

## **Hospitality in the Teacher-Learner Relationship**

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### **Introduction**

I was probably in my third year of primary school when a teacher gave instructions for an activity that we needed to work on. The professor asked if we all understood the instructions. It was not clear to me if I should ask or not. I decided to wait a few minutes to see if any of my classmates were in the same dilemma. In the end, I took courage and went to her desk while she was writing some notes and told her very softly how I understood the instructions. She stood up from her desk and said in a loud voice, “Ernesto understood it this way . . . is he right?” All the class said, “no,” after which she told me, “You were the only one, so I won’t take more time; ask your classmates for instructions.” All the class laughed loud enough for me to be embarrassed. That was probably the last time I asked a question of a professor during my primary years.

On another occasion, in the same school, with a different professor but with the same classmates, we received instructions to bring a certain material for an activity. The professor asked for two matchboxes. One student rose from his seat and asked, “Filled or empty boxes?” We all laughed (including myself), while others made a bullying sound, like telling him how stupid he was for asking the question. The professor stood and said, “I think I have to clarify that question . . . please bring two matchboxes with matches.” We all were in silence and embarrassed. We all thought that the boxes were to be empty, that we were going to use the boxes, but not the matches. This particular student was brave to stand and ask, but we did not value his question.

Although the examples given above are somehow “childish” behaviors, similar reactions happen at every level of education. Professors mock stu-

dents' questions or misunderstandings, and students react towards questions of peers. There is often a sense of fear in classrooms. Things like fear between student and professor or lack of empathy in the classroom make education a painful process. Through this essay, I will expand upon the meaning of hospitality, its application in education, and how it affects the learning space. In addition, I will provide examples and show how this can help in the process of transformation, not only from the professor's perspective but for learners and the community.

### **Hospitality and the Scripture**

Hospitality should not be a foreign term for Christians. However, this is not true in many cases. Hospitality is rooted in the Bible, in both the New and the Old Testaments. The Bible relates its importance and the reasons for its practice.

In the Old Testament, Leviticus 19:34 says, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (NIV). The foreigners usually did not have rights in a land that was not their own. The lack of rights deprived them of freedom. "Aliens were kept ethnically apart." Those attitudes towards foreigners are not only old attitudes. They remain until now (Milgrom 2004, 244). Joe M. Sprinkle says that although some people may have brought different "pagan practices," that did not justify mistreatment by the Israelites. The Israelites, based on their experience in a foreign land, should have been able to demonstrate "empathy" (Sprinkle 2015, 131).

In the New Testament, Romans 12:13 says, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." In focusing on matters of hospitality, Paul was concerned when missionaries depended on the "hospitality of others" (Matera 2010, 292). Andrew B. Spurgeon and Chiu Eng Tan refer to hospitality as "fellowship." Such fellowship should be a genuine and "non-hypocritical" fellowship. The literal Greek translation for hospitality is "love for a stranger." This means that hospitality is not only for other Christians or relatives but for those who are not family members or friends. Paul's message about hospitality is that it is not optional but a mandate (Spurgeon and Tan 2013, 274-275).

The main example of hospitality in the Bible is Jesus. Jesus represents the hospitality of God by his obedience and becoming a human in heart. Jesus demonstrated hospitality by going to people and interacting with the unwanted and sinners. Furthermore, Jesus shared meals with the people and sat down to listen to their stories. When persons accepted Jesus into their houses, they welcomed the Spirit of God and “became empowered by the same Spirit.” With the Spirit, they also became hospitable to the stranger (Yong 2008, 101, 106).

