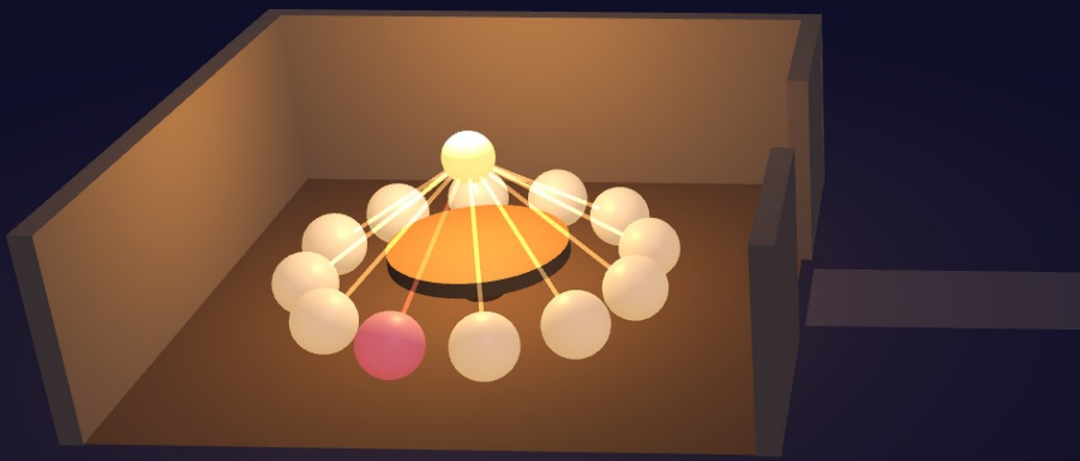
A BOOK

Come *In*



Xenia, the stranger at the door,
and the one thing your delegate cannot open

JOHN RECTOR

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John Rector

Charleston, South Carolina · November 13, 2026

johnrector.me/2026/11/13/come-in/

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PROLOGUE

Nine Forty

TUESDAY, 9:40 P.M.

It is raining on King Street. The kitchen closed at half past nine. Two people you have never seen are standing under your awning, reading a phone that has already told them no.

You are wiping down the bar. You can see them through the glass. They are not from here. You can tell by the shoes, and by the way they keep looking up the street as if the street might have an opinion.

Your delegate has already dealt with them. It runs the book for the house. Four minutes ago it answered their delegate, politely and correctly: the kitchen is closed, here are three places within a short walk that are still seating, here is the one with the shortest wait. Everything it said was true. It was good service. Nobody waited on hold, and nobody was left wondering.

They are still standing there. People do that. They got the answer and have not yet moved their feet.

You put the towel down. You walk to the door, turn the lock, and say two words.

Come in.

There is rice left, and the end of the stew, and you can do eggs. You tell them so. You do not ask whether they have a reservation, because you know they do not. You do not ask their names. You pull out two stools at the bar and go and light one burner.

I want to stay inside that moment, because nothing about it makes sense on paper. The house was closed. The request had been answered. The two of them were strangers who would probably never come back. Your delegate did its job without a flaw, and then you went and did something

else.

This book is about the something else. It has an old name. The Greeks had a word for it and a god to enforce it. The monks wrote it into their Rule. A philosopher in Prussia tried to say how much of it the law could require, and the answer was very little. We have built an industry on its name and spent a century getting good at the part of it that can be written down.

That part is about to be done for us, completely. So it is a good time to ask what the other part is.

THE SCENE

Your delegate turned two strangers away, correctly. Then you unlocked the door.

THE QUESTION

What did you do at that door, and why could the delegate not have done it?

PART I

The Old Law

A poem, a word with two faces, a broken token, and the order in which a stranger is to be received.

CHAPTER 1

Feed Him First

Near the start of the *Odyssey* a young man named Telemachus sails to Pylos to ask an old king for news of his father. He arrives on a beach where the king and his people are in the middle of a feast. Nobody there knows him.

What happens next is the oldest rule in this book. The king’s son gets up, takes the strangers by the hand, and seats them on fleeces in the sand. He puts food in front of them. He pours wine. They eat. Only when they have had enough does the old king, Nestor, say that now it is proper to ask the strangers who they are.

Homer does this again and again, and always in the same order. A stranger comes to the door. He is brought in, washed, seated, fed. Then he is asked his name. Odysseus is carried through a whole evening at the court of the Phaeacians, with dinner and games and a singer, before the king asks who he is and where he comes from.

