

## Openings

At last it is October. The colors are here, the fall is here, Samhain and Halloween are coming with Thanksgiving to follow, and with these come pumpkins.

Pumpkins are squash, with tasty seeds and tasty flesh and an efficient enough shape to render carving worthwhile. Efficiency, in this case, is measured in proportion of volume to exterior dimensions, with more being better. While it is possible to grow a zucchini with roughly the same mass as a medium-sized pie pumpkin, it is much harder to make a jack o' lantern out of it. Acorn squash fares somewhat better, but pumpkins hold pride of place for a reason: they are good. Their plumpness suggests plenty; their flesh is succulent roasted or stewed, they keep well, and one's hands fit nicely inside the top, if one begins with a suitable lid.

I did not always know this.

I grew up in suburbia, and as far as I knew, pumpkins were for carving. It was years before I knew you could eat one. You could eat the seeds if you didn't burn them, but I had no idea that jack o' lanterns were made of food. Eventually I did connect pumpkin pie with the glowing orange heads on every doorstep, but I was in college before I took a round, orange squash, cut a lid and hollowed it out, and then replaced the lid and put it in the oven. Living in small town Minnesota was like living in a perpetual magic show, or a living history museum--things I had only read in books, things I thought were gone forever, were still part of life. The shopkeepers knew me. The bank teller knew me. I walked to get groceries, to the fellowship on Sundays, to the general store where Mr. Jacobsen had run Jacobsen's since time began, and where his son was running the store with him. We were an hour from the Mall of America, but we might as well have been on a different planet.

It was a transformative planet. It got into your very bones and soul. It changed the way you looked at things and how fast the world spun by. When I went there I said I wanted to experience a different one of our country's many cultures. And so I did. That change has impacted the whole rest of my life. Before that I knew nothing but the fast-paced world of New York's suburbs. Everything had to happen yesterday or sooner; everyone had to fend for themselves; life was entirely anonymous; work was a necessary evil; automation was good; all recreation was expensive.

Life in Northfield couldn't have been more different. My college certainly allowed us to stay high-strung if that was what we wanted, but I was on a cultural immersion experience and I was determined to be immersed. Some small towns with colleges isolate the school, reject the students, regard the whole thing as a kind of parasitic growth. All the determination in the world would have been useless if the town itself hadn't embraced us, but we were lucky--Northfield was never like that. My fellow students showed me how to be at college, but it was the townspeople themselves that showed me how to be part of the town. The lady who ran one of the antique shops always said, "Thank you," and "goodbye" when I left, and so I learned to say goodbye when I left a store. The bank manager taught me to write checks and so I learned that I could ask strangers for help. The UU fellowship jumped at the possibility of a young person in their midst, and thus I learned to set boundaries. And the beloved man who ran the math tutoring

center on campus also owned one of the grocery stores in town, and it was therefore clear how interconnected a small town really is. In four years there I learned as much about community and grace as I did about English literature or educational theory in classrooms and on campus.

But I could not have learned it without that remarkable openness of a town that welcomed strangers into its midst, strangers who came at the remarkable rate of six or seven hundred a year, half to my college and half to the college across town. These good people did not panic. They did not tell us that we were going to destroy their way of life. They did not hate us for who we were or where we came from or for the fact that many of us came from families with double their annual incomes. They did not sneer at our fumbles or laugh at our clumsy adjustments to upper Midwestern culture and weather--at least not to our faces. Instead they sold plenty of ear warmers and warm socks and hot chocolate and coffee; they kept the grocery stores open 24 hours a day; they issued us library cards and explained about color coded sidewalk salt and carefully, patiently brought us into an adulthood many of us had never seen before.

Bless them.

I already knew how to survive in a city. They taught me how to thrive in a small town, opened up entire vistas--and the life that I now have--by their grace. I would probably not be here today if not for them. They literally changed my life.

Remember the pumpkins?

When they are whole, complete, round, they are just fruit. For us, they can't even be eaten yet. Make one opening and you can cook them; they become food. Make eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose for smell, a mouth for taste and what was once a vegetable is a head. Add a candle and it becomes a beacon.

The openings in our lives, in our homes, in our communities are what make us useful. A house without a door is just a box; a closed ark offers nothing to animals caught in the rising waters. And a person who chooses not to see or hear or touch, not to smell or taste or be present in the world is withdrawing their spirit from this place; is denying all they have and all they are to all who might need them--to all, including themselves. In order to be *in* the world we have to be *open* to the world.

