

# Character and . . .

## the Places of Home

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Mary Bryant, Managing Editor

*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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## Contact Information

Wendt Center for Character Education  
University of Dubuque  
2000 University Avenue  
Dubuque, IA 52001

563-589-3440 (office)  
563-589-3243 (fax)  
wendt@dbq.edu (email)  
www.dbq.edu/wendt (website)

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# The Hospitality of Homemaking

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Peg Kerr

## Abstract

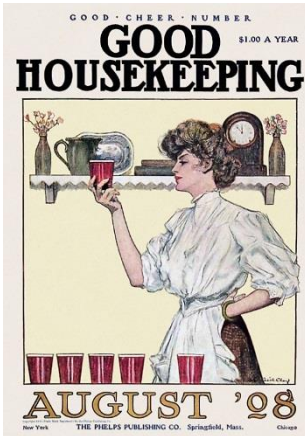
*The practice of hospitality happens in various places. In this paper, the concept of hospitality is explored with an emphasis on making our homes places to serve others.*

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I love Pinterest. What's not to love? It is an imaginary world where I can plan my dream home, decorate its rooms in the latest trends, and find delicious recipes for meals that I will serve in my lovely dining room. My problem is that my Pinterest homemaking practices bear little resemblance to my real-life homemaking practices. In real life, I find it a struggle to find time to shop for and cook a meal, and the state of my decorating is more 1990s than on trend. But these facts do not stop me from continuing to pin photos and label them “#HomemakingGoals.” Clearly, I am not the only one to participate in the Pinterest phenomenon. The Pinterest social media site reached 150 million monthly active users in 2016, according to Forbes (Chaykowski), and although the user base skews women, engagement among men has increased to 40 percent of all new account sign-ups. While interests vary, the top trending pins always include homemaking categories.

The question is, why do we do this? In my case, I think it is because I am fighting an internal battle with the disconnected and frantic modern culture we live in. I fantasize about creating a beautiful place to gather friends, family, and guests in an expression of hospitality and welcome. I

imagine the impressive dinners I will host one day when my life and home are more organized, and everything looks more like a page out of *House Beautiful* than an episode of *Hoarding: Buried Alive*. I want to open my life and my home to others. Unfortunately, I rarely find a spare minute to clear out the clutter, vacuum up the cat hair, and get the laundry put away. Hospitality becomes one more thing on my to-do list.



*Has our culture lost sight of the real importance of hospitality?*

Has our culture placed too much focus on the “entertainment” part of the definition and lost sight of the real importance behind it? The purpose of this article is to explore the concept of hospitality, the need for it, what makes the places we call home hospitable, and hospitality’s connection to character.

## Christian Hospitality

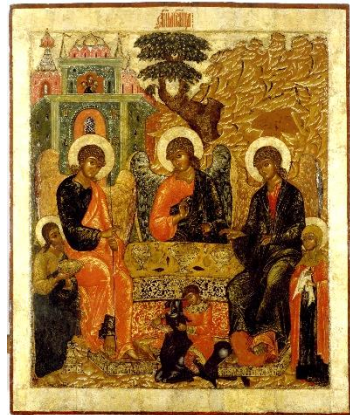
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Christians are called to practice hospitality. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us to practice hospitality (NABRE Rom. 12.13). Jesus himself ate with sinners and the spurned. Also, a passage in Hebrews says: “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels” (Heb. 13.2). Henri Nouwen would argue that our emphasis on the Pinterest “pretty pictures” aspect of hospitality has denied us of the blessing that God intended for us to receive through the practice of hospitality:

in our culture, the concept of hospitality has lost much of its power and is often used in circles where we are more prone to expect a watered down piety than a serious search for authentic Christian spirituality. But still, if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings. (66)

Nouwen's words inspire us to want to experience an "authentic Christian spirituality" through hospitality. We recognize that hospitality viewed as fancy invitations, Emily Post etiquette columns, a pristinely kept house, and expensive table settings have nothing to do with authenticity; in fact, compared to the militantly hospitable person Jesus was, these are weak representations of the real thing.

Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, asserts that the word "hospitality" is no longer really associated with a moral aspect, that most Christians have lost touch with it so we rarely view it as a spiritual requirement (4). However, hospitality is an important concept in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Abraham and Sarah served a choice steer and freshly baked bread to strangers passing by their tent; as it turned out, the strangers were

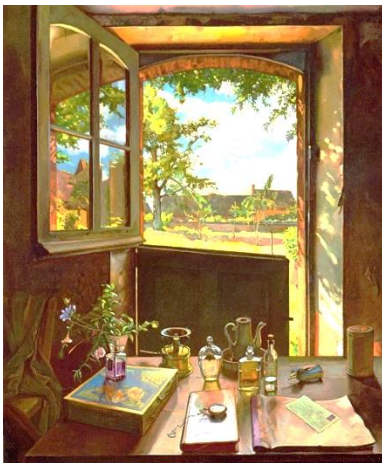


Unknown artist, "Hospitality of Abraham"

messengers of God come to tell them Sarah would have a son before the year was out (Gen. 18). In Deuteronomy, Moses explains to the Israelites they must befriend the alien because they were once aliens in Egypt (Deut. 10.19). There are admonitions to practice hospitality all throughout the New Testament, but perhaps the one that sums up the call most succinctly is from Matthew: "And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matt. 25.40). Mother Teresa took Jesus' teaching literally as she is famously quoted as saying, "I see Jesus

in every human being.” These passages are not merely suggestions, and the call to practice hospitality as a moral obligation is presented as key to Christian life.

So, if all of the entertainment planning and home decorating ideas on my Pinterest page do not represent hospitality (which is somewhat of a relief), then what should be done? Francis Schaeffer, founder of L’Abri Fellowship International, a Christian community of study centers all over the world, said, “Don’t start with a big program. . . . Start personally and start in your home. . . . All you have to do is open your home and begin” (92). Kristen Schell, author of *The Turquoise Table*, was motivated by the Schaeffer quote to begin her own personal campaign to do exactly that (Schell, *The Turquoise Table* 37), and has also created a movement aimed at encouraging people to open their lives and homes to others (Schell, “#FrontYardPeople”). She started with the simple idea of painting a picnic table turquoise and putting it in her front yard; soon people were stopping to talk as they walked their dogs, curious neighbors came by, and before long the table became a gathering place for both kids and adults, strangers and friends. Her idea has spread across the globe, a phenomenon she attributes to the fact that people are “hungry for connection and a place to belong,” and that “we crave community-authentic connection” (Schell, *The Turquoise Table* 202, 203).



Konstantin Somov, "Open Door on a Garden"

Associating hospitality with home is not an isolated phenomenon. In their book, *Slow Church*, Christopher C. Smith and John Pattinson assert that “one of the most transformative, and intimate, forms of generosity is hospitality: sharing our homes, our tables and ourselves with others” (194). Pohl insists there is an “integral connection in our experience between hospitality and home” (154). Patrick McCormick defines hospitality as opening your house to others and welcoming them in; he also adds that sharing a meal is an important part of

it, too (94). This is not to ignore the importance of the practice of hospitality in our institutions, such as churches and charitable organizations; all of these serve a very important role, but the focus here is on our homes.

## Homemaking

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some will bristle when hearing the word “homemaking.” It can take people back to junior high and high school where the boys were put in shop classes to learn woodworking and auto mechanics, and the girls were put in home economics classes where they learned how to sew and cook. There is no question that the word has a complicated association in the modern world, particularly where it concerns women. But there is also a practical aspect to this—houses by their very nature are *physical* places that must be maintained and kept up.