The Greeks called this *xenia*. We translate it as hospitality, or guest friendship. It was not a matter of manners. It was law, and it had a god behind it. Zeus, among his other titles, was Zeus Xenios, the protector of strangers. To turn a traveler away, or to harm one under your roof, was to offend the highest power there was.

The most moving host in the poem is not a king. He is a swineherd named Eumaeus, who lives in a hut and owns almost nothing. A ragged old beggar comes up the path. Eumaeus calls off the dogs, brings him in, kills a pig, and gives him the best of it. He says, more or less, that every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus, and that a gift from people like him is small but dear. The beggar is his own lost master in disguise. Eumaeus does not know that. That is the point. He fed him first.

Hold on to the order. Give, then ask. Everything else in this book comes out of it.

HOMER

A stranger is seated and fed. Only then is he asked who he is.

THE PRINCIPLE

Hospitality is giving before knowing.

CHAPTER 2

One Word for Both

Our own language remembers what a serious business this was.

Host and guest are the same word. They come down by two roads from one root in the old mother tongue of Europe and India, a root that scholars write as *ghos-ti*. It meant the stranger, and it meant the one who receives him, because what it really named was the bond between them, with duties running both ways. Greek kept that sense in one word, *xenos*, which you have to translate as stranger, or guest, or host, depending on the sentence. French still has it. *Un hôte* is the man who has you to dinner, and also the man who comes.

Latin split the root in two, and the split is the lesson. One branch gave *hospes*, the master of the guest, and from it we get hospitality, hospital, hostel and hotel. The other gave *hostis*. In the earliest Latin a *hostis* was simply a stranger, an outsider you owed something to. By the time of Cicero the word meant an enemy of the state. From it we get hostile.

The linguist Emile Benveniste took this family of words apart in the last century and showed that it was not an accident. The stranger at the door is one figure. He may be a guest. He may be an enemy. On the doorstep, you cannot tell. The word did not know either, so it meant both, until it broke.

I think this is the piece we have forgotten. We use hospitality to mean warmth, or good manners, or a mint on the pillow. The people who made the word meant something with more nerve in it. They meant a decision taken at a threshold, about a person you do not know, by someone with something to lose.

A welcome that risks nothing is a courtesy. The old word was kept for the other kind.

The stranger at the door may be a guest or an enemy. The word did not know either, so it meant both.

THE WORD

Host, guest, hospital and hostile all grow from one root that meant the stranger.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Hospitality was never niceness. It is a risk taken at a door.

CHAPTER 3

The Half Token

The ancient world did have a way of proving who you were. What interests me is when they used it.

When a guest left a house where he had been well received, host and guest might take a small object, a knucklebone or a coin or a piece of fired clay, and break it in two. Each kept a half. Years later, a son or a grandson could arrive at that door holding his half, and if the edges met, he was family. The Greeks called the token a *symbolon*, from a verb meaning to put together. It is where we get the word symbol. The Romans had the same thing and called it a token of hospitality.

In the *Iliad* two men meet in the middle of the battle, on opposite sides, and before they fight each asks the other who he is. It turns out that the grandfather of one had hosted the grandfather of the other for twenty days, two generations back. They put down their spears. They agree to avoid each other for the rest of the war, and they trade armor on the spot, so that everyone will know.

Look at where the token sits in the order of things. It does not come first. Nobody was asked for a token at the first visit, because there could not be one. The token is made at the end, out of the welcome. It is a keepsake of something already given, and it opens the door for the next time.

We have tokens now too. Every door I use asks me for one. But ours come at the front. Show the code, then we will see about the table. The ancients would have recognized the object and been puzzled by the timing. For them the proof was the fruit of the welcome. For us it is the price.

THE TOKEN

Guest and host broke an object in two, after the visit, so their grandchildren would know each other.

THE DIFFERENCE

Their proof came after the welcome. Ours comes before it.

CHAPTER 4

Bad Hosts, Bad Guests

If you want to know how much weight a people put on a rule, look at what they wrote about breaking it.

The *Odyssey* has a bad host, and he is its most famous monster. Odysseus and his men walk into the cave of the Cyclops and wait for him, expecting a guest's gift. The Cyclops comes home, sees them, and the first thing out of his mouth is a question. Strangers, who are you? Odysseus answers and reminds him that Zeus watches over guests. The Cyclops says his kind do not care about Zeus. Then he eats two of the men.

