

“As a stranger
give it welcome”:

Shakespeare’s Advice

for First-Year College Students

By Jeffrey R. Wilson

Encountering a new idea can be like meeting a very strange person for the first time. First you judge with your eyes, scanning only the surface of the other. You immediately assume you are superior; then maybe you try to get to know him or her. You might be polite, but you scurry to end the interaction. You later laugh with your friends about it—you *won’t believe who I just met*—affirming your shared sense of normalcy and superiority.

We are similarly resistant to new ideas that challenge our personal experiences, perspectives on life, and deeply held beliefs about the world. *This is new to me* becomes *this is ridiculous* followed by *this can’t possibly be true*. We dismiss new ideas, like new people, before we get to know

them, assuming our own already established convictions are always superior because, after all, they’re ours. We reject ideas that aren’t ours—especially when they are difficult to understand—before we understand them.

This is not a disease of the lowly and uneducated; it is something all humans do. I recently read for the first time a book I have mocked in conversation with friends for years. I had rejected its argument before I even knew what it was. If you’re saying to yourself, *I’ve totally seen people do that, but not me*, you’re probably demonstrating what I’m trying to describe: the resistance to new ideas that challenge our personal sense of superiority.

Everyone knows meeting new people and new ideas can make our lives and minds better, yet that knowledge crumbles in the face of the human antipathy to strangeness. If we

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shift from ethical thinking (about what we ought to do) to analytical thinking (about what we actually do), much of life is captured in the famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "This above all, to thine own self be true" (1.3.77). It is a sobering and even troubling description of human behavior (as much as a fluffy moral platitude). Being true to ourselves may lead us to turn refugees away from our shores, to build walls to keep immigrants out, to blame Russia for the results of our elections—we are as suspicious of strangers as ever. We couldn't possibly have elected Donald Trump—too strange, too devastating to our cherished sense of our own superiority.

We don't need better ethics; we need better tactics for encountering strange people and strange ideas. This is especially true for the new college student shifting for the first time from the world he or she has always known—we call it *home*—to a new world on a new campus full of strangers in a strange land. At a time when high school students are inundated with standardized tests, when apps are designed to show us only the news that will make us happy, when social media brings us to believe that everyone thinks like we do, when cable news channels are aligned with political parties, when the coasts vote one way and the heartland another, when college campuses are said to be "liberal bubbles" creating "safe spaces" and offering "trigger warnings" for any ideas that might make us uncomfortable, the likelihood of encountering strange ideas is rapidly diminishing. The likelihood of having good strategies for encountering the strange is diminishing apace.

There is a potential answer to the problem of the human antipathy to strangeness in a somewhat strange place: a single line usually overlooked in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. You may be thinking a 400-year-old English play about a Danish prince avenging his father's murder has nothing to teach us about encountering something new in the 21st century, but resist that antipathy to strangeness for a moment.

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The line comes near the end of the first act. King Hamlet's ghost has just returned from the grave to tell Prince Hamlet his father was murdered. The younger Hamlet's friend Horatio, who doesn't believe in ghosts but has just seen one with his own eyes, voices the unanchored feeling we have when we encounter something new and unexpected which requires us to rethink the world: "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!" (1.5.167). The keyword here is *strange*, which comes from the Latin *extrāneus* and the prefix *extra*, meaning "outside" ("strange, *adj.*"). You can hear the word *terrain* in *extrāneus*: the two words are not etymologically related, but something is extraneous when it comes from outside (*extra*) your homeland (*terrain*). What is strange is foreign and unfamiliar.

Thus, strangeness evokes images of borders and exploration. This is significant because of the ethics of hospitality in the classical age. As related in ancient texts such as the *Odyssey*—which tells the story of a Greek nobleman lost at sea bouncing from island to island as he makes his way back home to his family—when a stranger washed up on your shore in the classical age, the ethics of hospitality required two actions. First, you feed the stranger. Then, you ask him to tell his story. Taken together, these were the twin pillars of hospitality, which the Greeks called *xenia*, from *xenos*, "guest"; thus, we now call hostility to foreigners *xenophobia* ("xenophobia, *n.*").

You need to feed a stranger like Odysseus because he has been battling the elements at sea. First, make sure he doesn't die. Why? Who cares if he dies? It's going to cost us time and money to feed him. Shouldn't we spend those resources on our own people? Yes, if the goal is to maintain the *status quo*, to keep our society exactly as it is. Then let the stranger die.

But the ancients saw strangers as a resource. And if we hold any hope for a better world—"better" in the sense of our understanding of the world coming more into tune with what is real—then the death of the stranger is the death of the possibility of progress. He can tell us about things we haven't seen. That's why, after you feed him, you ask the stranger to tell you his story.

