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WEEKEND BREAK

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Volunteers hand out soup and coffee at the Astoria Warming Center at First United Methodist Church in 2015.

HOSPITALITY

A BUILDING BLOCK OF SOCIETY

When we reach out in kindness and acceptance, we nudge people toward goodness

By **KIT KETCHAM**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

Hospitality, the offering of welcome and assistance, can be one of those daunting social and spiritual practices that is easier said than done.



Long ago, a congregation I was serving was surprised by an unusual visitor who arrived one Sunday looking for a place of welcome. “Stalking Cat,” aka Dennis Avner, was a Native American who had his body surgically altered to resemble his totem animal, a tiger. His face took on a feline shape, he used contact lenses to give his eyes a catlike appearance, and his mouth resembled a cat’s lips. Cat was featured on the TV program “Ripley’s Believe It or Not!” He died in November 2012.

We rose to that challenge, thankfully, and grew from what we learned about Cat’s journey and his reasons for altering his appearance as he had.

We humans are often suspicious of anyone who isn’t like us. And hospitality can be tough when we need to offer acceptance and welcome to someone very different, someone who may appear frightening or unusual.

We are protective of our children and ourselves. We are concerned about looking foolish. We are leery of being conned, and we may worry about the effect of a stranger on our families or on our quiet lives.

Yet as the prophet and teacher Jesus made very clear in one of his parables: “Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me,” reminding us that each being is worthy of kindness and assistance in time of need.

I occasionally join an elderly friend named Billy in his booth at Geno’s on Sunday night for my Grannyburger and tater tots. He’s a veteran of the Korean War, lives across the river and drives over



Pat Wollner

“Friendsgiving” 2015 at Pat Wollner’s house in Gearhart

to Astoria nearly every day to sit at Geno’s and talk with friends who come and go.

He’s concerned about all the veterans and other homeless folks he sees on Astoria’s streets. Why are they there? Where can they go? Can they get jobs? Who is responsible? Does anyone care?

‘Come on up’

A Tom Waits’ song “Come On Up To The House” runs through my mind as Billy and I talk, and I think, “They could come on up to the Astoria Warming Center” — and then I remember that the Warming Center’s legitimacy has been challenged and threatened with closure. Will it be available when it’s most needed?

Another person feels lonely because she has few friends like herself and doesn’t know how to find others who share her world. “Come on up to the Lower Columbia Diversity Coalition,” I think, and then remember that a lot of our members are straight, white and abled. Will she find what she needs there?

I meet someone looking for a new church home where he can share his liberal faith without needing to recite a creed or sing songs that are not in tune with his beliefs. “Come on up to our Fellowship,” I think, and when he does, I overhear some critical words about another faith. Will our congregation be a good fit for him?

Then I go to the Astoria Library and notice that somebody must have said, “Come on up to the library,” because sitting at a table reading a magazine is an older guy with raggedy clothes, a wild beard and a backpack beside his chair. And at one of the computers is a young woman looking for a job. And a woman with several little kids is hanging out in the children’s section. Quite a few people are coming on up to the library.

There just aren’t many places where people are welcomed no matter who they are or what they need.

Lucky we have the library. Lucky we still have the Warming Center. Lucky the Lower Columbia Diversity Coalition is

widening its circle. Lucky that my church has become more welcoming. And lucky that we have many folks here who share Billy’s concern.

Friendsgiving

Hospitality, giving kindness and support to people we don’t know, even people who are scary-looking or very different from us, is one of the building blocks of a healthy society. When we set aside our fears and reach out in kindness to another, we nudge that person toward goodness, encouraging more kindness rather than anger.

Like everyone who appreciates an act of hospitality, I’m no different. As a pastor who has lived in several different communities, many miles from close family members, I am used to the idea that I might be eating alone on a holiday. I have my go-to plan, just in case, and I’m usually content to fix a special meal for myself or invite guests over.

One act of hospitality was new to me, and when my friend Pat Wollner invited me to “Friendsgiving” not long after I arrived on the North Coast, I entered a world of friendship that I had not known before. (Friendsgiving, in case it’s new to you, too, is a holiday feast with good friends, not a typical gathering of relatives.)

When Pat, whom I’d met through volunteering with the local land trust, invited me to join her and several of her friends, I was both tickled and nervous.

What if my chili-spiced sweet potatoes didn’t go over so hot? What about all those high-calorie side dishes and desserts? Would they ask me to say grace? What if my Unitarian grace-giving offended someone? I need not have worried. It was a wonderful afternoon.

We all have opportunities to offer kindness and acceptance, whether it’s an invitation to a meal or coffee at Coffee Girl. And we all need and deserve kindness and an opportunity to express our gratitude for that kindness.

Thank you, Pat, and my Friendsgiving friends.

Rev. Kit Ketcham is the minister of the Pacific Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Astoria. She volunteers with the North Coast Land Conservancy, ENCORE (a program through Clatsop Community College that serves retirees), and is currently working with local musicians to produce a Pete Seeger Tribute Concert and Singalong. She is a native Pacific Northwesterner and has always wanted to live on the North Coast.