Homer's listeners would have caught it at once. He asked first. Before a seat, before bread, he wanted to know who they were and where their ship was. That was the mark of the savage, before any blood was spilled.

The poem has bad guests too. Back in Ithaca, a hundred young men have moved into the house of the missing king. They eat his cattle and drink his wine and will not leave. They are not thieves in the night. They came in through the front door. Their crime is that they have taken the host's place at his own table.

And the war that started it all began the same way. A prince of Troy stayed as a guest in a Greek king's house and left with the king's wife.

An anthropologist named Julian Pitt-Rivers, who studied these customs where they were still alive around the Mediterranean, boiled the law down to a few lines. The host must not harm the guest or show him hostility. The guest must not insult the host, or refuse what is offered, or try to take over the house. Each owes the other something, and the house stays the host's.

So the old law was not soft. It bound both sides, and the stories it left behind are about what happens when either side breaks it. Two of the

founding poems of the West are, at bottom, about hospitality gone wrong.

THE BREACH

The monster asks before he gives. The suitors take the host’s seat.

WHAT FOLLOWS

The law binds guest and host alike, and the house must stay the host’s.

PART II

The Door Learns to Ask

How a welcome became an institution, then a right, then an industry, then a login.

CHAPTER 5

The Porter

About fifteen hundred years ago an Italian monk named Benedict wrote a short rule for running a monastery. It is still in use. Most of it is about prayer and work and who does the dishes. Two chapters are about the door.

One says how guests are to be received. All who arrive are to be welcomed as Christ himself, because he will one day say, I was a stranger and you took me in. The abbot is to pour water over their hands. Special care is to go to the poor and to pilgrims, and Benedict gives a dry reason for it. The rich, he says, get respect anyway, because people are afraid of them.

The other chapter is about the man at the gate. Benedict wants a sensible old monk there, one who knows how to take a message and give an answer, and whose age keeps him from wandering off. He is to have a room by the door so that anyone who comes will always find someone. And when a knock comes, before he knows who is knocking, he is to call out a reply. The reply is thanks be to God.

I find that remarkable. The answer to a knock, in this house, is not who is it. It is thank you.

Benedict was doing something the Greeks never had to do. He was trying to make a welcome survive inside an institution, with a schedule and a budget and a hundred men who would rather not be interrupted. Notice how he did it. He did not write a procedure for the door. He put a person there. And he did not send the newest brother. He chose someone old, wise and settled, and gave him no other place to be.

The first great system of hospitality in the West solved the problem with a senior human being and a standing instruction to give thanks before finding out.

BENEDICT

At the knock, before he knows who it is, the porter answers with thanks.

THE DESIGN

He did not automate the door. He stationed his wisest man at it.

CHAPTER 6

The Right to Knock

In 1795 Immanuel Kant, who is said never to have traveled far from the city where he was born, wrote a short plan for peace among nations. Its third and last article is about hospitality, and it is surprisingly stingy.

Kant says every person on earth has a right to present himself on someone else's ground without being treated as an enemy. We all share the surface of one globe and cannot scatter forever, so we have to be able to approach one another. He calls this a right of visit.

Then he draws a line. The right of visit is not a right to be a guest. To be taken into the house, he says, would need a special friendly agreement, one that makes the stranger a member of the household for a while. The law cannot give you that. The law can say that the door must not be answered with a weapon. It cannot say that the door must open.

I used to read this as a failure of nerve. I now think Kant saw the thing exactly. He found the edge of what can be owed. You can be owed safety. You can be owed a fair hearing, a refund, a place in line, a correct answer. All of that can be written down and enforced, and all of it can be delivered by anyone or anything that follows the rule.

Welcome is what lies on the far side of that edge. It cannot be owed, and that is not a weakness in it. If you could demand it, it would be service. The moment it is required, it turns into something else, and the thing we meant slips out the back.

So a welcome is always a free act by someone who had the right to do less. Kant drew the map and left that country blank. He was right to.

> *You can be owed safety and a correct answer. You cannot be owed a welcome. If you could, it would be service.*

KANT

A stranger has the right to knock without being treated as an enemy. He has no right to be let in.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Welcome begins where what is owed ends, so only someone free to refuse can give it.

CHAPTER 7

The Industry

The word went on to have a busy career. It became buildings. The hospital, the hostel and the hotel are all the same word, a place for strangers, and for centuries they were often the same place, a house kept by monks on a mountain pass where the sick, the poor and the traveler slept under one roof.