The ideal Greek response to strangers (*xenia*) is obviously very different from the antipathy to strangeness we often express in the modern world (*xenophobia*), and it is these ancient ethics of hospitality that Prince Hamlet invokes in his response to Horatio. If the ghost is "wondrous strange," Hamlet says, "Therefore as a stranger give it welcome" (1.5.168). Treat the strangeness of a new experience that unsettles your understanding of the world, Hamlet says, not by resisting it, but by welcoming it, as the ancients did Odysseus.

Feed this new event; ask it its story. Interact with ideas the way we interact with people. Be hospitable to strangeness. Why? Because the newness of the event in question, while it may at first be threatening to the superiority of our views on life, has the ability to improve those views by expanding our knowledge of reality. Hamlet famously says in the very next lines (1.5.169–70), "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Feed new people, ideas, and events, and ask them to tell their stories. Give what's strange welcome as you would a stranger. By a bizarre coincidence, here the response to strangers is both the problem and the solution. In this word, *strange*, and the social conventions attached to it, is both the instinctual, animalistic fear and aggression toward what is new and different (the problem) and a cultivated, humane response in hospitality and curiosity (the solution). Intellectual *xenia* is the answer to intellectual *xenophobia*.

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How do you feed an idea? First, with facts. When something new becomes true we have to rethink what was previously known. In Shakespeare's time, when it was discovered that the earth is not the center of the universe, the view of humankind as the end-all be-all of existence had to be rethought. Galileo's forced recantation of heliocentrism in 1633 was nothing other than the intellectual xenophobia of the Catholic Church.

On an institutional level, you also feed ideas with funding. The U.S. Congress's refusal to study gun deaths as a public health issue is a refusal to feed a new idea. In contrast, Harvard University pumping money into climate change research can be seen as intellectual hospitality, a feeding of sorts. Climate change denial? Intellectual xenophobia. Filtering long-known facts and ideas through newly discovered ones can lead us to better understand the world and our position in it—"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio"—but only if we welcome what's strange and feed it.

In other words, you tell the idea your story, and then you ask it to tell you its own. You feed it, and it feeds you. To ask an idea to tell you its story is to listen to it, to study it, to learn it, to consider that it has seen things in the world you haven't. New ideas tell stories of intellectual lands beyond the borders of our own minds, and those tales can change the way we tell the stories of ourselves. When I learned in college of the shoddy science behind Alcoholics Anonymous programs, it changed the way I told the story of my struggle with alcohol. Stories of colonialism change the way we tell the story of Christopher Columbus.

If I seem to be listing causes associated with political progressivism, that's because intellectual hospitality is a progressive posture. Where conservatism is definitionally adjacent to xenophobia (the desire to conserve one's culture sometimes easily lapses into antipathy to cultures other than one's own), progressivism yearns for the movement—both individually and collectively—from circumscribed, insular, and tribal ways of thinking to curious, capacious, and exploratory thought.

I realize this claim will be alienating if not nauseating to some readers who identify as conservative. *That's ridiculous. That can't possibly be true.* On the one hand, I would ask conservatives to consider feeding this idea and allowing it to tell you its story, instead of turning it away at your border and building a wall to keep it out.

On the other hand, I implore progressives—professors as much as students—to consider the fact that conservatives are the new strangers on liberal college campuses. They don't need to be shouted down, protested, and silenced. Feed them, and ask them to tell you their story. How strong is your intellectual xenia, really, if it crumbles away when someone doesn't agree? The best way to learn about the world beyond the college bubble—to bring our understanding of things closer in line with reality—is to welcome those who arrive on our shores and listen to their stories.

Conservative immigration policy certainly includes some tenets that can enhance our understanding of intellectual xenia: we need to be alert to the challenges of welcoming strange ideas into the conversation. If we follow the analogy to the immigration of people, strange ideas can create a complex situation where there is sometimes little common understanding of basic truths and values. People from different cultures have different assumptions, customs, and beliefs. Integrating immigrants from other nations can bring those core differences to the surface, sometimes leading to tension, conflict, and violence.

Integrating new ideas in our on-going conversations presents similar challenges. The parley between deep-seated traditions and ideals can ratchet up the heat in our debates. People feeling their ideas and self-worth threatened can retreat into polarized camps where defending one's identity is more important than working together. And, yes, strange ideas can cause violence if not properly subjected to scrutiny when crossing into our terrain. But let's not forget that an open invitation to strangers—chiseled into the Statue of Liberty—is one of the oldest American values that we seek to conserve.

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Ultimately, for conservatives and progressives alike, intellectual hospitality is about the shift from political to analytical thought: from the effort to affirm the self to the effort to understand the other. Our sense of self-worth is usually tied up with an affirmation of our already established beliefs, but the ethics of hospitality breaks this connection. Hospitality allows us to affirm the self without rejecting the other because we can take pride in the generosity we show: our embrace of the other is what makes us great. We can enhance our understanding of the world without sacrificing the sense of superiority that leads to the antipathy to strangeness in the first place. Hospitality, as a superior form of action to xenophobia, allows us to overcome the resistance to strangeness that self-affirmation usually entails by affirming the value of both the self and the other. ☐

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