When accepting Jesus, we accept the “Christian obligation to be hospitable” and to share with strangers, as Jesus did. Biblically, we are called to preach and pray as well as practice the sacraments. However, those practices do not lead us to be holy people if we do not practice hospitality. “Hospitality is part of [Christians’] holiness, as they have learned to welcome the stranger as the very presence of God” (Hauerwas 1986, 108-109,146). To be Christian is to be the representative of God and his word to the world. Grant Zweigle, in *Worship, Wonder and Way: Reimagining Evangelism as Missional Practice*, quotes Bryan Stone as saying that the church of today should be a church transformed by the Holy Spirit “through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing” (Zweigle 2015, 64). Such hospitality is not only to be extended to the members of the body of Christ, as Zweigle says. Evangelism is to share the gospel with non-Christians. Hence, hospitality is also for them (Yong 2008, 115).

We can see that hospitality in the Bible demonstrates love to the stranger, openness, respect, empathy, honesty, and other values. These may be practiced in church but rarely in classrooms or in education. Christian and non-Christian educators should retain those practices inside a classroom, with students, who are strangers, not only to the educator but to a certain subject. What is the meaning of hospitality when applied to a setting where not many people consider it appropriate? In a context like mine in Peru, authority in the classroom is represented by power or even dictatorship, not hospitality. The following section addresses the different implications of hospitality.

## Hospitality

The word hospitality may have different connotations. There are not many people who have attempted to bring hospitality to an educational space like a classroom or to a professor. Hospitality, in my culture, is limited to a house setting or to a small group of people assigned to be hospitable so other people around can feel comfortable.

In the small town of Santa Rosa, thirty minutes away from my city, there is a particular practice. Family or friends are gathered in the house during the afternoon as part of their routine or for a visit. At 6:00 pm, when near the sunset, the head of the house stands up, turns the lights on, and approaches each member of his or her family or friends, shakes hands, and says, "Good evening." This is an indication that a person is welcome to stay for more time or even for dinner.

But hospitality goes beyond welcoming people whom we know. Hospitality means a way of living so as to be able to know others and to allow oneself to be known. In the Benedictine heart, hospitality means love demonstrated through practice. This can mean opening up space and being vulnerable. "To receive others is to expose myself to all sorts of frightful dangers of attachment and rejection." But to be hospitable is to be complete, and this only happens when we let other people "in" (Homan and Pratt 2008, 1-14).

Although hospitality implies the open doors of our houses, this is not the only way in which hospitality can be expressed. Henri J. Nouwen, in *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, says that in order to be hospitable, we need to become a "stranger to ourselves." To know what we are lacking is to be humble. To be ourselves in that particular position is to allow us to understand others more. Hospitality is extended to the space as well as to the person who offers it. Hospitality is to create a space in which strangers can move freely like a friend rather than "an enemy." Nouwen says that the intention of hospitality is not to change people or to side with them necessarily, but rather to give them the space "where change can take place." Many people believe that when someone is hospitable, he or she is inviting the guest to be like them. But in fact, hospitality allows the guest to see what he or she can do on his or her own. The process

of being hospitable is not an easy one, and in many cases, it requires abandonment (Nouwen 1973, 63-77).

Hospitality has been practiced throughout history as a priority. The Desert Fathers were early Christian hermits and monks whose practices included fasting and ascetic life. Although these practices included separation from others as part of their rules of life, love to others was more important than “knowledge, solitude, and prayer.” Overall, hospitality was a “top priority” (Merton 1970, 3-17).

To be hospitable is to live in community, and that community should be a community of forgiveness. Nouwen says that forgiveness is what holds community life together (Nouwen 2006, 119-120). One cannot experience hospitality or even provide it if there is no forgiveness. At many times, I was offended by the community in which I live now. It is hard for me to feel welcomed in a space where people who have offended me are present. I always thought that I should be the one asking for forgiveness, but the reality is that I am the one who should forgive and enter a place with freedom in my heart and mind. Matthew 18:21b-22 says, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” To be hospitable is to forgive.

The communities in which we are to set examples of hospitality can be communities of problems. As there are problems among secular communities, there are problems in Christian ones. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that, after all, Jesus “lived in the midst of his enemies.” Our work as Christians is to bring peace in the midst of problems (Bonhoeffer 1954, 17).