Then it became an industry, and here I have to be fair. The modern hospitality business is one of the real achievements of the last hundred years. A person can land in a city where they know nobody and find a clean bed and a hot meal within the hour, at a known price, without a letter of introduction. Homer’s travelers would have wept.

But something had to be done to the idea to make it run at that scale, and a restaurant owner named Danny Meyer has put it better than any philosopher. He separates two things most of us run together. Service, he says, is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how that delivery makes the person on the other end feel. He also says that service is a monologue and hospitality is a dialogue. The house decides its standards of service alone. Hospitality only happens between people.

Once you see the difference you see what the industry did. It got very good at service, because service can be specified. You can write it in a manual. You can train it, time it, score it and inspect it. The table was ready at eight. The room was clean. The order was right.

The other half could not be put in the manual, so it rode along inside the first half without a line of its own on the bill. It lived in a certain kind of owner and a certain kind of waiter. Everyone knew it when they met it. Nobody could order it.

That arrangement held as long as people did both jobs with the same pair of hands. It is about to come apart.

MEYER

Service is the delivery. Hospitality is how the delivery makes a person feel.

WHAT THE INDUSTRY DID

It perfected the half that can be written down and let the other half ride along unpriced.

CHAPTER 8

Sign In to Continue

Now look at your own week and count the doors.

You want to see the menu, so you are asked to download something. You want a table, so you are asked for a card to hold it. You want to read the article, so you are asked for an address. You want to walk into the building, so you are asked for a photo of your face. Sign in to continue. Verify it is you. Enter the code we just sent.

Every one of those has a reason, and most of the reasons are good. Tables were booked and left empty. Rooms were wrecked. Forms were flooded with nonsense. Each question at each door is the scar of some old abuse, and the people who added it were protecting something real.

But add them up and see what they come to. Without anyone deciding it, we turned the old order around. Homer’s rule was feed him, then ask. Ours is ask, then ask again, then we will see. The first words a stranger hears at most doors now are the words of the Cyclops. Who are you?

I am not complaining about any single door. I run a business and I ask for things at mine. I only want to point out that we have lived for a generation in a world where knowing comes before giving, almost everywhere, and we have stopped feeling it. It is like the hum of a refrigerator. It seems like silence until it stops.

And that is why the rare door that does not ask is so hard to forget. The diner that puts coffee in front of you before you have sat all the way down. The shop that says take it home, see if it fits, pay me next week. Nobody describes those places by their service. People tell the story for years, and they tell it with a kind of wonder, as if they had seen an animal that was supposed to be extinct.

They had. It was Eumaeus, and he was still feeding people first.

THE INVERSION

Homer said feed him, then ask. Most doors today ask, and ask again, and then decide.

WHAT FOLLOWS

We live where knowing comes before giving. The door that gives first is the one people remember.

PART III

What the Delegate Does at the Door

Service is about to be finished. This is what that leaves undone.

CHAPTER 9

Perfect Service

I should say what I do for a living, because it bears on this. My company, Charleston AI, builds finished AI work for local businesses, and many of them are restaurants and inns. An AI answers the phone on the first ring at any hour. It knows the menu and the hours. It takes the reservation, remembers the allergy, and sends the reminder. I prefer to call such a thing a delegate, because it acts on someone’s behalf and reports back.

So I am not a skeptic about this. I have watched it work, and I think it is about to work completely. Within a few years the service half of hospitality will be done by delegates on both sides of the door. Yours will know what you like and when you are free. The house’s will know what is open. The two will settle it between them in less time than it takes to read this sentence, and they will get it right.

Think about what that does. Every failure of service you have ever been angry about was a failure of memory, attention or time. The call nobody picked up. The booking that was lost. The dish that arrived with the thing you said you could not eat. A delegate does not get tired and does not forget, and it has all the time there is. Service, in the plain sense of the correct delivery of what was asked, becomes as dependable as tap water.

And like tap water it will stop being noticed. Nobody praises a restaurant because the lights came on. When the delivery is right every time, everywhere, it is no longer a reason to pick one house over another, and no longer something a guest remembers on the way home.

This is good. I want to be clear about that. It takes a weight off owners that has crushed a lot of good ones. But it also takes away the cover. For a century, the half of hospitality that could not be written down has been hiding inside the half that could. When the written half is done by something else, the other half will be standing out in the open for everyone to see. So will its absence.

