

Yes, Vacancy!

Welcoming Strangers into Our Home in the Name of Jesus

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I was hot and sweaty as I heaved my boots up the giant stones of the Inca Trail. I looked up toward the highest point we would reach on the trail—Dead Woman’s Pass at 12,500 feet. This was the hardest day of the trek—or not, depending on how you looked at it. Tomorrow we had to tackle the killer Gringo Steps descending into the valley. I wasn’t sure which was worse, going up or going down. All I knew was that I was having a ball—celebrating my ten-year anniversary with my husband and accomplishing one of our lifelong dreams, hiking to Machu Picchu in Peru.

On this adventure of a lifetime, I fell in love. But not with Kerry. I was already in love with him, and this anniversary trip gave us much-needed time away to celebrate. But as we joined the twenty or so hikers who were part of our group, I fell in love . . . with our international travel mates. Hailing from Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Wales, England, and the United States, we were an eclectic group, for sure. When we got in our sleeping bags the first night, Kerry and I laughed quietly at how different we seemed from the rest of the crew. We were definitely the elders of the bunch; most of the others were in their twenties, passionately politically liberal, and seemingly amoral in their religious beliefs, if they had any at all. Yet, despite our differences, we felt a tight bond and affinity with them.

Travelers share a common DNA. They are usually sojourners in search of meaning, memories, and adventure. I think of the people I met at the Christian youth hostel in Amsterdam where I worked one summer in college. They were fascinating, open-minded folks who were seeking new experiences, enjoying the differences in others, and often searching for the spiritual significance of life. These, I discovered, were my kind of people.

As the trip to Machu Picchu drew to a close, I felt a burning desire to start a Christian youth hostel. Winding through the streets of Cusco in a cab, I mentioned this idea to Kerry. He smiled. It wasn’t a joke. I was serious. I wanted to open a place on the order of Gladys Aylward’s in China in the 1930s.

At her Inn of the Sixth Happiness, she fed and housed travelers and told them about Jesus after supper each evening.



Michelle Knott

Change of Plans

If you live in North Arlington, Virginia, where we live, you know that residential neighborhoods are not zoned for youth hostels. So my passionate proposition was really dead on arrival, and Kerry and I both knew that. He said, “We can’t have a youth hostel, but at least you have hostile youth.”

Not one year later, another exciting opportunity to interact with international travelers—and actually live overseas—presented itself. Here was my chance! My heart raced at the thought. To prepare to move, I began weeding out old medicines from the bathroom cabinet. But then, as quickly as it came, the opportunity changed, and we were staying in the United States . . . in Arlington . . . in our very house with the now winnowed-out bathroom closet.

“Lord, I don’t understand!” I opined. “Everything was pointing to moving overseas. Now I’m stuck right back where I started—at home. You know how much I desire to get to know international people and share

the gospel with them. Why did you put that desire in my heart if I'm going to stay right here?" I was angry and honest and let God know my heart, because, well, He already knows it. I know He can handle my honesty. And if God ever winks, He winked at me just then and said, "Trust me, Michelle." Not out loud. But He said it. "Trust me." And so began a most unusual and hilarious and totally divine answer to prayer.

Fast forward to the present. We just changed the sheets (again) to prepare for a young teacher from China who will stay with us for two days. A young man from North Carolina who used to live with us is coming back for a few days. A local high-school girl stayed here last week. Two Protestant missionaries and a Catholic priest were here from France the two weeks before that. A man coming through from Ohio spent one night. A dear friend from North Carolina popped in for a night. A Dutch family of four spent two days sightseeing and sleeping here. Another high-school girl spent a week here. A family from Boston came for a week. And all this has been in the past two months!

Our Christian "youth hostel" is alive and well, and the Lord is not only winking now, but laughing . . . laughing at the creative ways in which He fulfills not only His will, but also the desires of our hearts. It is divine comedy at its best, and I'm still shaking my head in wonder.

"Couchsurfing"

"How do people find you?" I get asked quite a lot. "God," I tell them. It's true. God leads them to us. But we also do our own outreach. One way is through Couchsurfing.org. Couchsurfing is an online network of individuals around the world who have a desire to travel and meet new people. Through the network, strangers are able to find free lodging with willing hosts. Like Facebook, members have a personal profile where they introduce themselves and describe what sort of a "couch" they have to offer. Then travelers can send a request for a couch (or bed or air mattress, as the case may be), and the host can decide to accept them or not.

When I first suggested we sign up for Couchsurfing, my husband was dead-set against it. "Are you crazy?" were his exact words, as I recall. "We don't know these people!"

"I know! That's what makes it so exciting!" I replied with a grin. But I must admit, the first time we actually welcomed couchsurfers into our home, even I had a measure of trepidation. This was unknown territory for all of us. When a young couple from Slovenia ar-

rived with their sweet little one-and-a-half-year-old, however, we realized we had nothing to fear. "This is the first American home we have ever been in," they announced as they walked through the door. At that moment, we realized what a privilege it was to represent not only America, but also our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now that we have been doing this for several years, we are astounded at how God sends people to us. Sometimes I get three to four requests per week. In addition to couchsurfing, many people refer housing requests to us. Friends of friends of friends end up at our house. Two young women from North Carolina wound up staying here after they sent an e-mail to a young man in Switzerland who had stayed with us the year before. But while the word gets out, it really is God who is our booking agent. We know He is guiding the right people to us.

