

“Radical Hospitality”
A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada
Sunday, September 20, 2026

One of the most profound times that I experienced radical hospitality started with my showing up on the doorstep of complete strangers. For some backstory, I was a student in university at the time, planning for a full summer of research. This was a couple years before I started seminary. My university in Monterey, California, helped me to organize this experience, providing funds, support, and help with travel and logistics. Before my small dorm room opened up for the summer in the Boston area, we planned to have me stay at an Airbnb for a night or two.

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, I packed my things and flew to Boston, eager to get settled and explore. Arriving at the airport, I hopped into a rideshare and made my way to my temporary accommodations... Only something wasn't quite right. The photos didn't really match the building I arrived at. Also, where was the lockbox for the keys? And hang on, the numbers don't seem to be matching either.

There I was, standing on this doorstep with nothing but my suitcase. The sun had set, and it was growing dark. The listing had been a total scam. I had no place to go.

As I stood there, lost and confused, a man and a woman emerged from the building, taking out the trash. Seeing my desperation, they asked if everything was okay. Panicked, I explained that I was confused because my place should be somewhere nearby, but things just weren't lining up. In a moment of grace, they turned to each other and asked if I might like to join them inside.

To my luck, that night was the first night of Ramadan. Both the man and woman had family that had flown in to celebrate Ramadan and their graduations from Harvard. Their whole family filling their small apartment, they welcomed me in and fed me, even offering to let me stay there for the night if I needed. They explained that they couldn't possibly turn me away during Ramadan, a time when welcoming the stranger is obligatory.

I was shocked! Shocked that they were so welcoming and willing to open their already-full home to a person they'd never met. Their grace allowed me to figure out my next steps and find somewhere safe to stay. To this day, this experience of radical hospitality has continued to move me: the mystery of life's journey and never knowing who you might welcome or meet at your door.

This morning, we're centring this notion of radical hospitality: this way of going above and beyond basic politeness and social expectation to meet someone where they are. To bid them our widest welcome. To disrupt the cycles of oppression and brokenness in our world in favour of a more liberating, lifegiving way.

All of us have either welcomed others or have at times been welcomed ourselves. Perhaps a few of you even have stories like mine, where you were struck by the overwhelming kindness and generosity you were given when you least expected it.

And, for some of you, maybe it's the small, everyday experiences of radical hospitality that continue to astound and grip you. From meeting kind eyes or gentle smiles with a stranger to that profound coffee or tea when someone truly listened, holding earnest space for you to feel seen, witnessed, and held.

What's ironically radical about radical hospitality is that *it's not trying to be*. Radical hospitality doesn't start with our desire or wish to go above and beyond, or to get the gold star for doing the right thing. It starts, instead, from our desires to centre someone else. To meet someone where they are in the ways they wish and need. Sometimes, in the ways we need but don't know how to ask.

Radical hospitality is *radical*; it's just not trying to be. Instead, it's deeply humble and unassuming. True hospitality isn't an attempt to help or fix someone. It's not a posture that coexists well with ego or saviourism. Instead, radical hospitality calls us to meet one another as equals; as fellow travelers on life's journey. When we open ourselves from that kind of authentic place, we are just as much the recipient of this grace as much as we are also the giver.

The world's traditions offer us some lenses into radical hospitality. Our Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, point to hospitality as an obligation; how it's *required* to treat a neighbour or stranger with welcome and care. How it's something more than just words and ideas. It requires actively being lived into. There's a consistent theme that also appears across their main texts: that recognition can only come after the welcome, meaning the stranger is already someone we know if we only allow ourselves to meet them first.¹ Think of the story of the three strangers appearing to Abraham in the heat of the day: how only after welcoming them do we learn who they really are.²

The Two Row Wampum belt or *Gaswéñdah* offers an Indigenous lens toward hospitality. This is a living treaty, originally made in 1613 between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch, remembered by a belt of wampum with two equal and distinct rows. This living treaty emphasizes a posture of hospitality in holding respect and making space for another as we travel down the river of life; not trying to crowd or steer another's "vessel" as we dwell together.³

In Buddhism, hospitality is framed in terms of the giver. How the giver is the one who receives the true gift; the gift of the occasion to give. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh widened this teaching by extending this obligation inward. To greet our own inner fears by name. You cannot offer the hospitality that you have refused for yourself. There is no separate self.⁴ Radical hospitality is not just what we do for others. *It's also a posture we hold for ourselves.*

¹ Soltes, Ori Z.; Stern, Rachel; and Moraes, Endy, ["Welcoming the Stranger: Abrahamic Hospitality and Its Contemporary Implications"](#) (2024). Religion. 26.

² [Genesis 18](#), *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition*.

³ ["Two Row Wampum – Gaswéñdah"](#), Onondaga Nation.

⁴ ["Thich Nhat Hanh on... / Accepting Ourselves and Being Partly Right"](#), Plum Village.