Homes cannot function as warm and welcoming places of hospitality if homemaking is absent. Stephen Marche, in a *New York Times* piece, addresses the decline of homemaking. Although he refers to the work as “drudgery,” he admits there is value to it; the signs that a home is well-kept represent “intangible, emotional investment.” In other words, they show that someone cares. Marche refers to these activities as “the million tendernesses of ‘emotional work,’” and he adds that they all require effort. Parents do the repetitive homemaking tasks required of raising children, such as cooking and laundry, because their love for them makes it impossible not to (Marche). Jen Pollock Michel refers to this impossibility, stating, “To love is to labor,” and she is not referring just to families but to the world (113). There is the belief this work is not just born of love, but goes beyond to the realm of the holy: it is holy work. Pope Benedict XVI said, “Christ is calling each of you to *work* with him and to take up your responsibilities in order to build the civilization of Love” (Benedict XVI, “Message of the Holy Father”). The Second Vatican Council made clear the “universal call to holiness” in the Church (Benedict XVI, “General Audience”), and that it was meant to apply to all, not just priests and religious.

Matthew Kelly explores the concept of the “universal call to holiness,” and asserts that personal holiness is the answer to all of our problems

(63). He defines holiness as “the application of the values, principles, and spirit of the Gospel to the circumstances of our everyday lives” (64), and certainly the homemaking practices that maintain our houses as warm and welcoming places of hospitality constitute a part of our everyday, even humdrum, lives. To see the holy in the day-to-day and the toil it often entails is to understand the authentic Christian spirituality Nouwen said was necessary to practice hospitality. It is important to be reminded of the inherent goodness, the holiness, of homemaking. The term “homemaking” in this perspective is not a

reference to a circumscribed set of housekeeping tasks, but as “tenderesses,” the little kind things that are done to make homes wholesome, warm, and congenial. Marilyn Robinson goes so far as to refer to these as “sacramental.”



*Too many have lost the ability to see God’s presence in the practice of the mundane and appreciate the holiness and the goodness in the work of making a home a place of hospitality.*

Tish Harrison Warren in her book, *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, writes about viewing the ordinary routines of daily life through the lens of the liturgy. She writes:

A sign hangs on the wall in a New Monastic Christian community house: “Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes.” I was, and remain, a Christian who longs for revolution, for things to be made new and whole in beautiful and big ways. But what I am slowly seeing is that you can’t get to the revolution without learning to do the dishes. The kind of spiritual life and disciplines needed to sustain the Christian life are quiet, repetitive, and ordinary. I often want to skip the boring, daily stuff to get to the thrill of an edgy faith. But it’s in the dailiness of the Christian faith—the making the bed, the doing the dishes, the praying for our enemies, the reading the Bible, the quiet, the small—that God’s transformation takes root and grows. (35–36)



It could be added that her words also apply to the homemaking people do to make houses hospitable places—to be open to God’s presence in an ordinary day. Warren also shares a story about a professor friend who assigned his class to read Augustine’s *Confessions*. A student complained it was boring, to which her friend responded, “No, it’s not boring, you’re boring” (34). The point being that too many have lost the ability to see the wonder; and in the case of homemaking, to see God’s presence in the practice of the mundane and appreciate the holiness and the goodness in the work of making a home a place of hospitality.

## **Who Needs Our Hospitality?**

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The “entertainment” focus of hospitality, as a distortion of the moral dimension of the word, is a symptom of modern life, according to Elizabeth Newman. She attributes the distortion of hospitality to a “gnawing homelessness,” and a lack of a sense of place that has stopped us from practicing hospitality. She cites several reasons for this, including the fact that Americans no longer grow up and live in one place as used to be more common; this mobility causes a lack of personal connections. Urban sprawl makes it difficult to get anywhere except by car, which separates people further. In addition to changes in the spaces we live in, time and how we think about it is different. Both parents work long hours outside the home to sustain their purchases in a consumer economy. Working so much makes home a place of brief stays just to sleep; not a place you live your real life. Other signs of this kind of homelessness, according to Newman, are the hours devoted to TV and video games and not knowing the people next door (33–35). Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh categorized the type of homeless person described by Newman as the “postmodern nomad,” who has no sense of place because he or she is always looking for personal freedom and professional success, but is actually aimless and has few important relationships with others (44–45).