Hospitality has different implications. To be hospitable is to practice service. We are called to “be” servants and not to “act” like servants. To be servants is to be listeners in our place, where we host others. It is not just to open doors or places. There are many people that are willing to open spaces but with conditions. To listen is not reserved for the ones who are trained to listen. Richard J. Foster says that we do not need to provide “right answers” but just to hear. To be good listeners to others, we have to have had good experiences in listening to what God wants to say to us (Foster

1978, 137-139).

How can hospitality be extended to educational settings? Is it possible to apply it in classrooms by welcoming the stranger, showing respect, empathy, and love, opening doors, listening, and other practices of hospitality? Are the students to be treated as part of our families? Can instructors guide students towards this? If so, how will this create transformation in educational settings? In the following part, I will extend the concept to classrooms, with teachers as hosts, learners as visitors, and instruction as trust.

### **Hospitality and Education**

There are two main texts that talk about hospitality in the educational setting. Both books were written by Parker Palmer. The first one is *To Know as we are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, and the second, *The Courage to Teach*. Both sources are the basis for the composition of this essay. I first encountered Palmer in the “Transformation Across Adolescence” class under the guidance of Dr. James Hampton. Palmer brought light to me by showing that the educator’s role is not only what is usually the expectation worldwide, i.e., to give information or even to be a model for others. The “Spirituality and Transformational Learning” class, under the guidance of Dr. Floyd Cunningham, was very helpful in understanding the meaning of the spirituality of the instructor.

One of the reasons for educators to understand hospitality and to see the importance of spirituality in their lives is because, at many times, they do not have an idea of the high importance that this attitude has for students. Palmer relates this as “the pain of disconnection.” Students are eager to learn or to receive guidance. What Palmer wants is to change “traditional education,” which is shaping the student to a certain mold (Palmer 1993, x). This is similar to what Paulo Freire refers to as the “banking concept of education.” The banking concept is the process of depositing, in which students are mere receivers, static, and with no option to think or to create. The change that Freire wants toward the elimination of the banking concept is to liberate the educational system, “reconciling the poles of contradictions so that both are simultaneously teacher and students” (Freire 1984, 58).

The purpose for a teacher in finding his or her spirituality is to be able to create openness. As presented above, hospitality is this openness, and when there is openness, like in its regular setting in the classroom, it welcomes “diversity and conflict.” It is in the authentic spirituality of the teacher where truth is found, regardless of what that truth is. In traditional education, fear is reigning, while in truth conveyed with hospitality, fear is gone (Palmer 1993, xi).

The previous statement represents the educational system in Peru and other contexts. A few years ago, there was an article in a Peruvian newspaper about racism in private schools. Students with certain family names were accepted as students, while others, regardless of their economic status, were not accepted. Private schools are known for being expensive, and not all people are able to send their children to those schools. However, there are people, who with hard work, are able to increase their economic situation and so create new opportunities for their children. Private schools were not willing to receive people from the highlands or jungle; they wanted people from the urban areas and, in many cases, with a certain skin color.

Palmer says that “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.” And practice does not come from repetition or memorizing, as traditional education mandates, but brings students to the area of reality in the community. “This may mean working with materials, creating artifacts, and solving problems” (Palmer 1993, xii,xvii).

One of my experiences mentioned above created fear, and the other created courage. I was embarrassed for asking a question about something I did not understand and was put down in front of the whole classroom. I also remember that there were other people who asked questions, and their questions were right and were answered. The second experience did not help me to get through the embarrassing experiences that I had. From that point, I decided to keep the questions only in my own mind.