From Rumi's poem, "The Guest House," we hear of radical hospitality's inner dimensions: "some momentary awareness comes / as an unexpected visitor. / Welcome and entertain them all! / Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, / who violently sweep your house / empty of its furniture, / still, treat each guest honorably."⁵

Our inner lives are full of unexpected visitors. I believe the root of our hospitality for others is found in the ways we hold space and show up for ourselves. While it's important to meet people on their terms, welcoming our own inner guests is a profound source of wisdom and learning. Learning how we ourselves feel fully seen. *This being human is a guest house, both inside and out.* Some of our best learning for being fully present for others comes from being fully present for ourselves.

This community finds itself a year after moving into our new neighbourhood and building. There's a deep yearning and desire for us to know our neighbours and to be known ourselves. I think we're at a powerful moment of taking stock of our inner congregational life, pausing to ask ourselves: *Who are we in this new community? What postures, what unexpected visitors do we arrive with as newcomers and strangers?* Most essentially: *What do our own neighbours want and need? What does this community need that we can be present to?* Not to jump-in and save; not to fix or grow our members in the neighbourhood just for the numbers. But genuinely asking ourselves: *How can we show up for our wider community?*

Now, I'm biased here, but I think I already know your hearts. One of the greatest joys of serving a Unitarian Universalist community is experiencing the gravity and the depth of care that people bring to community and to our shared values. I joke that I feel like I have such a warped view of the world, being constantly surrounded by some of the most dedicated, hardworking people, always striving to live more fully into these values we hold so dear. Those of you that know my story know that Unitarian Universalism was a well of radical hospitality for me as a teenager. It's a big part of why I'm here and why I love this work.

You see, congregations need to be clinics of radical hospitality in our world. I don't mean this with any sense of UU exceptionalism. We're not the creators or the inventors of hospitality. We are inheritors. We know many others in faith communities who do truly radical work. At their core, congregations, churches, and communities of faith must be radical places. Spaces where we practice a different way of being together than what our wider world expects of us or tells us is the norm.

We must be places where we out-insist the forces of fear, hatred, and bigotry that divide us from one another. *If our community is just keen on being exactly like every other space and place in this world, replicating the same oppressive patterns and structures, then what's the point?*

You all know this already; it's why you come to this community, to remind yourself and one another that here we practice a different way. A way of humble kindness and

⁵ ["The Guest House"](#), Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, transl. Coleman Barks, *Grateful Living*.

generosity. A way of remembering our common humanity and our imperfect humanness. A way of knowing that we're not alone; that here we'll find ourselves as welcomed guests in a world that often feels unwelcoming and overwhelming.

Having this kind of community in our lives is something we don't always know we need. But where would more than a few of us be without it?

I want to turn now to our Unitarian Universalist tradition. What is our Unitarian Universalist theology of hospitality and radical welcome? I find it in our love and acceptance of one another. How each one of us comes from our own constellation of experiences and beliefs, yet we meet one another in this same core principle: We welcome as we once were welcomed ourselves.⁶ The great pluralism you find here of many rich perspectives, experiences, and beliefs is based on the premise that we welcome one another to be different and distinct.

If you're coming for a church where everyone thinks or believes the same way, this may not be the best home for you. But if you've come wearing your crash helmet and life preserver...⁷ If you've come knowing that such holy encounters with life and difference might even change you, or at least leave you in a place different from where you arrived... *Then you've come to the right place.* Radical hospitality will change you, in both the giving and receiving.

To close, I end with a prayer I wrote a few years ago when I was exploring the theme of radical welcome; I offer it now as a hope and a blessing for this community as we seek to be a people of radical hospitality. You're welcome to pray it with me:

Loving Spirit, be our guest in this place. Be the stranger at the door that welcomes us; that invites us to turn to one another with compassion.

Pull up a chair at our table and rest here a while. Stretch and strengthen the bounds of our circle so that we cast no one out who is but a friend we have yet to make.

Likewise, keep this place safe so that we might share in the abundance of love, inclusion, and ever-widening respect. Carve out a place within ourselves for the capacity to be more than we are, and *more than we think we are.*

Loving Spirit, remind us in the times when it is hard or challenging to find your patience and wisdom. Give us open hearts that are ready to serve our neighbour. To offer a meal or a kind word to this world that is hungry not just for food but for *connection.*

⁶ Referencing a line from [“Welcoming the New Member”](#), Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti, *WorshipWeb*, UUA.

⁷ [“Annie Dillard on ‘Going to Church’](#)”, Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (London, 1984), pp. 40-41.

May we follow your call to be a hospitable people as we work each day to draw the circle wider. To set the table for yet one more who is not yet with us.

*May we become the radical welcome we know is possible.*⁸

Amen.

⁸ “A Radical Welcome Prayer,” Rev. Alex Jesen, September 17, 2023, shared at the UU Congregation of Grand Traverse, Traverse City, Michigan, USA.