THE DELEGATE

Service is the correct delivery of what was asked. A delegate can deliver it every time.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Perfect service becomes invisible, and whatever was hiding inside it is exposed.

CHAPTER 10

Why It Cannot Give First

So why not have the delegate do the welcome too? It can be warm. It can be told to say come in. I think there are three reasons it cannot, and none of them is a flaw that better engineering will fix.

The first is that it has no house. A host gives from what is his. The swineherd killed his own pig. A delegate holds nothing of its own. Everything in its hands belongs to the person it works for. If it gave your table away to a stranger at closing time without asking you, it would not be generous. It would be exceeding its authority, and you would be right to correct it. A delegate can hand over what you have already decided to give. It cannot decide to give what is yours.

The second is that it risks nothing. I said the old word carried a wager in it. The stranger might be a guest and might be an enemy, and the host opens the door anyway, with his own evening, his own stores and his own safety on the table. That exposure is what makes the welcome mean something to the person receiving it. A delegate has no evening to lose. Its welcome costs it nothing, and a welcome that costs nothing tells the guest nothing.

The third reason goes deepest. A delegate's whole excellence is knowing before acting. That is what we want from it. It checks the record, confirms the booking, verifies the card, reads the history, and then moves. A delegate that acted first and found out afterwards would be a bad delegate, and you would replace it.

Hospitality is the exact reverse. It is giving before knowing. The better a delegate is at its work, the further it stands from this one act.

So this is not a case of a machine that cannot yet do a human thing. It is two jobs that pull in opposite directions. One is diligence, and it belongs to whoever acts for another. The other is welcome, and it belongs to

whoever owns the door.

> *The better a delegate is at its work, the further it stands from this one act.*

THREE REASONS

A delegate owns no house, bears no risk, and must know before it acts.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Diligence belongs to the one who acts for another. Welcome belongs to the one who owns the door.

CHAPTER 11

Two Delegates at a Door

Picture how most arrivals will go. Your delegate reaches out to the house. The house's delegate answers. They trade what each needs to know, agree on a time, and close. Then you walk in.

Nothing went wrong in that exchange. But notice what it was. It was Kant's right of visit, carried out to perfection. Nobody was treated as an enemy. Every question got a true answer. And nobody was welcomed, because nobody was there. Two agents with nothing of their own met at a door that neither of them owned.

Then you arrive, and you are not a stranger at all. The house already knows your name, your anniversary, and that you do not eat shellfish. I have written elsewhere, in The Last Stranger, about what happens to honesty when nobody is unknown any more. Here I want to ask what happens to welcome. If hospitality is giving before knowing, and the house knows everything before you come through the door, is there anything left to give?

I think there is, and I think it gets easier to see. When the record is complete, the record itself tells you what is owed. You booked a table for two at eight. You are owed a table for two at eight, and the right dish, and the bill. All of that is service, and it will be delivered.

The welcome is whatever the record cannot account for. It is the thing given that nothing in the booking called for. Giving before knowing turns into giving beyond what is known. The stranger has changed. The act is the same.

There is a danger on the other side, and owners should look straight at it. A house that knows everything about a guest before he arrives is tempted to treat his arrival as the last step in filling an order. The file is complete, so the person feels finished. He is seated, served exactly what his history

predicts, and thanked by name. And he goes home feeling, without knowing why, that he was expected and not received.

THE MEETING

Two delegates settle everything at a door neither owns. Nobody is harmed and nobody is welcomed.

WHAT IS LEFT

The welcome is what the record did not call for. Giving before knowing becomes giving beyond what is known.

CHAPTER 12

The Service Entrance

I live in Charleston, a city that has made a living from its welcome for a long time, and the old houses here have something to teach on this.

The classic Charleston house stands sideways to the street. What looks like the front door does not open into the house at all. It opens onto a long side porch that we call a piazza, and the real door is halfway down it. The story people tell here is that a family left the street door open when it was receiving and shut it when it was not. I cannot swear to the history. I can say that the builders understood something. They gave the house a threshold before the threshold, a place that was neither street nor home, where someone could be met.

The same houses had another way in. Around the side or at the back was the door for deliveries. Ice came that way, and coal, and the groceries. That door asked exactly what it needed to and no more. Who are you, what have you brought, put it there. Nobody felt insulted by it. It was the right door for that business.

