Andrew Hardison) share their concern for child mental health and family well-being.

**Selected Bibliography**


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**Hospitality: Transformative Service to Children, Families, and Communities**

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Hospitality is an ancient moral practice that was deeply embedded in early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hospitality requires acceptance of, service to, and respect for people who lack a place in the community. The contemporary importance of this practice reflects the social disconnection and economic disadvantage of many young parents and the high frequency of separation of young people, including many young parents, from their communities. Such social deterioration substantially increases the risk of child maltreatment. Building on the proposals of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, Strong Communities for Children demonstrated the effectiveness of community building in reducing such risk. It further suggested the importance of both relying on and learning from hospitable people in strengthening support for children and their parents.

**Keywords:** child abuse and neglect, community service, hospitality, Strong Communities for Children, U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect

When one is honored as senior (a mixed blessing, to be sure), the pull is to look backward—to assess one’s development as a professional and a person. In that regard, it is easy for me to identify values that were strongly held in my childhood and adolescence and that were deeply embedded in my fam-

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ily and the small-town community in which I lived as a child (see, e.g., Melton, 2010a). From the beginning, my career in psychology has been focused on the creation of humane settings for children and families (Melton, 1994).

However, the particular issues that have been at the center of my scholarship shifted as a result of an extraordinary set of experiences in 1989–1993. Besides having a number of powerful experiences abroad as both a Fulbright professor in Norway and a visitor to numerous countries in transition to democracy (see Melton, 1993), I served as a member of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1990) when it declared a national emergency in the child protection system. I led the board’s work to develop a new neighborhood-based strategy for child protection that, as I shall discuss, relies on the whole community (U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993). In that context, I vividly remember discussions about the question of whether too many U.S. neighborhoods have been in decline for too long to coalesce in support for families of young children. One board member recalled with great poignancy a colleague’s plaintive admission that he felt that he was in a war for the hearts and minds of his children. Such worries were real to all of us as we pondered the situation for the families in South Central Los Angeles, when riots erupted during our deliberations in 1992.

However, two events close to home had a profound effect on my work. First, in designing community assistance to families of middle school–aged students in upstate South Carolina, where I was already working and was ultimately to live, I was struck by the responses of parents to a survey about the sources of help available to them (Melton, 1992). Most inner city parents reported that they were living in a dangerous place with uninvolved neighbors and no source of help other than the emergency room. Parents in nearby affluent small-town and rural communities perceived much less risk, but they were not much more positive in their assessment of informal resources. More than 40% could not think of an agency or organization making the community a better place for families. Clergy, neighbors, and family members were rarely identified as primary sources of assistance. Rather, when identifying helpers, suburban parents listed professional specialists whose time could be purchased. Help seemed to have become a commodity that people bought rather than being something that they did.

Second, in 1991, my then-wife Julie, 41 years old at the time (now deceased), experienced a psychotic episode, the first step in a struggle with late-onset schizophrenia and epilepsy that continued for the rest of her life. Living in the situations that had been at the center of much of my scholarship for more than a decade prior to Julie’s becoming very ill, I experienced firsthand the limited responsiveness to and too-frequent disrespect for consumers and family members in the formal human services system. I felt the gut-wrenching consequences of disrespect for one’s own personhood. Even more profoundly, I understood the pain, the rage, and the helplessness that are engendered by observing indecency directed toward a loved one. In that context, I also developed a deep appreciation of the critical importance of informal assistance when a parent and, of course, the rest of his or her family face enormous challenges (see Melton, 2010a). I also rejoiced in the affirmation of humanity by people who offered help without being asked to do so.

**Decline of Community**

**Social and Economic Challenges**

Thus, since the early 1990s, I have been profoundly concerned about—one might say, obsessed with—the centrifugal forces across the industrialized world, as successive cohorts have been more disengaged, less trustful, and, as a result, less able to receive help reciprocally and naturally (see, e.g., Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Although pundits have frequently lamented the abysmal standing of politicians in U.S. public opinion polls, they have overlooked the fact that trust in the American people has also been on a steep decline among Democrats, Republicans, and independents (Jones, 2013).

