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Who Is the Other in the Hospitality Industry? Personhood at the Root of Transformed Work

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1 Introduction

As renowned restaurateur Danny Meyer says, genuine hospitality is a dialogue. There is a difference, he points out, between the monologue of mere "good service"—deciding how you want things done and setting your own standard—and the dialogue of hospitality, where your reception of the other and your delivery of the product makes the other feel: I am on your side (Meyer, 2006, p. 60). "Hospitality is present when something happens *for* you. It is absent when something happens *to* you" (Meyer, 2006, p. 11). Meyer's ideas are more than just the secret to the Union Square Hospitality Group's success. These seemingly simple statements enclose strikingly profound truths.

The dialogue of hospitality involves two persons: *myself* and the *other*. Therefore, two questions are crucial in becoming good hospitality professionals: *Who is the other? Who am I?* The answers enable one to transform work—whether in restaurants, hotels, tourism, or recreation—from a transaction of goods to a true person-to-person encounter. Ultimately, Meyer's insights and experience show us that hospitality sparks something great because it reflects the immeasurable worth of the human being.

Who is the other? To grasp this, we briefly explore the concept of *personhood*. Personhood is best understood in the light of several other notions: *intersubjectivity, unity*, *soul, body*, *agency,* and *dignity*. We will consider how a strong consciousness of the other *as person*, as *another I,* can positively influence (1) our vision of hospitality itself, (2) the way we relate with co-workers, employees, customers and guests, and (3) the way we relate to our own work. Deepening our understanding of what it means *to be a person* and *connected to other persons* is at the root of transforming our work.

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2 Person-to-Person: The Other as "Another I"

No human person exists alone: we live, act, feel, and move together with others. People depend on one another for their needs. We do more than exchange goods to survive, however—we relate, interact, and connect, forming a network of interdependence and interrelations (MacIntyre, 1999). Most of us are familiar with Aristotle's characterization of humans as social animals; we could further highlight the human person's *inter-subjectivity*. Being a human person means being interrelated with *other human persons*. One's very life experience is configured by the existence of other individuals with him/her: human existence is social and relational existence.

Martin Buber (2010) advanced the notion of intersubjectivity by developing the idea that a human is a being-in-relation. This means more than encountering the same people repeatedly over time. It means establishing a communion with *the other*, who is another *I*. It is this acknowledgment of the other as "another I" that generates genuine hospitality. A real relationship is characterized by sharing commonalities: something in you is invested in the other, and the other in you.[1] Like in any other human relation—friendship, a parent–child bond—in hospitality, the connection is also intimate, going beyond simply sharing resources or common social interests. As Meyer observes,

> It's human nature for people to take precisely as much interest in you as they believe you're taking in them. There is no more robust way to build relationships than taking a genuine interest in other human beings and allowing them to share their stories. When we take an active interest in the guests at our restaurants, we create a sense of community and a feeling of "shared ownership". (Meyer, 2006, p. 75)

This "shared ownership" does not only apply to customers: it especially applies to co-workers and employees as well.

[1] By commonality we mean material and immaterial goods shared between persons, uniting them and creating a community of life such as shared projects, dreams, ambitions.

To better understand intersubjectivity in hospitality, it is crucial to consider the concept of personhood, which constitutes the foundation of every human's intrinsic dignity. That is, one has human dignity *because* one is a person, and he/she must be treated according to that dignity (Lombo & Russo, 2014, p. 139; Yepes Stork & Aranguren, 1999, p. 61).[2] When we say the acknowledgment of "another I" leads to genuine hospitality, it is precisely because it implies recognizing the other as *another person of immeasurable dignity*. Buber calls this acknowledgment "becoming aware." Personhood and human dignity inform hospitality when we are aware that the other, as person, is a unique *subject*—and when we ensure that our reception and response to him/her reflects this awareness, whether he/she is co-worker, employee, or guest.