I expect every house, in the wide sense, to have two doors again. Delegates will come and go by the service entrance all day long. They will bring the bookings and the payments and the questions, and the door they use will ask them for everything, and it should. That traffic will be most of what goes on, and you will hardly see it.

The front door will be for people. And the way I would put the division of labor is this. Your delegate belongs at the back door, handling everything that was asked for. You belong at the front, doing the one thing that was not.

The ceilings of the piazzas here are painted a pale blue green. The tradition comes from the Gullah Geechee people of this coast, and the color was meant to keep restless spirits from coming in. Even the most

welcoming porch in America had a view on who was not invited. Hold that thought. I will come back to it.

TWO DOORS
The service entrance asks everything it needs to. The front door is where someone is met.

THE DIVISION
Your delegate at the back door, handling what was asked. You at the front, doing what was not.

PART IV

Keeping a House

Four practices for anyone with a door, which is everyone.

CHAPTER 13

Have a Door

Up to now I have been talking mostly to owners, because the prologue put you behind a bar. But very few of my readers own a restaurant, and all of them have a door.

To be a host you need a house. I mean that in the wide sense. A house is anything that is yours to open, at your own cost, to someone who has no claim on it. Your kitchen table is a house. So is your shop, your studio, your classroom after the bell. So is an hour of your afternoon. If you can open it or keep it shut, and it costs you something to open it, you are the master of a house.

The first practice is to know which ones you have. That sounds too simple to say, but I think many people have quietly stopped having any. Their time is booked by a calendar that other people can write to. Their table is where the delivery bag gets opened. Their work is done to a specification. A life like that can be full of service going in both directions and still contain no place where a stranger could be received, because there is no place left that is plainly theirs to give.

So name them. I would start with the table at home, because it is the oldest one. I tell my students to say order dinner to their delegates, and I tell them the task is not done until the food is in their stomach. That is the right use of a delegate. But notice what it cannot do in the same breath. It can order dinner. It cannot have someone to dinner. The shopping, the timing, the reminders, the route to your street can all be handled. The invitation is yours, and so is the door.

A person with no door has nothing to open. Before anything else, have one.

THE PRACTICE

Name the things that are yours to open at your own cost: a table, a shop, an hour.

WHY IT COMES FIRST

A delegate can order dinner. Only someone with a door can have someone to dinner.

CHAPTER 14

Give Before the Record Does

The second practice is the act itself, and it is small.

Once for each guest, give something the record did not call for. I do not mean a discount, and I do not mean a surprise that the system scheduled because the file says it is their birthday. Guests can smell that, and they are right to. I mean something that you decided on, standing there, looking at the person in front of you, and that costs you a little.

It can be the burner you relight after closing. It can be the seat by the window that you were holding for no one. It can be ten minutes when you sit down at their table and ask where they have come from, and listen to the answer. It can be the thing that is not on the menu because you only make it for yourself.

Two tests tell you whether it was the real thing. Did it cost you something that was yours? And did you do it before you had any way of knowing whether it would come back? If the answer to either is no, it may be very good service. It is not what Eumaeus did.

Then arrange your delegate around this. The instruction I would give is simple. Handle everything that is owed. Do it completely, so that I never have to touch it. And tell me when someone arrives. A good delegate does not replace the host at the door. It is the reason the host can finally be there. For a century, owners have been stuck in the back office doing by hand what a delegate now does better, and the door has been left to whoever was newest. Benedict had it the other way around, and so should we.

I have argued in Face Value that a human face in the room is becoming the thing customers pay for, because it is the one signal that cannot be copied. This is the same point from the other side of the door. The face matters most at the moment of arrival, when it has something to give.

THE PRACTICE

Once for each guest, give something of your own that nothing in the record called for.

THE INSTRUCTION

Tell your delegate: handle everything owed, and tell me when someone arrives.

CHAPTER 15

Be a Guest

The old law had two sides, and we are in more danger of forgetting the second.

A guest has duties. He comes when he said he would. He takes what is offered and does not ask for the thing that was not. He does not take over the house. He brings something, if only news from the road. He does not stay past his welcome. And one day, if he can, he opens his own door in return. The token was broken into two halves for a reason.

Your delegate will tempt you out of every one of these. It can send your regrets one minute before the dinner, worded better than you would have worded them. It can pick the gift and have it delivered. It can tell the host in advance exactly what you will and will not eat, so that the table is arranged around you before you sit down. It can leave the review. Each of those is a real convenience, and each of them moves you a step from guest toward customer.