In general, as social institutions, including the family itself, have weakened, the significance of disengagement has become more powerful:

> How do we promote family life that brings personal fulfillment, permits absorption in activities outside the family, and features non-contingent perpetual responsibility of family members to care for each other for richer or poorer, in sickness and health? ... Is it possible to achieve personal fulfillment within the family without mutual commitment? (Melton, 1995, p. xviii)

The same point could be made about religious organizations, civic organizations, labor unions, and the myriad of other institutions that have declined in membership and commitment, especially among young people (Putnam, 2000).

This loss of social capital has been amplified by financial challenges for young adults—in effect, those who are already parents of young children or who are likely soon to become parents. The millennial generation (ages 18–33 years in 2014) are the first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations . . . had at the same stage of their life cycles. (Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends Project, 2014, Economic Hardships section, para. 1)

The millennials are the only generation that has lost real wages in the past five years (D. Thompson, 2013b).

Moreover, to a stunning degree, young adults bore much of the wealth loss that accompanied the housing and foreclosure crisis. Between 2007 and 2010, home equity for 29- to 37-year-olds fell by 65% (McKernan & Ratcliffe, 2013). In 2011, the median net worth of households headed by someone younger than age 35 was $6,676, a decline in real dollars...
of 44% since 1984 (Taylor, 2014). The median net worth for households headed by someone between 35 and 44 years old was $35,000, an astounding decline of more than half.

Far too often, these weaknesses in social networks and material resources have been concretized (literally) by walls and gates. Sometimes such separation has been by choice. In a phenomenon that began in the early 1980s and accelerated rapidly after 2000, millions of Americans now live in gated subdivisions or guarded apartment complexes (Blakely, 2012; Blakely & Snyder, 1997; El Nasser, 2002). To an astonishing degree, Americans live amid a medieval landscape; metaphorical walls have been replaced by concrete and wrought iron. This “amenity” is now often a feature of middle-class neighborhoods, not just the enclaves of the wealthy. Such self-imposed isolation is magnified on the other side of the walls by the involuntary exclusion of people from American communities at a rate and in absolute numbers far greater than in any other country and far, far greater than in almost any other industrialized democracy (Gunderman, 2013; U.N. Development Programme, 2007; University at Albany, Hindelang Criminal Justice Resource Center, 2010, Table 6.13.2009).

Racial Differences

Whether the mechanism is found in criminal justice, juvenile justice, immigration detention, or school disciplinary proceedings, the burden of this involuntary separation from social and material resources falls disproportionately on young people, especially young people of color (Melton, 2010b). The numbers are stunning. For example, 49% of Black males, 44% of Hispanic males, and 38% of White males in the United States have been arrested by age 23 (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014; Riggs, 2014).

The racial disparities widen the more deeply that one looks into the system. Thus, if present trends continue, one third of Black males, one sixth of Hispanic males, and one seventeenth of White males in the United States will be incarcerated at some point in their lifetimes (Mauer, 2011). The decimation of some communities and the families within them is an obvious corollary (see, e.g., Toobin, 2014). Moreover, this problem is worsening: The incarceration rate was 3.3 times higher for Black males and 2.6 times higher for White males in 2010 than in 1960 (Drake, 2013).

Today, of course, this de facto segregation—worse, de facto punitive segregation—is not the direct product of Jim Crow laws; it is not even the product of overt discrimination. Exclusion practices themselves are ostensibly racially neutral.

Perhaps recognizing the paradox of the widening racial gap in median household income and wealth (D. Thompson, 2013a) and the much greater class-than race-based achievement gap for children today (Garland, 2013), Americans of all races now ascribe social division to social class and national origin more than race or ethnicity per se (Morin, 2009). Stunningly, the majority of African Americans themselves now say that “Blacks who can’t get ahead in this country are mostly responsible for their own condition”; only 30% of African Americans define racial discrimination as the main reason for Blacks’ disadvantage (Taylor, 2014, Figure 7.7). This discrepancy is a mirror image of attitudes in 1994, when the Pew Research Center’s pollsters began asking respondents to make such attributions. The flip began, incidentally, several years before the election of Barack Obama as president.

