

# The Magic of Radical Hospitality – July 16, 2011

## The Magic of Radical Hospitality

by David Green

I was in high school when I started working in movie theatres, sweeping up popcorn and tearing ticket stubs. I was attracted to the film-exhibition industry, as it's known (because of a cute girl who worked at the theatre, and all the free popcorn I could eat, and because I loved movies. One of the perks of working there was getting in to any movie free of charge.

I ended up working in theatres as an usher, then a projectionist, then through college as a manager, and eventually, supervising the remodeling of old theatres and the construction of new ones in California.

Over the years, I realized that the true business of movie theatres was not in fact to show movies. It was to sell popcorn and soft drinks and candy. That's where the profits lie. One of my bosses once told me (quite accurately) that a theatre is really just a popcorn stand that happens to be surrounded by large auditoriums where films are shown. The movies might be what drew people inside, but the actual showing of them was a secondary concern.

Our number one goal in the film-exhibition business was to find the most efficient methods to allow the patrons ample time and space to purchase popcorn. How we scheduled when films would begin and how much time to allow between showings was something of an art form. Too many people in the lobby at one time, long lines at the concession stand – resulted in lower popcorn sales.

But then, a guy named George Lucas changed everything. He'd made a name for himself by writing and directing a little movie (a modern western disguised as science fiction) – called "Star Wars." George was a huge movie fan himself, and he noticed that when he traveled around the country and would pop in to a local theatre to catch a glimpse of Star Wars, he was greatly dismayed at the quality of the film's presentation in most theatres.

His creation either sounded muffled or the film was all scratchy, or there would be distracting lights shining onto the screen from the theatre's exit signs, and it really perturbed him that audiences were not being able to see his movie the way he had made it.

So he decided to do something about it. He got together some sound and light engineers and developed a patented sound and projection system that he then sold and licensed to theatre owners. It was called the THX system, named after his first movie.

The THX system ensured that a film would be seen and heard at the same high standard that the film-maker had intended. And people noticed. And theatre owners found themselves scrambling to install the costly THX system, and initially not because they particularly cared about the quality it ensured, but because it brought in more patrons, who in turn bought more popcorn.

But in the midst of that: of realizing that if you actually improved the quality of the film-going experience, theatre owners suddenly woke up to the notion that if you also had a nice clean lobby and polite employees and spotless

restrooms and people's shoes didn't stick to the floor in the auditorium, then that also led to more patrons, who increasingly had a choice of which theatre to visit to see a particular film.

And people like me, who actually managed theatres, were sent to seminars and training sessions led by (of all people) experts not in the film-exhibition industry, but folks who worked primarily in the hotel business.

And not just any hotels. These were people who ran Hiltons and Ritz Carltons other luxury five-star hotels. In fact, it was something of an insult to refer to them as even being in the hotel business. They preferred to say they were members of the hospitality industry, which also included executives from the Disney theme parks and Southwest Airlines and other corporations that were known for providing the very best in customer service.

And that's what we who attended those seminars were there to learn: the magic of hospitality. And, even though we were still primarily in the popcorn business, we also began to view ourselves as members of the hospitality industry, because it completely changed the mindset and the corporate culture of how we did business.

I enjoyed that cultural shift and bought into it, and became what was known as a „fixer:“ they'd send me to an old, broken-down theatre and I'd completely rehab it, which often meant replacing the entire staff if they also didn't buy into the culture of radical hospitality.

But even then I knew our ultimate goal (our reason for being hospitable) wasn't hospitality for its own sake, but to sell more popcorn. And while that wasn't a bad thing in itself, I decided that for me, my ultimate purpose in life surely had a deeper meaning than popcorn.

In any case, I was always more interested in the stories being told on the silver screen and in why people flocked to see them; why those stories mattered, and what was it about human nature that makes us enjoy gathering in groups and laughing and crying and being thrilled and paying rapt attention to shadows on a wall even when we already know full well how the story is going to turn out in the end.