Persons are *centers* of something: we cannot be treated as mere conglomerations of parts, for each is far more than that. Persons are centers of subjective experience, durable identity, and social communication. We exhibit a structure of internal organization that provides an axis for coherence, continuity of awareness—of themselves and the other—and action. "Persons are the Archimedean points from which alone it is possible to identify positions in space and time, for it is they that give meaning to the here and now" (Spaemann, 2007, p. 164). This is one of the singularities that marks the distinction between humans and other living creatures: unlike an ordinary object such as a tree, persons as subjects have their own thoughts, intentions, desires, and aspirations.

A person's subjectivity stems from his or her being a singular unity of body and spirit or soul. Thoughts, feelings, desires, imagination, and choices—in short, our *activity*, expressed through our body—reveal the immaterial part of us that capacitates us to do all this: the soul (Lombo & Russo, 2014, p. 22). The union of body and soul means that it is no exaggeration to call human persons *embodied spirits*. We are always unified beings of existent duality: all the time, both material body and immaterial soul are alive in singular unity. St. Thomas Aquinas explains this union through the *hylomorphic* analysis, from the Greek *hyle* (matter) and *morphe* (form). This follows Aristotle, who stated that the soul is

[2] This dignity of the human person is not based upon how he acts, but on what he is as such.

the substantial form of the body (Lombo & Russo, 2014, Chapter 3).[3] The soul animates the body; making it move and act. The soul, therefore, is the principle or source of life and activity.

According to Karol Wojtyla (1993), the soul–body relationship is of "basic importance for understanding the whole uniqueness of the human person, as well as for explaining the whole structure of the human person" (p. 168). The unique relationship between body and soul—the unity *for itself*—is what makes each of us personal individuals with our own identity and interior world. Because we have a rational soul, we possess not only sense powers, but spiritual as well: intellect and will. This makes us—persons in our unity or the *I*—principles of our *own* activity. Human activity is characterized precisely by *freedom*, a corollary of our human nature, making us able to know ends and consciously and voluntarily act toward them. We are masters of ourselves and our actions, and capable of developing our own lives and acting toward our purpose (Lombo & Russo, 2014, pp. 96–97).

These are some of the characteristics[4] that come from being persons and illuminate our human dignity. All this means that when we relate to others, we must recall that "the person is an end unto himself and never simply a means; he is an end that exists per se and cannot be used as a mere instrument subordinated to other ends" (Lombo & Russo, 2014, p. 147; Yepes Stork & Aranguren, 1999, pp. 70–72).[5]

[3] For an overview of form and matter, and the significance of *substantial form,* see cited chapter. Specifically, Aristotle's definition of the soul is that it is "the first actuality of a natural body having life potentially in it." Aristotle, *De Anima* II, 1, *BK* 412, a 27.

[4] For a more complete discussion of personhood and its properties, see Lombo and Russo, *Philosophical Anthropology*. Other qualities they cite are inalienability, unrepeatability, completeness, intentionality and relationality, and autonomy.

[5] The original Kantian maxim is "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end" (Kant, 1997, AK 4:429).

3 Hospitality: The Ripple Effect of Human Dignity

Let us return to Danny Meyer's distinction between good service and genuine hospitality. His observation has a strong intuitive appeal. How do the notions of personhood and dignity help us unpack this distinction?

Meyer defines service as the technical delivery of the product. It is fairly obvious that any hospitality establishment's first range of goods covers material ones, appealing primarily to the senses. We seek the restaurant with the *lasagna alla bolognese* served at the perfect time and temperature; the flame-grilled, juicy burger that comforts you at the end of a hectic week; or the delicate variety of sushi and tempura that makes your mouth water. We seek the bed-and-breakfast with clean and cheery bedspreads, a harmonious color palette, and working wi-fi. We seek the resort that places you in the right spot to revel in the ocean's jeweled beauty or the hotel that offers you the starry panorama of city lights and sparkling, artfully served drinks.

The materiality of good services does not mean that these have nothing to do with human dignity. The manual work that yields good food, immaculate linens, and aesthetic spaces requires planning, study, standards, and creativity. Manual or material work involves our rationality and bears its imprint. Even more, manual work that is at the service of the human person's corporeality is capable of transmitting an immaterial reality. When carried out well, this work contributes to humanizing others and society (Chirinos, 2006, Chapters 4 and 5). The services offered by any hospitality establishment respond to all the dimensions of the human person: bodily, psychological, social, and even spiritual. Already we can see how notions such as the unity of the human person or the radicality of our social nature can influence the measurable qualities of the service provided in the industry. Technical excellence is already a mode of paying respect to personhood and dignity.