Reverse Missionaries

When you invite perfect strangers into your home and provide meals and a warm, family environment, they tend to be appreciative. Some are downright perplexed. As one Dutchman said to me, "This is very strange for us. We don't do this in Holland!" I laughed and said, "But it's *not* strange for us. We do it all the time, and we are so glad you are here. Welcome home." We find that as people are warmed by our hospitality and grateful to save money on food and lodging, they are often willing to hear our story. They want to know what motivates us to open our home. They listen as we share about our faith in Jesus Christ and how He has changed our lives by His sacrificial death on the cross. We often have wonderful conversations about our mutual faith journeys as we linger over coffee and dessert.

We like to think of ourselves as reverse missionaries: they come to us. But not only do they come here, they come here on vacation. People on vacation have a unique freedom and openness not usually associated with everyday life. Without their work duties, they tend not to be as busy or preoccupied. More relaxed and unhurried, they have time to talk and consider what life is all about. It's in that downtime—the time spent lingering over a meal or sharing stories in front of the fire or pointing out cities on the world map on the wall—that we often have the best conversations with our guests.

Our hospitality ministry allows us to catapult to a level of intimacy that might take years to achieve

in a traditional missionary setting. If we were to go overseas as missionaries (something we have contemplated and may still do one day), it would take time to establish friendships and win people's trust, until we eventually invited them into our home for a meal and significant conversation. Not at our "youth hostel." While every situation is different, it usually takes about twenty-four hours for the walls to come down. There's something about eating cereal together in our pajamas that bonds us together. Usually our guests go sightseeing during the day. And sometimes we join them if our schedule permits, but mostly we try to have a family supper ready when they get home. We hear all their stories, see their souvenirs, laugh and get to know one another over a meal around our dining room table. Once we even sat around the kitchen while one of our guests soaked his swollen toe in a big Tupperware bowl of warm water and Epsom salts!

One of our most surprising gatherings centered around the inauguration of President Obama. We actually tried to rent out our house for the occasion (as many were doing in the Washington, DC, area) and decided to shoot the moon and ask for three thousand dollars for the week. As it turned out, we got a request from a gentleman who said he was surprised we were asking such a low price. A low price? I asked him what price he was referring to. He said, "Three dollars." I laughed and said, "That's not what we're charging . . . but what were you hoping to pay?" He said, "Well, I hadn't really thought about it, but three dollars sounded good to me!"

A pastor of an inner-city church in Indianapolis, he and his wife stayed with us (we didn't move out after all), and then we had five more strangers from North Carolina come at the same time. In all, in our house we had eleven people for the 2009 inauguration. Not only did we have an amazing time getting to know one another, we also shared a historic moment in history and all became fast friends. The pastor and his wife spent half a day with us playing piano, singing hymns, sharing stories, and finally praying with our family before they drove back to Indianapolis. As they left, we thanked God for the three-dollar mistake!

Another time, we welcomed a Chinese family that had no religious background. They ended up leaving their twin boys with us without hesitation while they attended a Bible study with a young Chinese woman, who happened to be living with us. We gave them an English copy of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, and the father announced that from now on, he would use that every day to help his children learn English.

The year before, a French family came to visit for a few days, and we all bonded immediately despite the language barrier. We shared fondue, homemade French quiche, and chocolate chip cookies, which turned out to be a huge hit! After carving pumpkins together and celebrating a birthday with them, we were all sad to say good-bye. As they put on their shoes to leave, I told them that the most important thing in our life was knowing Jesus—not in a religious way, but in an authentic, personal way. Thanks to God's provision, we just happened to have a Christian tract in French to share with them. Before they left, Kerry asked if he could pray for them. Our two families gathered in a circle in our front room and held hands while Kerry asked the Lord to bless them. When we opened our eyes, everyone in their family was crying, even the father who had turned to face the window so we wouldn't see his tears. The Lord had touched their hearts. We have stayed in close touch with them, and we look forward to the day when we will be reunited.

Family Participation

In this unique family ministry, even though our children are young, they play a significant role. They change the sheets with us, help prepare the food, and often make signs to welcome visitors so they don't feel like strangers. One darling young lady from Vietnam took the bus to our street and then walked up the front steps, lugging her backpack. As she approached our house, I saw her take out her camera and snap pictures of our front door. The kids had covered the door with homemade signs welcoming her "home." She had tears in her eyes when I opened the door to greet her.

We joke that when our kids grow up, they will either have houseguests all the time, or they will never have a visitor for the rest of their lives. Their childhood is being defined by the internationals streaming through. Our children are homeschooled, and many assume they are completely sheltered from the world. If they only knew. Our kids are exposed to people from other countries, cultures, religions, languages, and worldviews. They have played basketball with Chinese twins. They have gone grocery shopping with Slovenians. Charlie played football to the cheers of French children. In fact, now we prefer to say we global-school our children, because they are exposed to so many cultures through our houseguests and international travel of our own.

