

# REPUBLICAN JOURNAL

## Opinion

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### **Column: Journey of the Spirit: Hospitality: Prayer by another name**

Bob Johansen is a retired parish minister and spiritual director living in Belfast. He currently serves as board chair of Family Promise of MidCoast Maine, helping local congregations and organizations respond to the needs of families at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Serving a plate of food, a bowl of soup, or even a cup of coffee to a hungry guest can be a sacred act, an expression of welcome, an opening to sharing, a show of support, and an invitation to relationship and community. Hospitality is a spiritual practice, prayer by another name.

Beyond the formal exercise of religion through corporate worship, prayer, meditation, or studying sacred texts, sometimes it's the small, repetitive practices that we return to over and over that most nurture our spiritual lives. Gardening, singing, dancing, sailing, bread baking, weaving and knitting, the list could go on and on. We are drawn to these practices and find meaning in them. They connect us to something larger than ourselves and feed our souls. They give expression to our deepest sense of ourselves and our connection to others, to the world, and to life itself. As spiritual practices they often remind

us that beyond the everyday physical interactions of people, places and things, there is, as philosopher William James wrote, “more,” however we choose to name it — the spirit, the divine, the sacred, or God.

I first learned the power of serving food to hungry guests while volunteering in a soup kitchen, a Catholic Worker House, in the South End of Boston. Our volunteer crew started early in the morning, taking stock of the donated food in the kitchen that day. With an agreed-upon plan, tasks were claimed — chopping veggies, browning meat, building up a soup stock, or cooking pasta. Teamwork and camaraderie saw time pass quickly. But the real joy came hours later when servers set a bowl of soup or stew in front of each guest, addressing him by name. Once all had been served, volunteers would join the guests at table to share the meal and conversation.

Many of our homeless guests spent their days endlessly walking the streets, reading in the public library, or sitting on park benches. They knew that drawing attention could lead to being chased away or harassed. But here in the warmth and safety of the soup kitchen, they could relax, be themselves, and sometimes open up.

In this temporary shelter from life’s storms, I learned that practicing hospitality was as much a gift to myself as to our guests. When two strangers meet over a bowl of soup or a cup of coffee, both are nurtured, not just by food for the body, but also by food for the soul. We affirm the fundamental bond that unites all of us as humans dependent on food and drink for life itself. We all know what it feels like to be hungry. We all know the pleasure

of delicious food shared in the company of others. We all appreciate how it feels to have someone serve us, attentive to our needs and desires, the server and the served united in a moment of communion.

The spiritual practice of hospitality, offering welcome, safety and nourishment to others, is woven into almost all religious traditions and into the hearts of many who consider themselves spiritual but not religious.

Whether at the kitchen table or at a dining table spread with a Thanksgiving feast, something life affirming happens in these moments. I remember grandmothers and mothers who always found a place at their table for strangers, neighborhood kids, and college roommates with no place to go for the holidays. I think of the British tradition of “excellent women,” always there to offer a cup of tea in a difficult time, or those dads always eager to share their grilling skills with the new neighbors. When we view hospitality as a spiritual practice, we understand our interconnectedness with one another, even when externals of situations and circumstances seem to highlight our differences.

Practicing hospitality remains a spiritual practice for me still. Sharing lunch in a drop-in center for homeless women, I discovered how much they craved conversation and company as much as the food we served. From grumpy guests who merely grunted when a plate of food was placed in front of them, I’ve been embarrassed to recognize that part of me that expects at least a bit of gratitude in return. In a community meal program at a small Massachusetts church, I learned how much guests wanted to contribute in some way, whether through a small donation or by helping set the table. In the Belfast

Soup Kitchen, I've learned how caring the community is. Through this simple spiritual practice, serving a bowl of soup and a cup of coffee, we each connect with something deeper than ourselves, however we name it.

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