However, culinary delights, spotless housekeeping, front-desk refinement, and even thrilling vistas can remain at the level of something being done *to* you. Good service appeals to all aspects of the person. Yet something more is necessary for authentic hospitality: the capacity to address

the person as a *whole*, as the subject and "other I" that he/she is. In becoming aware, acknowledging, and receiving the other as *another I,* we gift genuine hospitality—something done *for* you. "To" and "for," as Meyer says, make all the difference.

Yet good service and great hospitality are inseparable: both are needed to excel in the field (Meyer, 2006, p. 60). However, the step from efficient service to genuine hospitality requires more than techniques and behavioral strategies. Any successful manager or professional in the hospitality industry must exhibit organizational skills and specialized knowledge. Yet it is equally important—perhaps more important—that he/she must be able to successfully relate to employees and guests alike. Ultimately, successfully connecting with the other depends on our recognition of his/her personhood. It means being conscious of human dignity, of *this particular individual's* human dignity, and letting this awareness shape our convictions, perceptions, actions, and even feelings.

Personhood and dignity, then, make up the soul that should animate what might usually be called "interpersonal skills," i.e., attentiveness, listening, eye contact, calmness, empathy, warmth, etc. (Meyer, 2006, p. 60). Awareness of dignity is what grants us the intuition necessary to discover a particular guest's needs and know what to do to provide them (The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, 2021; Michelli, 2008). Consciousness of subjectivity hones both the realization that each person has a point of view, and the capacity to look at things from the other's perspective. The overall trait necessary is a capacity to *receive* and *respond* to the other, qua *I* (Cates, 1997, p. 94).[6]

We must emphasize that hospitality is more than a marketable commodity, even though part of hospitality is ensuring quality products and providing multisensorial experiences. Also, personhood and human dignity are more than just useful mantras to repeat to oneself with the sole end of being so warm and friendly that your establishment attracts more customers. This would still reduce what can be given to mere good

[6] Diana Fritz Cates philosophically explains "receiving" and "responding" to others, albeit in a more intimate context than hospitality (friendship and compassion when the other is suffering). She uses Aquinas's theory of the appetites to develop a notion of complacency that sheds light on interpersonal relationships. Cates defines complacency as "receiving the desires, pains, and joys of another into the self, such that they seem to the self to become partly the self's own."

service. Ask yourself: if hospitality were all about the best products and experiences, why is it that we can place such a wide range of establishments—from burger stands to Italian *trattorias*, from tour-guided trips to catering events, from bed-and-breakfasts to luxury hotels—within this phenomenon we call "hospitality?"

Fundamentally, it is because hospitality is an activity that springs from the interiority of the human person and a gift we make to the other *because he/she is another person*. Hospitality, therefore, is a ripple effect of becoming aware of human dignity. In any place where one human meets another, receiving the other and attending to his/her needs and well-being on account of his/her humanity, hospitality happens. Exploring the connection between human dignity and hospitality reveals the latter to be a particularly human activity with its own unique role in human flourishing. There is a singular delight that comes from receiving one as guest and being treated as guest.

We can see the uniqueness of hospitality *qua* human activity even in the experience of HospoVoice, a union of hospitality workers in Australia. At its origin is a frustration with wage theft and harassment in the workplace. They are constructive: part of their solution is an app called Fair Plate, which allows establishments to be rated by employees and which guarantees restaurants as "Fair Plate Certified" if they take care of their people. But even if their blog articles and news bytes expose the difficulties of working in the food and beverage industry—i.e., being overworked and underpaid—they are firm in their reasons for wanting to improve the hospitality industry. They love their jobs, identify as "people people," and find their greatest fulfillment in enabling others to feel welcome, have a good time, and make memories (HospoVoice, 2021a, b). They do not use the philosophical arguments presented here, yet implicit in their demands for fair conditions is a love for personhood, dignity, and the specific mission of making others happy with their work—hospitality.