As I have concluded elsewhere,

the key issues of American social justice today are not directly focused on the question of whether we will discriminate against others simply because they differ from us in some salient ways. Instead, the central problem is whether we will accept or even welcome others who are not only different but also difficult to like—not because of prejudice (at least overtly) about who they are, but instead because of distress about what they have done or how they usually behave.

. . . This problem is a matter of not only race and ethnicity but also disability, sexual orientation, politics, and religion. It implicates questions of personal responsibility—not only of offenders but also of those offended. (Who will turn the other cheek?) (Melton, 2010b, p. 452)

Hospitality as the Foundation for Community

Hospitality in History and Theology

The answer—indeed, the formidable challenge—lies in cultural change to embrace norms of hospitality:

(a) norms of welcome that would prevent the mismatches between community expectations and personal behavior that lead to pressures toward exclusion, and (b) norms of forgiveness and reconciliation that would overcome the punitive impulses that result from such mismatches. (Melton, 2010b, p. 452)

Hospitality is an ancient concept of central significance in all of the monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition (see Pohl, 2011). In particular, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism recognize the story of how Abraham and Sarah lavishly entertained three guests, who turned out to be divine messengers bringing news that their hosts would be blessed in late life with a son and that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed (Genesis 18; Revised English Standard Version). (See also the later Christian reminder of this story in Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”) Often with the same element of surprise, hospitality is also present in concept if not in language in the sacred texts of ancient Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Kearney & Taylor, 2011; see, e.g., Dalai Lama, 1999, especially the chapters “The Ethic of Compassion” and “Universal Responsibility”).

Indeed, hospitality was regarded throughout the ancient world as a fundamental, divinely commanded moral duty (Pohl, 1999). In biblical texts, the Greek word for hospitality
(philoxenia) is derived from phileo (love for people connected by kinship or faith) and xenos (stranger)—hence, love for strangers. The scope of the duty of hospitality was broad—to provide travelers with protection and fellowship, not just food and lodging. At its root, the provision of hospitality was an existential encounter—an I–thou relationship—because its presence was critical to strangers’ survival, their very existence. In Islam, charity toward strangers was conceived of not just as virtuous (a nice thing to do) but also as an expression of a duty to Allah (Schulma & Barkouki-Winter, 2000).

Hebrew scripture further emphasized the importance of praying for the well-being of other groups, even those whom one might describe as enemies (see, e.g., Jeremiah 29:4–8, describing a shalom community in Babylonia). Although the norms of neighboring peoples also required care for strangers, Jewish law, codified in Deuteronomy, uniquely required the fulfillment of extensive duties in care for strangers—an expression of empathy based on the Hebrew people’s experience as aliens in the Egyptian desert.1 In effect, strangers befriended strangers, even enemies.

From the standpoint of religious anthropology, the fact that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Greco-Roman religion and ethics all placed enormous significance on the duty of hospitality is unsurprising. With apologies to Tennessee Williams, almost everyone (be they Bedouin camel drivers, Jewish merchants, Greek seafarers, Roman imperialists, or Christian evangelists) was dependent on the kindness of strangers when they were embedded in a culture of wanderers in an unforgiving climate, whether in the desert or on stormy seas.

Moreover, in the first several centuries of the Christian church, hospitality was a fundamental aspect of the practice of the faith, especially in the sharing of meals. Apart from the practical needs for meeting places for new congregations and for board and lodging for visiting evangelists, the hospitality for visitors of different ethnicity and the inclusion of people of diverse social standing were signals of Jesus’s inclusive, radical message.

Hospitality was a way of life in the Christian church for the first five centuries and a salient concept until the 18th century (Pohl, 1999). From the medieval period until recent times, however, its significance waned. Grand edifices for entertaining became the norm in church and state in the medieval period, and professionalized and bureaucratized structures for help emerged from the Renaissance.