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In chess, an opening gambit sets the whole stage for the game. When my brother took chess lessons as a child (he was really good) they spent months on opening gambits, different ways to play the first few moves. The very first move has limited options. Pawns line the whole front row of each side, and pawns can only move forward one square, except in their first move, when they can go two squares if they wish. They can also move one square diagonally but only to capture another piece. So on a completely fresh board, the first move will be one of eight pawns on the white side moving forward either one square or two. The second move will be the same from the other side. These two choices open the doors. They create the breaks in the ranks—and *then* the game really begins.

Because the game isn't about what any one player does. The process of opening doors and windows, of putting down drawbridges is not enough. It helps. The game cannot happen without it. But it's the next step that makes or breaks it all.

The next step is where the players engage.

Now chess was invented as a war game, a way of practicing combat strategy without human lives at stake. (One does somewhat wonder why we can't just practice and then make the outcome binding.) Church is not a war game. We aren't interested in winning while someone else loses; we aren't fighting some kind of zero-sum game for the spoils of battle. If someone is happy and spiritually nourished at the Family Bible Church down the street, they probably won't find us all that helpful. We're not in competition with other congregations, and we're certainly not in conflict with the people who come to our doors. We don't need drawbridges and steel shutters; we don't need towers with long, tall slits for archers to shoot through. That is not the kind of impressive we are trying to be. We are instead engaged in the game of service, in the practice of assistance, in the process of growth. It's easy to feel alienated and think that maybe we should dig a moat in case strangers turn out to be unfriendly, but that is a big mistake. We are called to a practice of accessibility. Once upon a time churches kept their doors unlocked and offered sanctuary to anyone who stood within their walls. Here in the United States we no longer honor that tradition—fears of theft and violence, changes in cultural standards, and transitions in congregational leadership have moved us to a much more defensive model. We look more like a private home than a public space. Our doors are locked, our keys are kept safely away. We are supported by the voluntary gifts of the community, not by taxes, and we are treated as a private institution, not a public service.

With this transformation it becomes easy to think of ourselves as primarily a closed circle—as a family, as a club, as a cloistered community. But even monasteries have traditionally had open doors and guest rooms. We are physically closed by reasons of weather and practical existence, but in our hearts we are still open. In our practices we are still public. Our worship especially is public space, made for welcoming newcomers, strangers, hungry travelers. Our worship should be—must be—a place for anyone, especially those who do not know us.

When we offer worship here, we offer it in service—to each other, to the community, to the spiritual good of the world. Because we offer it in a traditional time, in a traditional place; because it is part of a vast shared tradition that goes back thousands of years, it is one of the biggest open doors we have.

It's not the only one--we have classes and community events and parties and gatherings and committees that work on issues for which we share passions; we have dinners and fundraisers and discussions and all of those are ways in to the congregation--all of those are openings. But that is not enough. We need to do more. What is our gambit when we engage?

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Several years ago, a book called The Game spread like wildfire across college campuses and through bookstores. Shelved variously as self-help, fiction, and research, it described in minute detail the way one might learn to seduce women. It was designed to explain the process to even the most socially inept of readers, turning them overnight into campus Casanovas. Bound like a Bible in black faux-leather and gold-stamped title, it talked about pickup lines and eye contact, flirting and the push-pull that holds the object of affection in thrall while both parties decide what more they want.

Unfortunately *The Game* didn't handle ethics so well. There are lots of ways and reasons to want someone to want someone or something, and there are lots of ways to make that happen, but many of them are predicated on revenge or anger or power without pleasure and consent, or sheer force of ego. There are really only two ethical reasons for seduction: one, because you think you have something good to share. Two, because they've asked for it. Almost all the possible variations on good seduction are one or the other.

You have something worth wanting, or they want you.

It's all about creating desire.

If you've ever tried to seduce anyone, then you already know the first thing: Opening a door is not enough. Making it *possible* to get in is not enough. Welcome and hospitality are not about passively opening doors, nor are they about forcing people in. Instead we want to make a space so inviting that they can't imagine staying away. It means making the boundaries so subtle that someone can walk right in, almost by accident, and then not want to leave. That jack o'lantern won't shine just because we scoop the seeds and cut out eyes and nose and mouth. We still need the candle. We still need the light. We need to be attractive.

Seduction is not just for individuals. Seduction can be for anyone or anything with a gift to give. This church, for example, has gifts to give. We have something good—really good—and we are called to share.