Their experience brings up another issue. Some might think hospitality is primarily about the customer. But if hospitality is the ripple effect of a strong awareness of human dignity, the truth is that customers and guests are on the outer rim of that ripple. We can only give genuine hospitality as an establishment or team, if those within the team

offer each other hospitality first. An implication of this for the modern manager is "concern for the worker and his clientele as an individual and as a social being—an idea that today extends beyond the individual worker to the organization and even the environment in which it operates" (Barrows et al., 2012, p. 519). It is within the team where we have the occasions to deal with the other as a free agent of his/her own activity—with all the difficulties and potential that arise from this fact.

4 My Team and I: Important Variables in the Equation

Some would rather count on 1% of 100 people than 100% of themselves. They grasp the truth that professional success is more like a relay race than a solitary sprint. Of course, at work we must constantly train as individuals, studying and applying effective strategies that can improve personal performance. Still, we will never be able to win a relay by ourselves. "The quality of teamwork is essential to team success" (Engelland, 2018, p. 171). Success is the result of a collective effort; trust is the glue that holds great teams together. Meyer believes in this kind of mindset in working with others in the hospitality industry. He is proudest to hear the compliment: "I love your restaurants, and the food is fantastic. But what I really love is *how great your people are*" (Meyer, 2006, p. 127). Hospitality is a team sport.

Now, what presupposes a team equation's effectiveness, and grants it added value? Four Seasons founder Isadore Sharp applies the principle: Treat employees right to treat customers right (Sharp, 2009, p. 93). Meyer calls this approach to hospitality management *enlightened hospitality*. Clearly, the care for our own staff comes first. The variables in the equation are my team and I, and *my team* is equally important as the *I*—the leader. "Nothing would ever matter more to me than how we expressed hospitality to *one another*. (…) We would define our success as well as our failures in terms of the degree to which we had championed, first one another and then our guests, community, suppliers, and investors" (Meyer, 2006, p. 102).

When one perceives another as *person*, he/she treats others as a fundamental subject because of his irreducible dignity. Companies do not become leading brands solely by their material perks. Let us take the case of Ritz-Carlton—the only service company in America that has been given the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award twice. Part of the Baldrige Excellence Criteria is the "integrated management framework." The Criteria contain key values that define the inculcated beliefs and behaviors found in high-performing organizations. Ritz-Carlton's unique culture starts with the motto: "We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen" (Reiss, 2009). For Ritz-Carlton, employees come first. Showing a deep trust in your staff's judgment and valuing their opinions animate the organization's platform. Borrowing Wojtyla's concept of *participation*, working in a team is not mere interaction. The experience of acting together with others must be fueled by a recognized value: one's dignity. "If you have a philosophy that puts employees first, guests second, community third, suppliers fourth, and investors fifth, you implicitly have a long-term perspective," echoes Meyer (2006, p. 185). Businesses stand a much better chance of gaining customers when employees are treated and encouraged to express and reveal their humanness. Feeling seen and acknowledged is an eminent human need.

Enlightened hospitality encourages all team members to become better employees, and ultimately, better persons. An unhealthy group dynamic can be overcome by the manager and the employees' openness and willingness to teach and be taught. As essential variables in the equation, everyone—from the front-of-the-house to the back-of-the-house—can and should develop and nurture habits to keep the team's unity and dynamism afloat. "Individual members bring human capital to the team. Human capital is created by improving a person's skills and capabilities to earn an income or increase human potential" (Engelland, 2018, p. 173). When the latter—increasing human potential—comes as the front burner, the working relationship in a team develops into a virtuous one. On what account does virtue belong in a team at work? Engelland (2018) observes that,

> In a virtuous relationship, each individual not only receives…enjoyment and utility but also delights in the virtuousness of the other. Each…-comes to expect that the other will exercise virtue in all their dealings, and because each friend wills the good of the other, they will correct the other when they see them doing something wrong. Virtue allows the very best kind of relationship – the kind that is needed among workgroup teammates. (p. 178)

Among the many habits or core skills that team members must acquire, we can highlight three which many hospitality practitioners find indispensable. Michael Romano calls the possession of these skills the *excellence reflex*.