So the natural progression was for me to go to seminary and become a minister.

Well, I know that doesn't make an ounce of sense, but that's my story and I'm sticking with it. There might not seem to be much of a connection between selling popcorn and being a minister, but I did learn fairly quickly that the lessons I'd learned about hospitality actually had a whole lot to do with how churches operate.

Now in some churches, there are obvious parallels between the film-going experience and sitting in church.

What I've found in practically every church I've served or visited is that (despite the particular theology that's being taught or preached there) one lens through which you can study any given congregation, one yardstick, is to measure how serious the church is about being hospitable.

Every group, every business, and every church does own and project a certain culture, all its own. And it becomes apparent rather quickly when you encounter that group, or deal with that business, or enter that church, whether or not you feel welcomed, listened to, understood, or well cared for.

If you sense that you and your needs are being taken seriously, if you feel comfortable, if your impression after the experience is: "Wow. That was a great. It exceeded my expectations. I want to do this again," then you have known hospitality.

The hard part about providing hospitality is that it requires being consistently intentional about it. And human nature is such (especially in a group) that we can get really comfortable with the way things are, and we can even develop (unintentionally) the mindset that because things have been a certain way for so long, that they're meant to be that way, that there's no other ways of being, and to make any changes would result in a loss of identity.

But what I'd like to suggest, is that when we adopt a mindset (or a corporate culture) of hospitality, and not just hospitality, but radical hospitality, wonderful things can happen.

And by radical hospitality I don't mean that we take up torches and storm the palace. But I do mean that we create a revolution of sorts (or a re-evolution) a constant awareness of how we're evolving as a congregation, that sets the bar very high in terms of our way of being a Fellowship.

It means that we take nothing for granted, from how easy it is to navigate and find information on our website, to the moment someone pulls into our parking lot, to the outward and inward appearance and upkeep of our building, to how we greet them, to the taste of our coffee, to the way our service bulletins are printed, to how easy it is to locate the nursery or the restroom (and how clean those areas are in particular) to how comfortable the temperature is in this room, to how well we express the basics of who we are and what we believe in a service, to how well we follow up with them after they leave.

It's better to think in terms of multiple impressions that are made, each one with the potential to be great or not so great, than it is to think of someone coming here as being one event. It's truly a multitude of events: sights, sounds, smells, and human interactions. All of those add up to an overall experience that overflows with hospitality, or not.

One of the most helpful ways we can learn to see this place and ourselves with a fresh set of senses, is to actually get away from here, and with your senses on high alert, visit a different congregation, and pay careful attention to what you experienced there. It's less about the particular theology or ideology that church holds to, but much more about the overall feel of what that church is doing right, or what they could be doing better, to provide hospitality.

That's why I'm putting together a team (and I think I'd like to call this group something really cool, like the "super-secret visitation squad") but just a handful of you who'd be willing to periodically visit another church, either by yourself or with a friend, and then come back and report on what you found there to be hospitable, or unwelcoming. If you'd like to be on this squad, see me after the service. It really ought to be a lot of fun.

The benefit of doing this kind of homework is three-fold: first of all, that other church might be doing something really wonderful that we could also do. I call this "stealing," in a perfectly legal sense. Secondly, you might notice something they're doing that feels unwelcoming, but it strikes a chord because you realize that we're doing pretty much the same thing, or you want to make sure we never fall into that trap. And finally, it serves to make you much more alert to how we can be even more hospitable because the experience has given you a new set of senses.

And providing radical hospitality requires that we regularly re-evaluate ourselves. It means periodically putting in a new set of eyeballs and slapping on a fresh pair of ears and attaching a different nose, and experiencing (as best we can) how we behave and how this place appears to someone coming here for the very first time.