Since about 2000, however, there has been a rebirth of interest in hospitality as a moral and spiritual practice in diverse branches of Christian theology and spiritual practice, perhaps as a reflection of the understanding that connections among people are increasingly difficult but also increasingly important to achieve.2 The scholarly but easily accessible writing of United Methodist social ethicist Christine Pohl (1999, 2011, 2012; Buck & Pohl, 2001) has been particularly influential in that regard, but current interest in hospitality crosses the theological spectrum. Of particular interest is theologically conservative psychologist Richard Beck’s (2011) brilliant and challenging application of the psychology of disgust (e.g., Rozin & Fallon, 1987) to an understanding of hospitality toward “unclean” people.3

**Hospitality as a Radical Phenomenon**

The transformative nature of religious hospitality is illustrated by the definition offered by African American theologian Arthur Sutherland: “the intentional, responsible, and caring act of welcoming or visiting, in either public or private places, those who are strangers, enemies, or distressed, without regard for reciprocation” (Sutherland, 2006, p. xiii). Stated more simply, hospitality requires people to stretch—not just to be nice, polite, thoughtful, or progressive but instead to reach further and open their hearts wider to people facing special challenges whom they do not like, do not know, or simply do not understand, and to do so without any expectation of reward.

Thus, religious hospitality (also called radical hospitality) is a challenge to all people of goodwill, no matter how virtuous and wise they may be. Hospitality requires acceptance of, service to, and respect for people who lack a place in the community, whether literally, figuratively, or both. It further requires assumption of such responsibilities—in effect, providing a home—in the context of an attitude of selflessness, of pure altruism. As John Calvin (1555/1844)

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1 Contemporary advocates of restrictive immigration policies often seek to make life in U.S. communities so miserable for undocumented immigrants and their families that they will “self-deport” (Johnson, 2013). Such proponents of deliberately unwelcoming policies and practices would do well to consider the divine directive in Leviticus 19:33–34: When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

2 Presaging contemporary fascination with religious hospitality were two Roman Catholic leaders in the 20th century who both articulated and modeled profound acceptance and care for people of widely diverse backgrounds, including people who might be described as outcasts. Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest who immigrated to North America (first to the United States, where he was a professor in several prestigious universities, and then to Canada, where he lived in a community for people with intellectual disabilities). Perhaps even more influential was Dorothy Day, the longtime co-leader of the Catholic Worker movement. Nouwen’s (1976/1998) major contribution to understanding of hospitality was his conceptualization of the experience as the creation of a “free and friendly space” for strangers (p. 48). He also emphasized the importance of service at a level that the helper comes to experience the suffering of others. In this context, “hospitality is the ability to pay attention to the guest” (Nouwen, 1972/1979, p. 89). Day was both a practitioner of hospitality (providing food, lodging, and companionship to people on and outside the margins of society) and a gifted journalist who communicated a radical Christian vision for social change. Founded in 1933, the unincorporated Catholic Worker movement continues both to publish a newspaper and, through a loose federation, to operate numerous houses of hospitality across the United States (Day, 1963/1997).

3 Other contemporary contributors to the understanding or application of hospitality include Morales (2006), Russell (2009), Sawyer (2008), Spellers (2006), Sutherland (2006), and Baker (2013).
wrote, “To perform an act, in the hope of a reward, . . . is not generosity, but a system of commercial exchange” (p. 166).

In that context, hospitality requires not only personal commitment but social transformation, so that relationships are exercised with respect in a state of equality (see Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1999, 2012). As Pohl (2011) has noted, “the tradition [of hospitality] challenges us to see people not as embodied needs but as persons with stories and gifts” (p. 486). She further noted, “At the center of hospitality are consistent efforts to make neighborly love more expansive and response to strangers more personal” (p. 486). In that context, the experience of welcome is a move toward recognition and inclusion. . . . Hospitality has a subversive and remedial dimension and allows practitioners to resist destructive cultural patterns. When the larger society tends to disregard or dishonor certain persons, small acts of respect and hospitality are powerful alternative statements. (Pohl, 2011, pp. 485–486)

The depth of sharing involved in such person-to-person transactions is affirming to both givers and receivers—distinctions that are apt to be reversed as relationships deepen (cf. Riessman & Carroll, 1995, on the self-help paradox; see also Murphy-Berman & Melton, 2002). In the near term, the interaction itself is apt to provide especially potent help to the most vulnerable among us, as they find a place in the community: “They need more than handouts and social programs; they need homes and communities within which to contribute and to share their gifts” (Pohl, 2011, p. 485).