Primarily, we have *respect*. This is because *the other* is a free, intelligent agent, an end in himself and not a tool for ends. There is a difference between instrumentalizing the other and teamwork. Working as a group is collaboration and participation for an end. In hospitality, the *I-thou* acknowledgment and respect for our inalienable dignity cannot remain unilateral. It has to be fully experienced by the other as well: on other words, reciprocal. Employees give their all when they, and not just their end-product, are accepted and appreciated as *someone* and not *something*. Paul Bolles-Beaven taught Meyer an operative South African expression: *Ubuntu*. This Zulu expression conveys humanness, going beyond a traditional greeting like "Hi, how are you?" *Ubuntu* transmits the unspoken "I see you." "That simply and effectively addresses the core human need to be seen and feel seen" (Meyer, 2006, p. 192).

Next, we have *patience* and *dialogue*. Human intersubjectivity comes with a flip side: our capacity to relate presupposes an inner core that is infinitely private. There must be an "I" before there is a "we," and to a certain degree, the "I" is incommunicable. Thus, hard work is required to establish a true understanding of the other. Moreover, our biography and history create a pattern of habits rendering us with different personalities, inner worlds, and their respective unique expressions. Miscommunication is at the root of many interpersonal problems, even before a difference in values. Surface-level attributes of individual team members

can be crucial to the team's overall function, yet finding common deep-level factors that we cannot see can have a much more significant impact on work teams.

Finally, the habit of *empowerment* gives each one a chance to become a better team player. Teamwork provides an arena for the other to grow in freedom. The work environment, when in shape, capacitates employees to learn from their mistakes and improve. Meyer affirms that this is a huge contribution to the dialogue on hospitality. Based on his experience, he found that those most likely to thrive in the Union Square Hospitality Group are those who enjoy playing team sports. "And that's true for any organization in which people depend on others for their ability to succeed" (Meyer, 2006, p. 144). *Empowerment* can be translated as enabling employees to solve problems for guests by making immediate decisions on their own initiative and discussing them later with management.

We can see respect, patience, dialogue, and empowerment in the story of Isadore Sharp and the rise of the Four Seasons hotels. When Sharp wanted to create the world's best hotel company, he saw that caring for the employees was the key. Sharp (2009) knew that "the fastest way for management to destroy its credibility is to say its employees come first and be seen putting them last" (p. 106). It took tough, persistent, and one-to-one effort to convince managers to delegate authority, support and trust fellow workers, and treat them with integrity and respect. Sharp does not hide that he had to cut some top managers, establish new patterns of communication, and make choices that were personally distressing, but it all paid off: Four Seasons protects its values and lives by the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Employees feel like their work makes a difference, their opinions count, and that helping the company furthers their personal growth.[7]

Wojtyla says that the more intense the interchange between the *I* and *thou* are, the stronger is the confidence, trust, and self-expression. In this industry that hospitality is, mutual responsibility is the mutual confirmation of the person's value: his or her dignity as a person (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 245). Meyer makes it clear that: "That sense of affiliation builds

[7] Sharp tells the full story in detail, narrating difficulties and nuggets of wisdom.

trust and sense of being accepted and appreciated, (…) a necessity for a company's long-term survival" (Meyer, 2006, p. 175).

5 Transformed Work

Personhood and human dignity are central to hospitality not only in the way we relate to others, but in how we do our work. Persons are self-experiencing subjects revealed by their activity. In hospitality, they are revealed not only to others but, more importantly, to themselves. Persons are intrinsically perfectible beings: we perfect ourselves through our actions. Work is the *first* condition in perfecting ourselves. Man, as *homo faber*, is not only someone who works for work's sake. Rather, he works with a broader view, his human spirit leaving a mark on the work's materiality, which then becomes the bearer of meaning and values that transcend it. In and through work, we humanize life and the world around us.

The dignity of work stems from human dignity. Work, in some way, becomes or reflects the agent of the work (Aristotle, 1995, p. 1168a7). This subjective dimension of work is what is most stable, independent of the product. It only and exclusively depends on the dignity of human beings, and so takes precedence. If awareness of this reality is lacking, work loses its truest and most profound meaning. Work is nothing less than an expression of our essence as human persons, such that regardless of the managers' and employees' products ranging from simple to complex, all have value because they are products of the human person.

