simon

Symons, M. *The Pudding that Took a Thousand Cooks: The Story of Cooking in Civilization and Daily Life*. Ringwood: Viking, 1998.

© Simon Carey Holt, 2002.

References:

- Accommodation Cafes and Restaurants*, Industry Training Monograph. Canberra: NCVET, 1998.
- Accommodation Industry*. Canberra: ABS, 1999.
- A Recipe for change: The Future of Commercial Cookery in Australia*. National Industry Skills Initiative, Food Trades Working Group Report, July 2001.
- Clubs, Pubs, Taverns and Bars*. Canberra: ABS, 1999.
- Myack, S. "Working with Black and White" in *Quadrant*. No. 359, September 1999, 55-61.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. Glasgow: Collins, 1976.
- Pohl, C.D. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.