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Author(s): Jean Janzen.

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The Mystery of Hospitality

JEAN JANZEN

For years I have been captivated by the Genesis 18 story of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. The narrative of the three visitors, the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, and the mystery of this visit set under the great trees has combined into a longing for deeper understanding. When I saw the original painting of this scene by Marc Chagall at a museum in Nice, France, I began to hold it in a new light, the angelic figures feasting at an outdoor table as Abraham hovers near and Sarah approaches from the shadows with a dish of food.

The history of journey and immigration is a Mennonite story, but one that is shared by all immigrants in the world. When my husband, Louis, and I moved to Fresno, California, we found ourselves in good company with other Mennonites, but also many other travelers. Among them were the Armenians who soon became part of our lives. Through my husband's pediatric practice, we came to know "Min," who offered order and wisdom with her administrative skills. And then we met Diane, displaying her tender heart for young families as she assisted Min. Eventually, Louis met Juliet, a nurse at Valley Children's Hospital and a recent Armenian immigrant from Syria, who came to Fresno to marry a bachelor, live with him in the country, and raise a family.

Their recurring invitations to visit them at their home were their way of thanking my husband for his care. Their warmth and welcome connected us to them in our shared efforts to raise children and to open up our own home.

In 1975, we received an invitation to join a group of physicians and spouses for several weeks of excursion in the Soviet Union. Because of Louis' love of history and our desire to learn more about the places from which my father had immigrated to Canada, in 1910 at the age of fourteen, we decided to go. We also knew about my first cousins who had been displaced to Kazakhstan during World War II and still lived there. We were able to visit them in 1989. This first tour took us through Moscow and Kiev, and also included Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. In Armenia, we visited churches from the 5th century

and Echmiatsin, the holy center of faith. After we toured the cathedral and the seminary grounds, we were approached by a student who asked us where we were from, and surprised us by revealing that he was also from Fresno, and grew up on Butler Avenue, close to Fresno Pacific University.

When I entered the masters program in creative writing at Fresno State in 1980, I began to find the language for my Mennonite story and how it intertwined with other movements throughout the world. That journey of writing awakened me to the power of narrative and poetry as paths to new understandings and possibilities. The faculty was a source of direction and nourishment which allowed me to “walk into the wild,” as I have named it, to enter the creative process as a way to find home. Armenian poets and writers were walking with me, and their own William Saroyan was honored in our city. In his short story, “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze,” he compares a young, starving writer trying to survive in the time of Depression to a trapeze artist who prays for strength to make his flight with grace.

The hospitality of the Atmajians brought our stories together in a way that holds us in a larger light. A Sunday afternoon barbeque on their spacious, grassy lawn included the delight of chickens running free, an old piano leaning against the barn from which one time a hen flew out when our daughter began to play the instrument. And we were enriched by the variety of other guests, once including an editor from the San Francisco *Chronicle*. We heard stories of relatives in New York and Los Angeles, and of the early struggles for integration in our city and countryside.

Many years have passed since those gatherings. Our children and theirs have grown up to become active citizens in our community and elsewhere. When I looked for a place for my husband Louis to receive nursing care, my family and I decided to place him in the California Armenian Home. It is located near our home, and its rural setting with extended gardens has now been home for him for more than three years. I think of the large flowing fountains as a symbol of welcome in this interim time.

The three visitors came to Abraham as he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. When he saw them, he bowed low to the ground, offered them water so that they could wash their feet and rest under the trees. He gave them drink and food. He and Sarah's hospitality, in spite of unbelief and laughter when their great destiny was announced, resulted in the grand story of the Gospel. Mennonites and Armenians together is a small piece of that continuing narrative and it holds rays of that same light—the presence of generous hospitality, which is love.