There was a time, in my graduate education at APNTS, when I faced a different fear, the fear of talking. I came from Peru, where English is not an official language. The official language is Spanish. When I came to the Philippines, I needed a new language. Although I studied some basic English

before, I did not have the platform to practice. I needed to learn a new way to speak in a new culture. A certain group of people decided that the way I spoke was “funny.” I lacked certain pronunciations. I had a different accent than the others. This attitude created in me a sense of rejection and fear of talking for a semester. I avoided participating with others or even asking questions in class or interacting with people. Even nowadays, due to that experience, I feel a lack of confidence when speaking or even writing in English. I decided to stay in fear rather than to learn, “boxed and tied.” In this case, fear was not imposed by a professor but by peers, learners who were walking with me in the process of learning (Palmer 1993, 39).

Fear is more common than people think, and fear is present not only in the students but also in educators. Many people think that educators, especially those with years of experience, do not face fear when, in fact, fear is present every single day. I had never thought that arrogant teachers, who entered a room full of power, are usually hiding their fear, but Palmer, in *The Courage to Teach*, says that “arrogance is often a mask of fear” (Palmer 2017, 51)

I remember the first time I was asked to teach in a Sunday school class. All the students were adolescents and younger than I. I prepared for over a week for my class. I entered the room with fear and no idea what the students were going to think about me. They were used to one teacher, and she was not able to be there for a few weeks. They really loved her. The students looked at me and took their places immediately. I entered pretending to know all with “arrogance,” looking at the students as not knowing anything, as “empty vessels.” After an opening prayer, introduction, and a few words, I ran out of words and ideas and had no more to say. The students noticed my fear, and this turned into an opportunity for them to take over the class with noise, laughs, comments, and more. Although I prepared for my classes well and since have improved, I still have fear in facing them.

Hospitality in education requires certain aspects such as humility, care, personal relationship, listening, and silence. The following section addresses those issues in the classroom setting.



## Humility

When people open their houses to provide hospitality to a stranger, the first thing is to introduce the place. Introducing the house is intended to make people feel comfortable and at home. The same should happen in education.

Humility in hospitality is part of the spiritual feature of a professor. It is in humility that I am able to see everyone and their needs and requirements. It is in humility that I no longer see myself alone with what I want to provide (Palmer 1993, 108). It was in humility that the Desert Fathers were able to find God since humility was their first commandment. Matthew 5:3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). When a person forgives, it represents humility (Merton 1970, 52-53).

As Christians, we are to follow Jesus’ life. Jesus represented humility in his teaching, in the way he talked, and how he told his disciples and followers to obey his example. The Beatitudes are one example, but Jesus taught humility in many other ways. Andrew Murray, in *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness*, writes that Jesus offered himself as a teacher. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (NIV). Murray says that it is in humility that we find salvation. Humility in Jesus was not only through words but in actions. In his role as leader, he demonstrated humility by washing others’ feet and serving at the table. Actions demonstrated Jesus’ role as a servant. Servanthood is to be practiced by all and engraved in our words and actions (Murray 1973, 24-28).

Hospitality “means receiving each other, our struggles, and our new-born ideas” (Palmer 1993, 74). It is not possible to do such things unless we learn from Jesus and become servants who are able to accept diversity in a room full of people with different struggles, needs, points of view, and voices.

## Care and Personal Relationship

I was in high school when I experienced something that I still have not

forgotten. I was not a tall person, like other peers my same age. I started to grow mostly between the last year of high school and the first year of college. I could easily get lost among primary-level students. My parents were afraid that something could happen since I was small and thin. My father went to pick me up every afternoon at the school, and we walked together. For some reason, one day, I decided to walk home by myself with a friend and stop by his house to pick up some books I needed. My father did not find me, and my classmates told him I had already left. He returned home, which was ten blocks away. When he did not find me at home, he returned to the school, and my classmates were still there. My classmates saw my father worried about me and so decided to divide into groups and follow different ways that I could have taken. When I finally arrived home, I found my father with almost twenty classmates waiting outside my house. Some started to cheer, and others ran to see me. Next to my father was my Physical Education instructor, who heard I was “missing.” I was embarrassed. It was not until years later that I started to value the care of the group.