**Costs of Isolation**

Although separation, whether voluntary or compelled, is tragically most common and most severe among those who have least, it is important to remember that the experience of being a stranger is both common (seemingly ubiquitous) and increasing in frequency across the whole society, especially among emerging and young adults. Succinctly describing the contemporary social context as “the script for a fiscal horror flick,” Paul Taylor (2014), the executive vice president of the Pew Research Center, longed wistfully for the early to mid-20th century, when the financial numbers (e.g., more workers per retiree) and the politics were easier:

Back then, except for the gray hair and crow’s feet, young and old pretty much looked and thought alike. No more. Our older generation is predominantly white; our younger generation is increasingly nonwhite. They have different political philosophies, social views, and policy preferences, as they made clear in 2008 and 2012, when the young—old voting gaps were the widest on record. Many of the young are big government liberals; most of the old are small government conservatives (but hands off Social Security and Medicare!). The young are comfortable with the dizzying array of new lifestyles, family forms, and technologies that have made the start of the twenty-first century such a distinctive moment in human history; the old for the most part are disoriented by them. The young are the least religiously connected generation in modern American history; the old are the most devout believers in the industrialized world. The young have been starting their working and taxpaying lives in the worst economy since the Great Depres-

In short, the problem of separateness and the corollary need for hospitality go beyond those who are “unclean” and thus in need of unconditional welcome (cf. Beck, 2011). Paul Taylor’s (2014) analysis of demographic trends suggests that grandparents, parents, and adult (or nearly adult) children today may be so different from one another that they often feel like strangers. Apart from the situation in families themselves, these groups’ generational peers are so disconnected that social resources do not cross age cohorts easily.

Although social and economic poverty are correlated, even educated people of at least average means are sometimes strangers to each other. For example, in my colleagues’ random-household surveys of parents of young children in largely suburban, small-town, and rural communities in northwestern South Carolina in 2004 and 2007, 44.2% of respondents reported being highly isolated (McDonell, Lavenda, & Waters, 2010). About one sixth of the isolated parents reported having a college degree, the same proportion had a family income greater than $70,000, and the majority (56.7%) were married.

Isolated parents reported (a) that they did not know anyone who could help them if they needed assistance with shopping, home repairs, or other chores; (b) that they did not know the names of any children in the neighborhood other than their own; (c) that they did not know how they would obtain child care in an emergency; and (d) that they belonged to no organizations other than a church. Fewer than half of the isolated parents (compared with about 90% of other parents) said that they belonged to a church or other religious organization.

That disconnection is bad enough in itself; surely it threatens the quality of life for young adults themselves. McDonell et al.’s (2010) analysis showed that isolated parents of young children typically have low neighborhood satisfaction, little sense of social support, and little experience in helping and being helped.

The fallout for children is undeniable; social isolation does threaten children’s safety and well-being. Isolated parents report that children in their neighborhood are often unsafe (McDonell et al., 2010). More generally, literature reviews commissioned by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1994; Pelton, 1994; R. A. Thompson, 1994) and updated approximately 20 years later (e.g., Pelton, in press; R. A. Thompson, 2014) showed that poor neighborhood quality (social poverty, controlled for social class) and sustained economic poverty are strong factors in the etiology of child maltreatment. Indeed, the physical markers that may be seen on a drive through a neighborhood (e.g., fences around residential yards; see McDonell & Waters, 2011) are strong indicators of children’s (lack of) safety in their own homes, even after statistical controls are
added for neighborhood demographic characteristics, whether the measure is parental self-report (McDonell, 2007) or the incidence of child injuries in hospital emergency rooms (McDonell & Skosireva, 2009).