Human work does not only proceed *from* the person. Like any other work, hospitality is also essentially *ordered to* the human person. The different tasks corresponding to the roles of each employee in the industry must be oriented to the person—work's subject—who is carrying it out. In other words, work finds its *final goal* or *purpose* in the human person. Consequently, attention given to details at work contributes not only to the perfection of the work itself, but also of the person.

Our care for our work, which centers on many material, organizational, and aesthetic details—thus, work well done—brings into play

the virtues. Good professionals are recognized by the quality of their work—an internal perfection of the worker. Meyer wants people for his team who are highly wired to do the job well, which all hospitality professionals are called to. He recounts:

> It's not hard to teach anyone the proper way to set a beautiful table. What is impossible to teach is how to care deeply about setting the table beautifully. When I walk into any one of our restaurants as its dining room is being set up for service, one of the most lovely sights to me is a waiter lifting a wineglass off the table, holding it up to the light, and checking for smudges. This is not because I'm an unreformed smudge freak, but because someone is showing care for a small detail – smaller even than what the average guest may notice. (Meyer, 2006, p. 131)

This is how work, transformed by virtue, occupies a central position in human flourishing, contributing to the perfection of others and the world. Human work impregnated by human dignity serves as a channel to realize one's ideals and values. Then and only then can work be considered not only as a means of subsistence, receiving praise and honor, and leverage to climb the social ladder, but as the right environment for human growth and perfection.

6 Conclusion

Hospitality is a dialogue between an *I*—myself, and *thou*—the other. It is a dialogue that goes beyond a conversation or discussion. Hospitality as dialogue signifies the life of the relation between persons: their immeasurable and irreducible worth. In this chapter, we have seen that understanding hospitality's dynamism essentially involves understanding the notion of personhood. Through this, we have answered one of the questions that guide us in becoming good professionals—*Who is the other?*—and are now aware of how human dignity informs and intersects with hospitality. Acknowledging *the other* as another *I* who possesses the same dignity reinforces the idea of a transformed *other* and work in the

industry. Because of this absolute character, the person must always be respected and treated according to that dignity.

We will deal more about personal development or flourishing in the next chapter. Since we have already talked about who the other is, now we ask: *Who am I?*

Action Prompts

- Make it a daily habit to think of how you are going to treat the people around you *before* you go to work.
- Open up channels of feedback from employees to management, to discover whether employees feel respected, empowered, or listened to.
- Encourage self-examination at all levels. *Does my action respect or honor the dignity of others?*
- Evaluate the length of work hour shifts of your employees, to ensure their work-life balance.

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Study Questions

1. Why is the *I-thou* relationship in hospitality a fundamental one?
2. Explain, in your own words, the difference between good service and hospitality.
3. Explain the source of human dignity and give examples of attitudes and behaviors that will reflect its worth.

Chapter Summary

To better understand the difference between good service and genuine hospitality, it is important to consider the notion of personhood, which constitutes the foundation of each and every human's intrinsic dignity. Each human person is an intimate unity of body and soul, and a free agent of his own activity. Each human person is also a unique I, which

is never an isolated reality: in daily existence, it is always in relation with a thou. The human person is open to others and social by nature: one cannot flourish alone.

Hospitality's dynamism intersects with human dignity in certain fundamental points: (1) The services provided address the bodily, psychological, social, and even spiritual needs of the person, and yet hospitality is defined by receiving the other as a *whole person.* Hospitality necessarily entails dealing with differences. Thus, (2) the field necessarily requires cooperation with others whose dignity is on par with my own. To create a collaborative work environment, some essential attitudes and habits have to be acquired and developed: for instance, respect, patience and dialogue, and empowerment. Finally, (3) the dignity of work stems from the dignity of person. Thus, hospitality should not be merely product-oriented activity, but transformed and humanized work.

Hospitality is revealed to be a field that is intrinsically other-oriented. Human dignity ought to inform hospitality and be especially reflected in one's reception of and response to the other. Hospitality then becomes an occasion for the transformation of the human person.

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