The relationship between teacher and student is as important as the one the students have with their parents. It is in a classroom that students expend considerable time. Many of the professors become “insensitive” to the life of students, basically only caring for grades and papers. Professors tend to believe that they can know their students by the things they write. It is not surprising that students pull back from their superiors, creating a “resistance to learning.” Teaching, according to Nouwen, is the perfect space to eliminate such resistance. It is in teaching that teachers have the great advantage of creating a space where “students and teachers can enter into a fearless communication with each other.” Care and relationship are presented when teachers allow learners to participate when the teacher can let the learner know that “they have something to offer.” Then, they are no longer passive learners. This is an opportunity to develop hospitality. The learner can share what is experienced in his or her life. It is in the classroom where the host helps the guest to find his or her “hidden talents,” touching their reality (Nouwen 1973, 84-88). Palmer also says that the “personal relationship between the knower and the known” invites students “by

interacting with the world, not by viewing it from afar” (Palmer 1993, 35).

### **Listening**

Among the things that a good host can provide besides shelter is the act of listening. Many learners are eager to talk, but because of fear, they do not. Hosting means sharing. Lecturing demands that the learner only receives. Listening in my context is more submission to authority than healing. This means that the professor is right, and the student is forced to listen. There is no healing, which means that there is no listening to the student’s story, life, or experience. In a classroom, students should be able to find a place to express things they are not able to do in other contexts. A professor would stand in the front and say, “Listen to me if you do not want to be in trouble,” or, “Listen to me, if you don’t want to fail your exam.” That is the only way that instructors will use “listen” as part of the process of education. In other words, if students do not listen to what teachers want to say, they fail in the educational process.

In contrast, part of the Benedictine rules to achieve spirituality in the life of a teacher was the art of listening. Monks were called to be listeners, but listening not on the “intellectual comprehension” level but attentiveness to different aspects of life. It is important to learn how to listen because it is in listening that a person is able to hear “screams, and the sound of another’s suffering.” If we are not listening to the pain of the world, we are not practicing love. “Listening is the core meaning of hospitality. It is something we can give anyone and everyone” (Homan and Pratt 2008, 208-212). Listening is not an easy process. It requires practice; in fact, listening is part of the “life-long process of learning” (Waal 1984, 41-43).

Listening is not a practice commonly given by teachers, at least in my context. If listening is practiced, it can provide tremendous impetus to transformation. When we learn to listen to others, we are learning about ourselves. This is because we can learn from all. Educators do not just offer a voice but provide a platform for listening (Palmer 1993, 101).

### **Silence**

Silence is often considered ignorance. But this is not true in most cases. When we learn to listen, we can hear things from the silence in a room. Palmer says that “we need to abandon the notion that ‘nothing is happening’” (Palmer 1993, 80). Silence should be taken as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. It is in silence that reflection can be found. In my context, professors want quick answers to questions, answers that demonstrate knowledge, ability, and capacity. Professors want quick results as well. That demonstrates that they are good at teaching.

When students do not respond, teachers have the tendency to consider them as obstacles. Parker calls these types of students “students from hell” and the setting a “classroom coma,” or death with no interaction. Professors have to be aware of the conditions behind students’ reactions. Those students are full of fear, often marginalized, speechless in their own homes. It is necessary to open space for these students to express themselves (Palmer 2017, 40-46).

### **Physical Hospitality**

When I finished high school, I was sure that I wanted to study architecture. Many pastors called me to supervise, advise, or design classrooms. Most of the churches had Sunday school classes. Some churches adapted their churches for community projects such as Compassion International or for schools.