Sometimes, that's so hard to do. We might notice something, let's just say, a flier that's been posted on a bulletin board for months, and at first we might read it, and the next time we see it we say, "Oh yeah, I've seen that thing before," and before you know it, that outdated flyer has been stuck on that same bulletin board for 18 months because it's just become part of the landscape and we take it for granted and it's not our job to take down outdated flyers.

But think for a moment what happens when a first-time guest sees that same flyer, and notices that the date of the event the flyer is promoting happened 18 months ago. Well that guest might laugh, but even if they did, the message being relayed could be anything. It could send the signal that we're indifferent. That we don't care. That we don't pay attention to detail. That no one is apparently responsible for updating bulletin boards. It could mean any number of things, but none of them very flattering.

And while that outdated flyer in itself might not make all that much of a negative impression on that guest, it very well might. Maybe a subtle or subconscious one, but an impression nonetheless, that when combined with their other impressions, speaks volumes about us. And if in fact the impression made by that flyer is a negative one, then what we have done – unintentionally – is thrown up a roadblock to being hospitable.

Now, you may be thinking, "Gee, now we have to be the flyer police?" Well, yes. Exactly. What having a culture of radical hospitality means is that we look and listen, really use all of our senses, in such a way that whenever we come here, and whenever we gather in any size group, we're on the lookout for anything and everything that might potentially be a roadblock to hospitality.

And when we see it, we take ownership, "responsibility" for correcting it. It could be as simple as taking down an outdated flyer, but it could also be pointing out that something needs to be repaired, or making sure that when someone walks into your field of vision whom you don't know, you smile, introduce yourself, welcome them, and ask if there's anything you can do for them. You understand that's everyone's job, your job, not just the greeters who hand out bulletins. You take ownership, "responsibility," for doing all you can to make that new person feel like a million bucks.

And the magic thing about providing radical hospitality in our case, as opposed to the days when my ultimate goal was to sell more popcorn, is that we are indeed providing hospitality for its own sake. We're not selling anything. In fact, when we practice hospitality we're giving ourselves away.

If we are selling anything, it is hospitality itself. In a world – and in many cases – in a local community where people are seeking a welcoming place to belong, a place where they can ask honest questions, and be themselves, and not be dismissed or put down for their beliefs or their ideas, we are unique.

We can and we should be the people and the place where everyone can know they are welcomed. If we do have a product, it is that our only doctrine is love – as we say every Sunday – and love is unselfish, and giving, and forgiving, and joyful, and never really runs out or tires out or dies.

That's why, for instance, in the little ads and flyers we're putting up around town and publishing in things like the Amarillo Little Theatre programs, the headline reads, "Love is our religion.," Period.

And the way we express that love is through hospitality.

When acts of true hospitality occur, it is amazing how transformative it can be. Every so often, I'll read in the newspaper a letter to the editor, sent in by someone from out of town. These letters vary in the details, but they always go something like this:

"Dear editor.

Last month my husband and I were travelling through your city, when the transmission dropped off of our car right onto the freeway while my husband suffered a nervous breakdown, and our beloved poodle, Foofie, ran amok down the access road. I,Ãd like to thank the kind stranger who stopped on that 110 degree day when the wind was blowing 50 miles an hour, and risking life and limb, replaced our transmission and went to get my husband a sedative and mixed him a double scotch and soda, and rescued Foofie. The kind stranger refused to take any money for her efforts, and I never learned her name, but I do recall she said she was a UU, whatever that means, and she was in a rush to get back to her church to take down some old flyers. If everyone in your fair city is like that person, you have a lot to be proud of. Sincerely, Mildred Snodgrass, Palm Beach, Florida."

I mentioned before that being a place and a people who practice radical hospitality is transformative. It transforms those who are recipients of our hospitality, and it transforms us as well.

It informs all that we do, the way we think about ourselves, our neighbors, and all with whom we share this planet. When we ask ourselves, "Is this hospitality?", we are following the path to live in and grow and share the love that is our doctrine.

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