So the third practice is to be a guest on purpose. When you are invited, answer yourself. Carry the bottle in your own hand. Eat what you are given, unless it would truly harm you. Say thank you at the door, to a face. And notice when you have been received and not just served, because the person who did it took a risk on you, and it should not go unseen.

There is a simple reason a delegate cannot be a guest, and it is the same reason I give my students for what counts as done. A guest is someone who can be fed. I wrote in The Eval Is in Your Stomach that the test of a finished errand is out in the world and not on a screen. Hospitality has the same test. It ends in a body, at a table, under a roof. A delegate can be sent anywhere. It cannot be had to dinner.

THE PRACTICE

Answer the invitation yourself, carry the gift in, eat what is offered, and thank a face.

THE REASON

A guest is someone who can be fed. A delegate can be sent anywhere and received nowhere.

CHAPTER 16

When to Close the Door

A book that praised the open door and stopped there would be a dishonest book. I have a lock on mine.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida spent a good part of his last years on this problem, and I think he stated it as sharply as it can be stated. Pure hospitality, he said, would be unconditional. It would say come in to anyone at all, without asking a name, without limit, and let the newcomer do as he liked. And he saw at once that this is impossible. A house that cannot refuse anyone is no longer anyone's house. The host who gives up being master of the place has nothing left to offer, because there is no longer a place.

So every real welcome has conditions. There are hours. There is a number of chairs. There are people who are not coming back. Derrida did not think this made the conditional kind false. He thought the two needed each other. The rules of a house give the welcome somewhere to happen. The impossible, unconditional kind is what the rules are reaching toward, and what keeps them from hardening into a checkpoint.

The blue ceiling on the piazza says the same thing in paint. Come up, sit down. Not everything is invited.

Here is how I would bring that down to practice. Keep your rules. They have reasons, and your delegate should enforce them all day without apology. But keep, in your own hands, the power to break them. The delegate holds the rule. You hold the exception.

And the exception has to be made by the person who will bear it. When you unlock the door at nine forty, it is your evening that gets longer and your stew that gets eaten. That is why it is yours to give. An exception granted by something that pays nothing for it is a loophole. One granted by the person who pays is a welcome.

Some nights you will leave the lock turned. You are tired, or the two under the awning do not look right, or you just cannot. The old law allowed for that. It asked that the door be yours, and that sometimes it open.

The delegate holds the rule. You hold the exception.

THE LIMIT

A house that cannot refuse anyone is nobody’s house. Welcome needs a master and a door that shuts.

THE PRACTICE

Let the delegate keep the rules. Keep the power to break them, and use it only at your own cost.

PART V

The Ledger

Where this sits in my own framework, what I expect, and where I am probably wrong.

CHAPTER 17

Where This Sits in the Reality Equation

Everything I write rests on one idea, the Reality Equation, and I should say where this book stands in relation to it.

The Equation says Reality is a ratio, the Actual divided by Expectation. The Actual is what the world hands you. Expectation is what you bring to it, already in place and unconscious, before anything arrives. There is one Reality for each one who is having it, so the first question is always whose. Start with the two under the awning.

They walked up expecting a locked door. Their phone had told them so. What arrived was an open one. For them, in that moment, the Actual came in above what they expected, and they felt the lift. I do not think the lift is the point. A surprise passes. What matters is what was left behind. A meal was eaten at that bar. An hour was spent there. Those are history now, and history is beyond alteration.

History is the Actual, and only Actuals retrain what a person expects. The next time those two come to that door, they will expect it to open. The ratio will settle back toward one. I would say that is what the phrase at home means. It is a place where what arrives is what you expected, and there is nothing to brace for. A host is someone who makes a place where a stranger’s ratio can come to rest.

Now the owner. I hold that no one can reach either term directly. You cannot put your hand into a stranger and set what he expects of your house. A sign that says welcome does not do it. The word hospitality on the menu does not do it. The only road runs through action. You act, the act leaves an artifact, the artifact becomes history, and history slowly moves expectation. It runs one way.

That is why the welcome has to come before the knowing. Knowing is drawn from history. Between you and a stranger there is none. The welcome is not a response to the record. It is the first entry in it.

Your delegate works from history, and where there is none it properly declines. The host makes history. I have said elsewhere that this is what consciousness does. It does not manufacture the future. It manufactures history.