The reflection of residents’ collective concern for the neighborhood and their motivation and competence in maintaining it might reasonably be expected to indicate neighbors’ watchfulness, exercise of informal control, and constructive engagement with one another (see Zolotor & Runyan, 2006, on the relation of social capital to neglectful and harsh parenting). Such factors and related lack of material resources for children’s care may contribute to parental depression (Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; Pelton, 1994) and ultimately to children’s own feelings of sadness and worry, other generational costs of the decline in social capital (Twenge, 2006, 2011). Neighborhood quality is related not only to the risk to children’s personal security but also to their vulnerability to long-term harm as a result of such wrongs (Chauhan & Widom, 2012; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomás, & Taylor, 2007; Keyes et al., 2012; Schuck & Widom, 2005; Yonas et al., 2010).

Hospitality as a Strategy for Child Protection

The good news in that regard is that a concerted effort to strengthen norms of neighborliness can improve quality of life in general for families and communities and in particular can enhance children’s safety. Following the strategy recommended by the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993) and relying on primary community institutions (e.g., churches, civic clubs, fire departments), Strong Communities for Children in the Greenville, South Carolina, area mobilized thousands of volunteers and hundreds of community organizations to take whatever action that they could to ensure that every child and every parent would know if they had reason to celebrate, worry, or grieve, someone would notice and someone would care (Melton, 2014; Melton & Holaday, 2008). This level of commitment and activity was achieved with just one outreach worker per town.

The conceptualization of the goal was adapted from the vision of the Clemson University Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, which had been built on the premise that families should be able to get help where they are, when they need it, in a form in which they can use it, with ease and without stigma. Stated tersely, people shouldn’t have to ask. Hence, help should be built into community settings in unobtrusive ways.

In comparison with matched block groups across a three-year time frame, random household surveys of parents of young children showed strong normative change: less parental stress, greater social support, more frequent help from others, greater sense of community and personal efficacy, more frequent positive parental behavior, more frequent use of household safety devices, less frequent disengaged (inattentive) parenting, and less frequent neglect. These changes in parental self-report were mirrored by positive findings in relation to substantiated cases of child maltreatment; child injuries observed in emergency room cases; and teachers’, parents’, and children’s self-reports. The effects were strongest for families of young children who had been neglected—the target age group and the problem of primary focus—although there was also evidence for positive spillover effects on elementary school–age children.

The biggest lesson of Strong Communities was that notwithstanding the differences in status, wealth, power, and interests that may be associated with race, ethnicity, profession, gender, and age, these distinctions mean little or nothing when people have the opportunity to join in expressions of caring for children and for one another. Such cultural differences and related distinctions of theology and politics seemed to have no effect on volunteer engagement and organizational activity. Organizations integrated their service in Strong Communities into their everyday activities (Haski-Leventhal, Ben-Arie, & Melton, 2008). Moreover, volunteers reported almost exclusively altruistic motives for their service; personal achievement, skill improvement, and social opportunities were rarely reported to be factors (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008).

This deep and broad engagement in community service—in effect, ensuring a welcome for young children and their families—was amplified among scores of exceptional volunteers who creatively led or expanded activities in Strong Communities (Hashima & Melton, 2008). Commonly recruited through cold calls by outreach workers, the exceptional volunteers generally had lifetime commitments (often motivated by religious belief) to community service. However, they were awed by the power and breadth of the ideas in Strong Communities and the diversity and passion of the participants in the movement.

