

Denying Someone a Place to Eat Violates Timeless Norms of Hospitality that Go Back to the Homeric Age

On Feb. 1, 1960, four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina—Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain and Joseph McNeil—sat down at the lunch counter in Woolworth's and tried to order a bite to eat. They were denied. Authorities were called.

Police did not arrest the young men, citing a lack of provocation. So, they sat at the counter the entire day, leaving only once the restaurant closed. The four students returned the next day. After a few days, they were joined by several hundred others. By the end of March, the movement had spread to 55 cities in more than a dozen states.

The action taken by Blair, Richmond, McCain and McNeil—who are remembered as “the Greensboro Four”—was arguably the most effective civil rights demonstration in history. One of the reasons the demonstrations were so effective was that they reaffirmed ancient ideas about how humans should treat one another. There are universal ideas of hospitality and decency that transcend local customs, trends, and prejudices. One of these is offering food and shelter to people who cross our path.

The poet Homer explored these ideas nearly 3,000 years ago. *Xenia* (Greek: ξενία, “guest-friendship”), the ancient Greek concept of hospitality, is a major theme in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

In *The Odyssey*, both Odysseus and Telemachus are treated with generosity by their hosts during their voyages even though they are strangers. On the other hand, we see the suitors of

Penelope (the Proci) abuse this sacred concept by taking advantage of her generosity as a host. As a result, all 108 suitors (and the maids who helped them, which always seemed crazy to me) are slain by Odysseus and his son.

Another violation of *xenia* occurs in *The Iliad*, where we see Paris commit the ultimate violation of guest-friendship by absconding with Helen. By stealing (or eloping with, if you prefer) the wife of Menelaus, Paris commits a sin not just against his host, but custom and the gods. The ultimate result of this impulsive act: the 10-year Trojan War and the fall of Priam's house.

Homer's tales may be fictional, but the stories demonstrate the importance hospitality played in the ancient Mediterranean world, as well as the expectations and responsibilities of hosts and guests. The Greeks were not unique in this regard. The idea of "protective hospitality" exists in all three of "the Abrahamic traditions"—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—the scholar Jayme Reaves points out in [Safeguarding the Stranger: An Abrahamic Theology and Ethic of Protective Hospitality](#).

The idea was even explored recently in popular culture. In *Game of Thrones*, the infamous "Red Wedding" scene occurs when Walder Frey abandons customs of hospitality to betray Robb Stark, slaughtering him in the process (along with Stark's mother and pregnant wife).

One can see why showing a certain level of hospitality is a powerful theme in culture and literature: it establishes a basic dignity among fellow humans.

Hospitality has changed from ancient times, of course; but some elements still linger. One of these elements is to allow people—*all* people—to enter, break bread, and sleep in establishments that offer such accommodations to the public.

This rule has not invariably been followed, of course. Nonetheless, it's a good rule that makes sense and appeals to

our (better) egalitarian instincts. We're all human. We all need to eat and drink. We all need to rest. Maybe you can't bring your pet inside. Maybe you can't get in if you're not wearing a jacket or a tie. Maybe you'll be asked to leave if you drink too much. But the basic premise is this: if you come in and follow the rules, you are welcome to break bread, drink, and rest.

By refusing some people to eat at a lunch counter because the color of their skin, Southern cities were violating something. It wasn't the law – they had that on their side (though not for much longer). They were violating decency. They were violating ancient customs and ideas of how a host is supposed to treat a guest.

Those same laws were violated recently when Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the press secretary of the White House, was asked to leave the Red Hen restaurant because President Trump is her boss.

The owner of the Red Hen, Stephanie Wilkinson, said she asked Sanders to leave because she works for an “inhumane and unethical” administration.

“This feels like the moment in our democracy when people have to make uncomfortable actions and decisions to uphold their morals,” Wilkinson [told](#) the *Washington Post*. “I explained [to Sanders] that the restaurant has certain standards that I feel it has to uphold, such as honesty, and compassion, and cooperation. I said, ‘I'd like to ask you to leave.’”

Sanders complied.

The event naturally caused an uproar. Yet it's telling that [most of the discussion](#) has [focused on](#) whether restaurants have “the right” to deny service to people on such grounds. And which party would benefit from this breach of social norms.

Such questions miss the point.

Like lunch counters in the South during the Jim Crow era that didn't serve people of color, restaurant owners today have the legal right to bar people if they don't like their politics. (Legally, this is entirely appropriate.) And only a deeply cynical and divided people would immediately begin to wonder if the action helped or hurt their political cause.

A more appropriate question is this: *Is it the right thing to do?*

Sadly, like Ms. Wilkinson, too many people appear to believe it is.

"Kind of amazed and appalled by the number of folks on Left who applauded the expulsion of [Sanders] and her family from a restaurant," tweeted former Obama campaign manager David Axelrod.

Kind of amazed and appalled by the number of folks on Left who applauded the expulsion of [@PressSec](#) and her family from a restaurant.

This, in the end, is a triumph for [@realDonaldTrump](#) vision of America:

Now we're divided by red plates & blue plates![#sad](#)

– David Axelrod (@davidaxelrod) [June 24, 2018](#)

One can find arguments on the left and on the right explaining why denying someone a seat at the lunch counter because of their politics is different than denying them a seat because of the color of their skin.

People are free to parse the legal and moral distinctions. After they're parsed, I'll simply remind them we all lose when we fail to show basic decency to our fellow human beings.