What is record here: the Equation, its terms, and the rule that only action reaches them. What is argument: that being at home is the ratio at rest, and that a welcome is the first artifact between strangers. I think it holds. I am the one saying so.

THE EQUATION

The guest expected a shut door and met an open one. What lasts is the artifact, a meal that is now history.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Knowing is drawn from history. Between strangers there is none, so the welcome has to come first.

CHAPTER 18

What I Expect

Five predictions. Each can be checked, and I have tried to make them plain enough to be wrong.

01 Nobody will praise the service

Within a few years the correct delivery of what was asked will be the same everywhere, and people will stop mentioning it. Reviews that talk about speed and accuracy will read like reviews that mention the plumbing. What people describe instead will be how they were met.

02 The owner moves to the door

The post at the entrance, long given to the newest and youngest, will go to the most senior person in the house. In small places that will be the owner. Benedict put his wisest man at the gate, and the houses that do well will find their way back to that.

03 Every house grows a second door

Businesses will keep a plain, strict entrance for delegates and a separate front door for people. Walking in unannounced, which nearly disappeared, will come back at the best places as a thing they are proud to allow.

04 The unrequested thing becomes the product

What a house gives that nobody ordered, and that nothing in the guest’s file called for, will be the thing people talk about and return for. Houses will set something aside for it on purpose. Every attempt to schedule it by machine will fail the day guests work out that it was scheduled.

05 The table at home comes back

When every outside door has been made smooth and correct, people will want the other thing and find they can make it themselves. Having someone to dinner, asked in person and cooked for by hand, will become more common and will mean more than it has in my lifetime.

CHAPTER 19

The Ledger

Three claims carry this book. Here is each one with what is already true, what still has to happen, and where I am probably wrong.

1. Service goes to the delegates

ALREADY TRUE

Phones in small businesses are already answered by AI that knows the menu and takes the booking. The delivery of what was asked is the kind of work a delegate does well.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Guests need delegates of their own, and the two sides need to settle things between themselves as a matter of course.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

Some people may want a person to do the serving because they enjoy being served by a person. If so, service does not vanish into the back of the house. It turns into theater, and my clean split between the two halves gets muddy.

2. A delegate cannot welcome

ALREADY TRUE

A delegate holds nothing of its own, loses nothing when the door opens, and is built to know before it acts. Each of those is the reverse of what a host does.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Nothing has to happen. This is a claim about what a delegate is now.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

If delegates come to own things and to bear real losses, the word could apply to them, and I would not rule that out. The nearer danger is that I am right and it does not matter. If a warm voice is enough for most people on most nights, the difference is real and nobody will pay for it.

3. The welcome becomes what people come back for

ALREADY TRUE

Ask anyone about a place they love and you will hear about something they were given and were not owed. Nobody tells that story about a booking that went through.

WHAT HAS TO HAPPEN

Owners who are set free by their delegates have to walk to the door. Nothing makes them.

WHERE I AM PROBABLY WRONG

Many will use the freed hours to open a second location, and the door will stay empty. And giving first invites takers. If delegates make it easy to find every generous house and lean on it, the generous houses will start asking questions at the door again, and they will be right to.

EPILOGUE

Come In

TUESDAY, 11:05 P.M.

The rain has stopped. Two plates are in the sink. The burner is off.

They stayed a little over an hour. She was from Ohio and he was from somewhere near Lyon, and they had driven down the coast with no plan because her mother had just died and neither of them could stand to be in the house. You did not ask for any of that. It came out over the eggs, the way things do when a person has been fed and nobody is in a hurry.

They told you their names on the way out, at the door. You told them yours.

Your delegate had it all recorded by then, of course. A walk-in after close, two covers, no charge entered, flagged for your review in the morning. It wanted to know how to file it. That was a fair question, and you did not have a good answer.

It had done everything right that night. It answered them in seconds and told them the truth and found them three other places to go. If they had gone, they would have been well served. You would never have known they existed, and they would have remembered Charleston as a city where the kitchens close at half past nine.

What it could not do was see two people standing in the rain and give them something that was not on offer. It had nothing to give. The bar was yours, and the stew, and the hour.

So you did that part. It took two words.

You will not remember what the house made that Tuesday. You will remember her laugh when you said the eggs were all you had, and that he tried to pay three times. A year from now a card may come from Ohio, or it may not. That was never the reason.

Your delegate can answer every knock there is. It can tell anyone the truth about the hours.

The door is yours. Sometimes, open it.

Come in.

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