The exceptional volunteers reported personal transformation as they experienced community transformation. They found themselves to be more central in community life, more sensitive to their community’s needs, and more expansive in their strategies and aspirations for community service. Most impressively, however, Strong Communities became a way of life—a personal ministry—that applied the strategies and principles of the movement in a much broader way than they had originally imagined. The exceptional volunteers (even some who had jobs in human services) described themselves as newly and constantly energized servants capable of moving mountains. They also often found themselves noticing—and acting on—opportunities to provide hospitality in ways that they formerly would have overlooked or would have avoided because the circumstances seemed to be beyond their capacity to address.
In Celebration of Greatness in Everyday Life

In my last lecture at Clemson (Melton, 2013), I argued that we must look to the truths—the big ideas of people of extraordinary wisdom—that are found in Western moral philosophy at the same time that we facilitate and celebrate the achievements and insights of the greats (as in Strong Communities, the exceptional volunteers) who walk among us every day, those who believe that “people shouldn’t have to ask,” who “naturally” behave accordingly, and who quietly lead others in building and sustaining a sense of community. Their recognition comes daily in smaller, maybe silent ways—in the affirmation that comes from others, be they friends or family who trust in great human beings’ goodness, effort, and skills, or strangers who are surprised and warmed by their incidental hosts’ hospitality. (p. 7)

These are the people who stretch the understanding of what it means to live in community. They do the seemingly impossible. In so doing, they open new possibilities for everyone.

Our experience in Strong Communities was filled with stories (e.g., Byrd, 2007) of people who reached out to adults and children whom they did not know, who noticed when they were worried or sad, and who lent an ear or a shoulder (and sometimes tangible resources) in support. Our exceptional volunteers were people who, in Tutu’s (2004) application of African idiom and theology, have ubuntu (roughly translated as human dignity or humanity), who are welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong to a greater whole. They know that they are diminished where others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 26)

Paraphrasing an African saying about the meaning of ubuntu (“a person is a person through other persons”), Tutu (2004) has preached, “A person is a person because he recognizes others as persons” (p. 26). It is this relationship that Tutu (1999) famously termed a “delicate network of interdependence” (p. 35): “I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.” (Tutu, 2004, p. 27).

Altruism is the word that I suspect psychologists would most often apply to such an approach. However, altruism seems far too tepid to describe a quest for community that demands, in Tutu’s (2004) words, that “anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness”—indeed, “anything that subverts, that undermines [the] sought-after good”—should “be avoided like the plague” (p. 27). Surely altruism is insufficient to describe the forgiveness for the seemingly unforgivable that occurred in the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and that in Tutu’s (1999) view opened the door to spiritual, social, and political transformation, to justice and community.

In an image reminiscent of and perhaps partly built on King’s (1963) beloved community (see Hill, 2007), Tutu (1999, 2004) foresaw a transformation through redemptive, liberating relationships grounded in mutual respect for human beings as children of God, even for “the least of these”—the youngest, the poorest, the least accepted (cf. Melton, 2010c, describing theological arguments for children’s rights). “Behind every [Mahatma] Gandhi, every Mother Teresa, every [Oscar] Romero, every [Nelson] Mandela,” Tutu (2004) has written, “there are millions of people who are living lives of love and heroism... It was the faith and the fortitude of these many that have brought the momentous achievements of the last decades” (p. 116).

This praise of ordinary people whose goodness is extraordinary is reminiscent of the contributions of another towering figure, Eleanor Roosevelt, the hospitable mother of human rights law, who often humbly showed her respect for everyday heroes. Taken from a speech to the United Nations in 1958 on the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Roosevelt’s simple words—my favorite quote—provide a vision of a society that values and practices hospitality:

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in, the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. (United Nations, n.d., para. 3)

Just as the people of the ancient world expected to be welcomed even as strangers, so too should we and our neighbors, whatever our age, ethnicity, or station in life, expect to be treated as people with dignity. I was both humbled and gratified recently when a colleague abroad described my work as an integration of moral values and principles, especially as related to human rights, with “unbridled faith in the compassion, caring, and companionship within everyday human relationships.” We as psychologists can pursue no greater cause than the celebration of the people who give life to the Golden Rule in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces every day. We can do no greater work than assisting in the creation and continuation of the settings that promote and sustain norms of hospitable treatment for all.

Amid the continuing societal decline in expressions of caring, we must diligently discover, understand, apply, and spread the contributions of successful people—exceptional servants—as the foundations for truly transformed, hospitable, decent communities inclusive of those who are strangers, excluded, alienated, or in great need. (Melton, 2013, p. 9)

People shouldn’t have to ask!