



LOVING THE STRANGER

Most of us have trouble enough loving the people we know without loving strangers. But sometimes it's good to peel back the layers to discover the origin of a word. "Loving" goes back to an Old English word, *luflic*, which literally means *worthy of love*.

Most, if not all, spiritual traditions encourage us to see the stranger as a divine guest. There is a Jewish text that says simply, *To God there are no strangers*. And someone we don't know is especially welcomed during Passover. St. Benedict's rule for monks calls on us to receive the unknown guest as if he or she was Jesus. These are all ways of saying, *Even though I don't know this person she/he is worthy of love*.

What we most often do, and train our children to do, is something that has been labeled "sharp elbows." This is because we use our elbows to push through a crowd, to get into the theater, and in so many ways to get to the front of the line. One way of treating people we don't know as being worthy of love is to stop pushing our way to the front of the line.

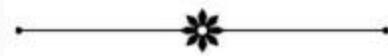
In our modern society people who stop pushing for advantage are labeled by some as “losers”, but spiritually they would be more accurately known as angels. They are the ones who bring a divine message to a world suffering and overflowing with violence, cruelty, and savagery. On the contrary, the leaders who think of themselves as strong men are in actual fact simply people who think only of themselves.

The ancient TAO wisely states,

*The rigid tree will break in the wind.
Therefore, the hard and mighty are
vulnerable; the yielding and gentle are secure.*



Let us move away from those hard and mighty people and stay with the gentle folk who believe that strangers are worthy of love.



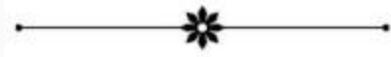
A friend of mine recently reminded me that the once popular television show Mister Rogers had a character named King Friday XIII who is intent on building a wall to keep out strangers. One of the excluded people shouted to the King, *Why?* And the King responded, *Because you don't look like me.* Variations on that theme have become



common in recent years in our own country. There are those who insist that this country was founded by and for white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males and are working to restore that concept of what it supposedly means to be an American. The NEW YORK TIMES columnist Charles Blow points out that when people who think this way are confronted, their approach is to attack. Then Blow makes a partial list of those who the present occupant of the White House has recently attacked. It includes the Mueller investigation of foreign interference with the last election, our international allies, immigrants, celebrities and athletes, the press.

All these people under attack are undesirable strangers to the attackers. Our job, it seems to me, is to try and regain some balance and moral integrity in our country. And one, perhaps small but nonetheless important, way is to recognize that people

who are different from us in some way are still “worthy of love.”



This may seem like an odd question, but where do we find strangers — these folks who are “worthy of our love”? They are all around us! For those who are trying to walk the Tao of Jesus the instructions are laid out pretty clearly in the gospel of Matthew (25:35–37),

For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick or imprisoned and you came to see me.

My assistant Katherine, who soon will be continuing her Ayurvedic studies for the healing and refreshment of body, mind, and soul, scouted around and found many contemporary additions to the instructions in Matthew. When we talk about strangers we often think about migrants from another country or the new kid in a high school class. But the people who can feel estranged from a community or society make up a much larger group than migrants or new kids.

The number of suicides among people in the 15–19 age bracket has jumped almost 25% in the last 23 years. The root cause is a sense of loneliness. They feel like strangers in their environment, especially in terms of schools.

People who are sick or terminally ill can feel as if they are cut off from their former community of life. The list is long — the homeless, victims of



poverty, veterans with PTSD, those who have been bullied, threatened, raped, victims of domestic violence, homeless children (who account for 25% of the homeless people in the United States), single parents with kids. In California, we have had many wildfires. The governor calls it “the new normal” due to climate change. People have been seriously traumatized by those events, and they feel estranged from the people who still have their homes and their dreams. Then there are the people seeking protection in the United States from the violent ravages of war, lawless gangs, extreme poverty and other persecutions and fears. The list goes on and on.

All of these folks are “worthy of love,” So how do we show it?



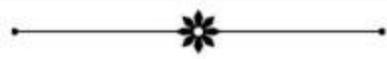
Our Sister Marti was a great teacher in reaching out and helping the estranged to feel included. One example was that whenever she went to a restaurant, she always collected the food that she and others with her had left over. She would have it boxed up nicely and when she came to a homeless person outside the restaurant, she would go up to her or him, introduce herself and shake hands. By then she probably had eye contact with the other person. Marti had a lovely smile. She would say that she had just been to a restaurant and they gave her more food than she could eat, and so she was hoping this person could help her with the problem and then she would offer the



box. It was always taken. She would thank the person and often there would be some other conversation. Once someone asked Marti what she talked about, and I remember her response, *Just normal things you would chat with a friend about.*

If the person she met was sitting down on the sidewalk, Marti would sit on the sidewalk. If the person seemed sick, Marti would arrange some transportation to an appropriate medical place. If the person was just terribly sad, Marti would ask what had happened and then she would listen. Sometimes she could help, often she couldn't. But she always showed respect and ended with a hug that was very genuine. I felt the contact was worth more than the food.

Did I do the things that Marti did? Not often. Do I wish I did? Yes.



*A homeless young man
carries his tent and his cat
through the summer crowd*

Brother Toby