So, while the Mother Teresas among us, those living with and providing homes for desperately poor and displaced people all over the world, are revered and respected as icons of Christian hospitality, in reality this is not where most people start in a quest to practice hospitality as a moral good. Leviticus 19.34 states, “You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the


alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.” But, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, while the word “stranger” commonly implies someone who is unknown, Pohl asserts that it actually applies to anyone who is disconnected from human relationships that give people a protected place on this earth (13). Neighbors, coworkers, friends, students, and virtually anyone at any time could be in need of our hospitality. Margot Starbuck recommends inviting someone totally unlikely, whose presence does not benefit the host, and especially those unable to return the favor (120). Even the close ties shared among family members can be strained by what Pohl refers to as “contemporary values, life-styles, and institutional arrangements which have helped to foster the sense that we are all strangers, even to those to whom we are related” (13). Mothers, fathers, children, sisters, and brothers might be in need of hospitality, too.

Arthur Sutherland asks, “What does it mean to welcome those who wander among us?” (4). Who are the wanderers? Sutherland offers Matthew 25.44: “Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’” The issue is that those in need cannot be

served if they are not *seen*.

Starbuck states, “Folks who would be blessed to get yanked into your living space—and who will bless you in the process—are everywhere” (120). Jesus, having perfect sight, discerned those in need—but as Sutherland points out, he did not go looking for them. As he went about his daily

business he *saw*. Sutherland advises assuming the vision of Jesus, “Hospitality ought to be ad hoc and personal” (79). Schell refers to this when she laments the fact that, by default, her impulse is always “to do”; that she struggles with the concept of “being” as opposed to “doing”—that it seems too passive. But as a consequence she admits failing to *see*. She states, “our society equates busyness with success, and I internalize that to mean the more I do, the bigger the difference I will make” (*The Turquoise Table* 95). However, it is in just those



*Neighbors, coworkers, friends, students, and virtually anyone at any time could be in need of our hospitality.*

seemingly inconsequential moments in time that a person in need might be noticed.

## A Hospitable Home

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As people who are instructed to identify those in need of our hospitality, and to “open your home and begin,” we may wonder, what makes a hospitable home? What types of homemaking make a house a hospitable home? Pohl describes the characteristics of homes that are hospitable places. First, they are comfortable and appear lived in. Second, the people in them are thriving in the environment. Additionally, a hospitable home is one that is obviously well-cared-for, not perfect, just cared-for—those are two very different things. She also adds that a hospitable home shows signs of someone paying attention to details such as “attractively prepared good-tasting food or flowers from a nearby garden.” Pohl summarizes by noting that consideration of these niceties demonstrates gratefulness for life and the investment of more time than money (152). Marche would categorize this attention to detail as “intangible, emotional investment” into homemaking and serving others.

A meal is a classic act of hospitality. Opening up a home and sharing a meal is a simple act of kindness, showing someone cares enough to prepare a meal and invite someone in. Tim Chester said in his book *A Meal with Jesus*, “Jesus didn’t run projects, start ministries, or put on events. He ate meals” (89). The ordinary everyday act of offering and sharing a meal provides human connections and serves others. Inviting someone out for a meal together is also a demonstration of kindness and caring. Hospitality is simple.

Nowhere in the literature on Christian hospitality is beautiful decorating, gourmet food, or perfection mentioned. Gina, a contributor to the blog, *My Joy-Filled Life*, wisely encourages readers to think realistically. As lovely as it might sound, inviting a dozen people over for a formal dinner party is to be avoided unless a person has experience with this type of hosting. Gina advises people to think about the kinds of hosting they actually enjoy doing. Maybe backyard cookouts, potlucks, or laying out simple tailgate food for a game on TV are better suited; host things that sound fun and that everyone will look forward to. There

are few people who don't love a take-out pizza. A host who dreads an upcoming event is certainly not going to enjoy the authentic Christian spirituality in offering hospitality that Nouwen talked about. The best advice Gina offers is this: "Build hospitality around the plans you already have," and "invite people into the life you already have." Modern life is already full of commitments, and no one wants to pile on more. If plans are already in the works for a holiday meal at home, invite the neighbor who is spending it alone. Invite the single brother-in-law to join the family for movie nights.