When I visited the different spaces in churches or schools, I was surprised by the conditions. Churches decided to build three classrooms in space big enough for one. There were windowless areas in classrooms and bathrooms, dark hallways, stairs with no handrails, no areas for recreation, and the list could go on. The main purpose was to fulfill what organizations were requiring. In other cases, such as for-profit schools, administrators filled the rooms with chairs so more students could fit. The more students in a classroom, the more money the school could generate. As an architect, I highly criticized the infrastructure not only for safety reasons but because it demonstrated the lack of care for students. When I offered my critique, the answer from the church leaders usually was, “Thank you for coming; we will let you know.”

Parker says that the physical setup of the classroom highly affects the learning process. A room where the strangers do not have the possibility of interacting does not create hospitality but irritation, especially when the classroom is to “be a place where every stranger and every strange utterance is met with welcome.” Parker says that pain is present in the process of education. Such pain should be removed. The place is to be part of the healing process.

The classical physical arrangement in the educational system in Peru is in all levels the same, with small changes depending on the age of the students. For example, in kindergarten, children are in a circle of tables in groups of four, six, or more, and the instructor is at the front. At the primary level, the students mostly gather in groups of two, with the instructor in the front. With high schools, colleges, and even graduate schools, we have individual desks with instructors in the front. This represents the “front-classroom authority structure.” Front-classroom authority is when the power and the knowledge come from one person, i.e., the instructor, not the student. The student adds zero value or no knowledge to the environment or to the learning experience. The teacher should not create hospitality with words only. It is important where he or she locates him or herself in the room. When a teacher sits in the circle and talks, “we are all being invited to create a community of learning by engaging the ideas” (Palmer 2017, 74-75).

Palmer, in *The Courage to Teach*, describes six “paradoxical” aspects that work in the teaching process space. “The first one is the space should be bounded and open.” This suggests that the space should be open for everyone to talk, with materials that all can access, and bounded because limitations help people to have a focus. A space that does not have limits becomes a complicated one to manage. One example of this is confidentiality. In openness, everyone has the freedom to talk, and in boundaries, whatever is shared stays among the people in it. The second paradox is that “the space should be hospitable and charged.” As much as we want to create freedom in the mind of the students with a space, the classes need to have an essence. Learners come to learn and find that information comes from different sources. The third paradox is that “the space should invite the

voice of individuals and the group.” Education does not only come from books and teachers. People learn from contributions from different sources. The individual voice is important, but the group is as important. When educators make decisions based on one rather than the group, there is an expectation to fail. The fourth paradox is that “the space should honor the ‘little’ stories and the ‘big’ ones.” This one talks about respect. There is a tendency to get lost in big stories or big issues so that educators have the tendency not to pay attention to the small ones. The fifth paradox is that “the space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.” If learning does not take place using the community that surrounds us, then learning is only an individual act. It is important to know what is happening around us to see the reality. Learning in community “helps us see both barriers and opening to the truth that lives within us.” The last paradox is that “the space should welcome both silence and speech.” Silence is considered in my context, and in many others, a sign of ignorance. But “silence itself can be a sort of speech” that allows us to think deeper (Palmer 2017, 76-80).

### **Conclusions**

We are called to be hospitable, not only in our way of living in our homes but in our actions. Those actions are extended towards educational settings by developing spirituality in the life of the educator. The classroom becomes the place in which students are comfortable, fearless, and welcomed.

Classic education is inhospitable. It does not allow people to enter with new ideas and does not allow the voice of the student to be valid. There are, in many instances, no boundaries. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a welcoming setting in which everyone is welcomed and treated in ways that are not expected.

It is in classic education where the lack of spirituality in the teacher prevents connection with the learners. Teachers are the highest and only source of information. It is in hospitality where the learner finds the space for interaction. Coming from different oppressive settings, including homes and previous institutions, hospitable classrooms, and professors, will allow learners to be transformed in their way of thinking and acting.

Hospitality is an art that allows education to be painless and enjoyable. “To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced” (Palmer 1993, xii). Such obedience is not forced. In obedience, we learn humility, care, and relationship and come to listen.

Educators should learn to take advantage of fear and silence. It is in those aspects that learning is generated.

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