We're often asked, "With all those strangers in your house, how do you know the children will be safe?"

The obvious answer is, we don't. But how do we know they'll be safe anytime, anywhere? Of course, we are cognizant of the risks involved in this ministry, but we have felt the Lord guiding us each step of the way. After all, Hebrews 13:2 tells us, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (NIV). The disciples were told to stay with strangers, and Paul couchsurfed his way through Asia. That being said, we always pray before accepting a visitor, and we have said no on occasion because we didn't feel a peace about someone. Usually we accept only families, thinking that ax murderers don't usually travel with their kids. But, as Kerry notes, "If they did, that would be good cover!" So far, we've come out unscathed.

A powerful side benefit of our hospitality is that we are getting on-the-job training in evangelism. Recently we had a family visiting from Vietnam. The father had fought in the Vietnam War. We played NERF gun geography together (shooting guns at a giant map we have in our playroom), and he shot that NERF gun with a precision and intensity I have never seen before! He clearly was familiar with guns. At dinner that night, his daughter mentioned that they were Buddhists, but that all religions taught the same thing. I was thinking of how to respond, but said nothing while I waited for the right time. Later, my eight-year-old son said, "Mom, that lady said that all religions are the same. But they're not. Why didn't you say something?"

Wow. Why *didn't* I say something? I let an opportunity to spread the truth about Jesus Christ go by. And my own son rightly challenged me on it. Before our Vietnamese guests left, my daughter wrote a small book about God for the young woman. She included drawings about the Bible with the gospel clearly presented. The truth is that as we open up our home to strangers, Kerry and I are trying to be missionaries, but our children are often the ones most effectively sharing the gospel. They are learning how to talk to people from all over the world, to listen to their stories, and, we hope, to share their faith better than their mother does sometimes!

Unexpected Gifts

To say that this ministry is full of unexpected surprises is an understatement. Shirin came from Iran for a few days and ended up staying three months while she awaited her visa. Xiaozhen came from China for two weeks, which turned into two years. We all traveled to China with her to meet her family last year. She

got married this summer, and Kerry gave her away at the altar. Ben, Josh, and Jessie all came for summers and left a wonderful, indelible mark on our family. The ministry is never what we expect, but the house is always full of the right people, whom God sends our way.

Last Christmas I realized for the first time how Mary and Joseph were couchsurfers in Bethlehem so long ago. We got an e-mail on December 23 from a young man from China, studying in New York, who asked to come stay with us Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. It wasn't in our plans, but we eagerly said yes and picked up Jimmy at the metro station.

That night we took him to our Christmas Eve church service. Having never celebrated Christmas in his life, he was fascinated by the children dressed as angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. As Jimmy sang along to the carols, I whispered with surprise, "Do you know these songs?" "No," he answered, "I'm just reading the words on the screen." He participated fully and seemed to enjoy himself. Later he joined us and several friends for a Christmas Eve dinner. One friend's daughter brought twenty-six chicks—hatched for a recent science project. We all played with the chicks, and Jimmy asked, "Is this a Christmas tradition too!?" He had no idea what a crazy family he had landed in!

The next morning he opened his first stocking, his first Christmas presents, and then listened as Kerry shared the Christmas story of Jesus' birth, his death for us, and resurrection. We wanted Jimmy to know the true, wonderful meaning of Christmas! We went back to church later that morning. During the prayer time, Jimmy prayed out loud for his family in China. He spent the afternoon with us before heading back to school, writing in our guest book that he hoped we could stay in touch for the rest of our lives. We've already started on Facebook, and I have a feeling we will see him again.

In fact, I think we will see all our houseguests again. This past summer we travelled as a family to Slovenia, where we stayed with the very first couchsurfers we ever hosted. It was like a family reunion. They actually moved out and stayed with their parents so that we could use their whole apartment. We traveled around the country together, sightseeing, swimming in the Adriatic, eating gelato, and enjoying each other's company again after more than two years. But the best memory for us was when we were able to share the Gospel with them over a dinner of Slovenian dumplings one evening. The next night, the young

man's parents invited us to dinner at their house. His mother began by saying, "I understand you are interested in God. I want to talk to you about that." After a wonderful, open, and authentic conversation, we invited her to come stay with us in the United States. She said, "I do want to visit you... and I want to go to your church." We can't wait for her to come.

What's Ahead?

What is ahead for our Christian "youth hostel"? More sheets to change and more meals to cook, we hope! More individuals and families to love. More laughter around the dinner table and shared cross-cultural experiences. More conversations about the meaning of life and eternal things. More lives changed by Jesus through the simple practice of hospitality.

Machu Picchu may be a "million" miles away, but travelers like those we met on the Inca Trail are making their way up our front steps all the time. We don't have a neon sign out front, but I hope we will always have a vacancy for the strangers and soon-to-be-friends that God sends our way.

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