Any number of things can make a person attractive, but institutions are leveled out because we are composed of many diverse individuals—so what makes a congregation attractive? What makes a church sexy? The same things that make a person irresistible: self-confidence and joy, humility and spirit, inspiration and hope and possibility, and reciprocated desire. Knowing you're wanted, knowing you're welcomed, can make all the difference.

Expressing desire is tricky and scary because it makes us vulnerable. It has us telling someone else what we want, with the possibility that they will decide not to give it to us. But when the “something” is actually “someone” that has to be okay. We can only let people know how fabulous they are and try to be our most fabulous selves. If we're a good fit, they'll think so, too, and stick around. It doesn't take much to tell someone how much you like them. As individuals we learn that skill by age five: “you're nice. Will you be my friend?” Adolescence and adulthood complicates it as we learn “The Game”, as we discover that being honest and open about wanting something can be perceived as greed or desperation. We learn to hide what we want under layers of exploratory questions, designed to find the answer before we ask.

But we also learn that there's more than one way to say, “Yes, please.”

We can mention where we'll be and when. We can issue an invitation. We can speak appreciation for a specific thing about them: a scarf, a book, a joke, a skill, a talent. We can say please. We can say thank you.

Churches can do this, too. We can have clear, easy-to-find information about events and meetings, at regular times in regular places. We can ask people to join us for special events. We can communicate clearly about what we do and who we are. We can tell everyone—newcomers and savvy elders—what we really enjoy, appreciate, and admire about them. We can ask for volunteers and we can say thank you when we get gifts of time, of energy, or of money.

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We can also be careful not to demand too much too fast. Have you ever been on a bus or airplane or long train trip and found yourself next to someone who, despite being a complete

stranger, is bound and determined to share their entire life story, broken-hearted past and medical history in the span of your trip? They want sympathy and empathy and a shoulder to cry on and a companion in their rage...and despite a general human compassion, you are a little uneasy, perhaps, with knowing that their impotence stems from an unexpected and rare disease—unexpected because they were actually adopted and their adoptive parents both died young but the papers from the agency in the village in east Asia said that their parents were healthy?

That's not the kind of information most people want until they're a little more invested in each other. Wait until the third date, the fourth encounter, the perfect dinner party that doesn't want to end. Wait until the seduction has taken; wait until you are both caught. And wait until you are with good friends, eating popcorn in your pajamas and watching old movies which should never have been colorized. Show that you understand and respect boundaries and privacy and propriety. When you're seducing someone, if you really want them to feel comfortable, don't scare them. Open the doors. make it welcoming. Get them to want to come in. Ask them to stay.

Sure, we could play hard to get. We're good at it. But that's disingenuous. It pretends we're something we're not. It implies insecurity, that we have to make people try extra hard to prove they like us. We're better than that. We're smarter than that. We trust our own judgment more than that—don't we?

We already know the game. We know the good ways and the bad ways to play it.

We have a secret handshake habit--drop the wallet card or mumble something and see if the other person picks it up, then mention church and walk away. We tend to treat the presence of our faith in our lives more like an affair which might ruin our reputation than like the proud and public union that it could be.

What right have we to act as though we are ashamed of having any faith at all; why on earth should we be ashamed? I am not ashamed to have faith. I am not ashamed to have religion. I am not ashamed any more than I am ashamed to have the ability to read and write. This faith is not a liability. It is a strength. It is a strength that is abundant and robust and self-sustaining. As people fall into despair among us and around us, have we any right at all to keep to ourselves something that might help?

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The good people of Northfield changed my life. They didn't just open their doors--they gave me a small-town experience that I never wanted to leave. Can we not do the same? Do we not have a life-changing, transformative message of embracing theology? Do we not have the story of a miracle that blossoms in all of our hearts, in each of our hearts, that is made real and relevant by our hands now, today, in this world in which we live? Do we not carry an ancient message of possibility, one that is older than any theology of exclusion, one that is in fact as old as the world itself, as old as the idea that life is a miracle, a glorious accident, a remarkable feat of natural engineering more complex than anything we can truly understand?

Do we not carry a powerful banner of hope that shines with a light all its own, a beacon that can help us chart a course between rejection and isolation, past fear and into a harbor that we can build of community and interconnection among all people?

And if we do, is it not incumbent upon us, embedded in that embracing theology we love, to welcome strangers, to welcome newcomers, to welcome old friends? Is it not our duty to offer what we have to those who might want it?

Let us open our doors. Let us be sweet and strong, let us be wise and brilliantly foolish. Let us put our best foot forward, and pour every ounce of charm and grace into a daily seduction of the spirit.

We owe the world nothing less.

Blessed be  
and amen.

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