William Glackens, "A Pineapple"  
*The pineapple has become a symbol of hospitality.*

This kind of flexible hospitality also satisfies Schell's definition, which calls not only for opening up our homes, but also opening up our lives to others. This can be difficult. People might be reluctant to invite others into a home, or a life, that is less than perfect, that could benefit from more attention and care. No one is perfect, and inviting others in can leave people feeling very vulnerable. Schell states, "vulnerability requires honesty" (*The Turquoise Table* 140). Our culture assaults us with the illusion of perfection. Pictures pinned to Pinterest boards tell a very different story from what is real; to look through them one would think everyone else is perfect. But this is a lie, according to Schell, and the loveliest people are those who gracefully own their imperfections with confidence. Schell asks, "have you learned anything interesting from someone stuck perpetually in the trap of perfection?" (*The Turquoise Table* 142). For many, encounters with these people result in feelings of inadequacy when they believe they aren't measuring up. Stressing over whether our homes are beautiful or clean enough turns the focus back to entertaining as the purpose and ourselves as the focus. Author and blogger Shauna Niequist articulated this very well when she said, "true hospitality is when people leave your home feeling better about themselves, not better about you" (00:09:41-47). Letting go of the illusion of perfection and opening the doors to our

lives and our homes can be a daunting. But authentic hospitality is a humble thing, and the goal is to serve others, not to impress them.

## Hospitality and Character

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When homemaking is practiced for the purpose of making our homes warm and welcoming places for others, places of hospitality, they are transformed into acts of holiness and goodness done for those in need, people disconnected from human relationships. Biblical stories portray hospitality as an important virtue. The Judeo/Christian tradition is not the only belief system that speaks to hospitality as an important attribute of good human character; the Muslim faithful, Hindu teaching, and Indigenous groups throughout the world all, as examples, have considered hospitality an important value. The offer of food, drink, and shelter has been considered a moral obligation of communities throughout history (Lashley). The provision of hospitality as an expression of good character is evidenced across belief systems. For Christians and non-Christians, the goodness of the humble act of opening doors to our homes and inviting people in is understood on a universal level. One does not need to be of the Christian faith, or any faith, to recognize this. Inviting others, especially those in need, into our homes for opportunities of human connection and welcome is important. As Christians we do this in our quest to grant God's will here on earth, but making the world a better place is not exclusive. Hospitality gentles the world; a warm and welcoming home can be a microcosm of peace on earth.

## Conclusion

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Surfing the pages of the Pinterest website is fun, and can stimulate creativity and motivation. Preparing and opening our homes to others can be one of the joyful pleasures of our lives. However, if the focus is on entertaining, and the allure of perfection that we see on the social media site overcomes us, it can set up barriers to practicing authentic hospitality—that which puts the emphasis on others. The pursuit of perfection turns homemaking into a task when the focus is on ourselves. Making a hospitable home should not be complicated or difficult because authentic hospitality, an act of humility, is neither of

those things. Authentic hospitality is simple; it does not require going all out to host extravagant dinner parties.



*Hospitality makes our world a better place, and it starts by simply inviting people in.*

For Christians, hospitality is a moral obligation. To experience it as the blessing it is intended to be requires that we open our doors and our lives. The work of homemaking done in the pursuit of this goal and to provide warmth and welcome is good

work; some would call it holy. It is an emotional investment that demonstrates caring and love. The stresses of modern life have created many who are in need of our hospitality, and these people are likely to be all around us, people who are already a part of our lives but experiencing estrangement from their own friends, neighbors, or family. Homemaking pursued for the sake of making our houses places of hospitality—making them homes—and opening them to our fellow human beings is a moral good. Hospitality makes our world a better place, and it starts by simply inviting people in.

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*Peg Kerr, Professor of Nursing, has served as Nursing Department Head at the University of Dubuque for nine years. She received BSN and PhD degrees from the University of Iowa. In her spare time, Peg enjoys browsing the Pinterest social media site.*

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Image p. 14: Wikipedia/Public Domain

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