

DEEP LESSONS IN HOSPITALITY
By Laurie Jurs, Columnist for Green Valley News
July 2015

*The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be such good friends
you don't care.*

*Let's go back to that
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.*

*No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.*

*I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.*

(“Red Brocade” by Naomi Shihab Nye)

With these words, we prepared for the 12th Annual Migrant Trail the next morning. Fifty-nine of us, from around the country, Canada, Colombia, Mexico and Central America set out the last week of May

to walk 75 miles in the footsteps of desert crossers from Sasabe, Sonora, Mexico to Kennedy Park in southwest Tucson.

Not a fundraiser, athletic event or protest march, it was a pilgrimage in honor of those who have crossed and those who did not make it across. For me, there were deep lessons in hospitality.

Mennonites, Quakers and Catholics, among others, made up our group. These faith communities have traditions of welcoming the stranger, of lives of service, of *being* hospitable, not only *providing* hospitality. What I heard from one Mennonite stuck with me. He said, “The opposite of violence is not nonviolence. The opposite of violence is hospitality.”

I looked up the word’s origin. It comes from the Latin root “*hospes*” which means guest, host and stranger. What a fascinating linguistic intertwining. Each needs the other to exist.

What forms of hospitality did I see on the Migrant Trail? There was the openhearted welcome to us first timers from the Walk veterans, from showing us our jobs (mine included the pop-up outhouses) to preparing us for the emotional rollercoaster to come.

There was the sustenance from the many church and humanitarian groups that brought us meals and water throughout the week. (The Green Valley/Sahuarita Samaritans have made a high holy art form of this.)

There was the body and soul satisfying overnight at Serenity Baptist Church in Three Points. Real tables and chairs made the Thai banquet brought by a Buddhist fellowship from Tucson especially enjoyable. The saffron-robed monk led us in a prayer of gratitude.

But what of the hospitality shown or not shown to the desert crossers themselves? A few weeks before the Walk, an exhausted migrant knocked on a friend’s door near Green Valley. She gave him food, drink and a safe place to rest a minute. Though she speaks little Spanish, she has asked God and his guardian angels to send anyone lost and suffering to her. She asked for my help with Spanish. We learned he and two cousins had crossed near Sasabe, walking 10 days to reach Green Valley. We gave them kindness and sustenance and wished them Godspeed.

I walked a similar route to theirs, taking seven days. I had food, water, a sleeping bag and most importantly, a safety net. I knew where I was and what lay ahead. And it was still damned difficult. Not all of us finished the Walk nor walked the whole way. But none of us suffered or died.

For lack of hospitality, many have anguished and perished not far from our own communities. There are three sites a short walk from my own home in southern Green Valley, where we found the bones of migrants. We marked them with crosses that read “Desconicido” or “Unknown.”

We carried simple white crosses on the Walk. I selected one marked “Desconicido,” of which there were many. Other crosses had names painted on them, names of people that have been identified.

How do you show hospitality to the dead? Our trek became a funeral procession when we walked single file in silence. Periodically, the quiet would be broken by a leader shouting a name or “Desconicido” or “Desconicida”, each one followed by a group shout-out of “Presente!” *We know you lived. We know you died here. We know your spirit lives on and we will never forget you.*

People developed relationships with their crosses over the week. Jorge from Agua Prieta said he felt he’d helped Jose finish his journey, helped him get to Tucson. The nurse from Calgary started out carrying one cross, immediately developing a sharp neck pain, one she’d never had before. A few days later, she acquired a second cross and the pain vanished. It came to me maybe those two people knew each other, somehow, some way.

At our closing circle beneath a bluff by Kinney Road and Ajo Way, with five great horned owls looking on, we held out our crosses for a sprinkle of water. *Here, Desconicido, it’s way too little and way too late, but here’s some water for you. Here’s some water for you, at last.*

Now I’m home again, after walking in your footsteps. Sometimes I’ll be the host, sometimes the guest, sometimes the stranger. And no, I was not busy when you showed up. I do not need to pretend I have a purpose in the world. You are my purpose.