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HOSPITALITY AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRESENCE:
A LOCAL REFLECTION

Cindy Liliana Gonzalez

Nota bene: During an age of people not knowing their neighbors and of hurtful racial division throughout the country, I find myself living in a small town. This reflection is a plea for people to look up from their smartphones and welcome those who need hospitality. This is also a plea for all to become community-building advocates through contemplative presence.

I live in an old brick house behind Daniel's Funeral Home in St. Joseph, Minnesota. The house is right on College Avenue, and my front door neighbors are Dr. Jerry Wetterling Chiropractic and The White House. For those unfamiliar with St. Joseph, typically, a group of undergraduate Johnnies, students from Saint John's University, rent out The White House every academic year and are known to throw the occasional party. There is a street in St. Joseph named Ash Street. Ash street is home to the local post office and a yoga studio. Ash meets College Avenue, and although there are pedestrian lines to signify an official crosswalk, there is no pedestrian sign or traffic light to warn cars of walkers. The lack of such a sign is peculiar to me because this is the first residential stop drivers make after exiting the route 75 highway. This results in my daily struggle of physically signaling to cars that I am crossing the street and that they need to stop; pedestrians always have the right of way, just in case a refresher is needed.

If my data is correct: nine times out of ten, cars don't stop and give me the right of way when I cross this street, and on the one remaining occasion, there are no cars, so I can cross the street without worrying about my life. The funny thing about this scenario is that I physically make eye contact with every driver that cuts me off at the intersection. More often than I like to admit. I give the drivers a piece of my mind through the universal sign of frustration: the middle finger. Why am I frustrated? I have called the city numerous times about the need for a pedestrian sign with no luck. I live in this town with my family. The drivers are not only cutting me off; they are also cutting my son off as I am often walking with him in arms. The next question is one I get a lot: why are you walking? My answer? I walk. I've always walked.

Before starting my Master of Divinity degree at Saint John's School of Theology, my family and I lived in San Francisco, California. I walked everywhere, and when I couldn't, I used public transportation. As a 'townie,' a loving term residents of St. Joseph get from the undergraduate students of the College of St. Benedict and Saint John's University, I have struggled with the decision to finally get my driver's license. Pause for reaction. Yes, I am a twenty-six-year-old woman with no driver's license. I do know how to drive; I learned as a teenager and have illegally driven a handful of vehicles. That is one perk of having immigrant parents. The law was unfair to them for so many years regarding obtaining a driver's license, so driving illegally was done to survive.

In St. Joseph, I walk to the Minnesota Street Market for single items in sub-zero temperatures because I love it. The co-op has introduced me to other moms, local makers and vendors, and is a constant reminder of my belonging to a community. Yesterday was Ash Wednesday and my son woke up with a high fever. After a successful trip to a pediatrician in St. Cloud, Minnesota, bed rest was the recommendation. That meant not being able to attend mass.

We walked to St. Joseph Catholic Church and Father Tupa gave us ashes without blinking an eye. That evening, I walked to Clemens Library at the College of St. Benedict to meet with a classmate, so we could discuss vocation as part of an assignment. She drove me home. Thanks, Jena.

When I think of Benedictine Hospitality and Contemplative Presence, I recall my identity as a resident of St. Joseph. No matter how loud my neighbors at The White House get, I don't call the police to intervene. I welcome the music and the arguments of young lovers that take place. I welcome the numerous people who grieve their loved ones as they make their way to funeral homes by using my front lawn as an initial gathering place. When I sit on my couch, I wave sometimes to Dr. Wetterling in his office, although I still don't know if he can see me. He is a healer. He helped me heal from my postpartum back issues. He's also graciously invited me to his home to participate in a community event called "Supper and Sound." I signal to the drivers who cut me off not just because of my frustration, but as a needed self-reminder that I too belong here. This is my home as much as it is theirs. I know hospitality should be directed at the other. I am still working on that. Fr. Tupa of St. Joseph Catholic Church prays for us all. As a 'townie,' I am aware of God. He is in everything and everyone that I encounter on my walks. He is in the smile the barista at The Local Blend gave me after telling me someone had picked up my bill when my credit card was declined three times in a row. In St. Joseph, I am the stranger, the guest and the delightful other as so is everyone else, which is such a humbling experience. Hospitality relates to Contemplative Presence because they are interrelated. I choose hospitality because I am aware of where I am and who surrounds me, and because my ears choose to continue to listen for God's "divine cries daily" (*The Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue 29).

Hospitality asks us to be committed to the welcoming of all

people. Why? The rule says “Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ” (RB Chapter 53). But how can we be hospitable if we don’t first take the time to know who we are, where we are and who as well as what makes up our community? We need contemplative presence to remind ourselves of the importance of choosing to love our rowdy neighbors who—no matter how many times we say hello—just nod their head in response. Contemplative presence allows us to greet the barista at The Local Blend who makes our coffee every morning by name. Contemplative presence allows us to embrace the frigid temperatures winter brings to Minnesota with open arms. Contemplative presence allows us to be aware of all of our surroundings and to be left in awe. Being aware of where we are, who we are and of everything that makes up our community allows us to be more authentically hospitable. If we choose to see hospitality and contemplative presence as interrelated and essential to our existence, then maybe we can all take one step forward into living out God’s plan of a loving kinship and one step closer towards eliminating exclusion.