My mother once told me that her mother, out on the “homestead” in northern Saskatchewan, never refused a meal to a stranger showing up on the doorstep because that stranger might be Christ returned. I remember being surprised at the evangelical note struck by this story, which contrasted sharply with what I had experienced of my grandmother’s otherwise quiet and ritualistic Catholic religiosity. Of course, the story also resonated because it confirmed a cliché about the Depression and the wandering souls, or “drifters,” of the Prairies. However, I mention it here because this story has stuck with me as a kind of gauge of openness with regard to the presence of others.

I often ask myself, especially after I have refused yet again a request for a small donation from one of the sometimes cheerful, sometimes strangely morose canvassers at my doorstep, perhaps because they usually appear at suppertime, what I would do if the stranger at my door asked for food and shelter. Unlike my grandmother, I know I would find some way to refuse to honour the request directly, although, depending on the circumstances, I would perhaps provide some kind of assistance, such as use of the phone, directions to other, more official channels, perhaps a few dollars. Or perhaps not. Perhaps I would merely close the door with a nod and a smile, as I have so often before. It is difficult to know what I would do, of course, because of the unlikelihood of the particular request, especially considering that the question I ask myself is fed by particular images of the destitute lodged in my imagination. Even now the image that immediately comes to mind is that of a “drifter” at my doorstep, dusty and ragged clothes and all. That, of course, is the point. While my grandmother’s preparedness to feed whatever stranger asked to be fed was certainly buttressed
by the fact that she regularly fed any number of strange men who periodically appeared to help on the farm, and then disappeared, I have no reason to doubt that she would indeed have been open and committed to feeding that "complete stranger."

I have also often thought of that basic and fundamental openness and commitment when, driving as I do every week along some pretty deserted stretches of highway between Sudbury and Ottawa, I consider how I might be received if I trundled up the long, lonely lanes of the few houses I notice from the road to ask for assistance if and when my car broke down. I do have a cell phone, but coverage on some stretches of the highway is spotty at best, although, interestingly, it has improved in the past few years, confirming yet again the globalizing reach of our world. Especially in the dead of winter, on one of the dark, cold, sometimes late evenings that sometimes catch me on the road, I would like to think that the circumstances and relative isolation by themselves would create a situation that would make my appearance less easy to dismiss than that essentially similar appearance on my own front door in the suburbs. I am not sure, however, and I am somewhat disturbed by that uncertainty. That again is the point. What sense can we make of those situations that we find disturbing, for which no ready answer makes itself available? What happens when we focus on them? What do they reveal about the way our commitments and expectations operate in our thinking?

If I return to my example, is there any reason that I should expect to be received and helped with less hesitation by a person inhabiting an isolated house in a remote part of the country than I expect of myself when I contemplate someone on my doorstep in the suburbs? Aside from what this might say about me personally—which, I must admit, does not speak well for my altruistic inclinations when put on paper, though I am only trying to be honest—might there not be certain expectations built into these two situations that might say something about how expectations get folded into the very structuring of the way we work out our relations to others, especially when those others are strangers to us?

Apparently there are no statutes, at least in the common-law provinces of Canada, that impose a legal obligation to provide assistance to others. I cannot, therefore, have a legal expectation that I would be helped by anyone in one of the few houses I can see from the highway. Yet I retain a certain expectation that I would be helped, an expectation that, again, I do not extend to the suburban setting. Why? As I mentioned above, I drive down this stretch of highway every week and the isolated houses have become somewhat familiar to me over the years. I am also invariably surprised when I notice dwellings that I have not noticed before, usually in the winter when the canopy of leaves is not there to conceal them—dwellings further back from the road, or tucked away behind
rocks or copes. These unnoticed dwellings contrast quite sharply with those other dwellings that manifest themselves openly to the highway with its passing traffic, some of them delightfully strewn with coloured lights around Christmas. The driveways of the latter open invitingly out onto the highway and no doubt I would choose, if choice there was, one of those snow-blown driveways and brightly lit houses as a target for my solicitation if and when I needed help. Indeed, one might say that those particular houses, set close to the highway and in plain view, contribute to my expectation, because they are in fact inviting in their disposition. Some of them are even quite showy, and I have no doubt that my sudden appearance on the doorstep of one of them would be no cause for alarm. Especially after nightfall, the lights that shine from these houses appear as beacons of humanity in the surrounding wilderness. More than that: if these dwellings have been built so close to the highway and with such an evident opening out onto the highway, it is, no doubt, partly because they are affirming a link and connection to the flow of that highway. The driveway flows out onto the highway as much as the highway flows into these driveways, as tributaries flow from the main stream. If I am drawn to these particular dwellings, it is because they have disposed themselves as open to me.

Now, contrast this with a typical suburban streetscape, with its rows and bays and crescents of very similarly constructed houses bunched together on narrow lots. Although they can similarly be decked out at Christmas time and the snow is meticulously blown or shovelled off their driveways, their openness onto their streets is nowhere as inviting as those highway homes described above. Indeed, the very conception of twisting and turning the streets into crescents and bays is meant to discourage through traffic and the passing by of strangers, while the highway, of course—in my example, the Trans-Canada Highway—is meant to provide a route for those passing through. Consequently, the expectation that I might have of doors opening more than a crack or a head-width as my request for help is evaluated is quite different. Again, what I am pointing out here is not intended as a comment on the individuals who occupy any of these homes. Any given person might open their door wide and be extremely helpful in all kinds of ways. I am talking about the physical disposition of the homes themselves and what they can be said to manifest. Crowded together in the suburbs, these dwellings nevertheless affirm their privacy and independence. Indeed, though they may be built a mere body length apart from each other, they are advertised as “single” and “detached,” and priced accordingly, each being meant to be the proverbial “castle” for its owner. This independence and the presupposition of privacy that such homes are meant to display are perhaps most succinctly expressed by the discreet manner in which a few of them display their willingness to be open to others by placing “Neighbourhood Watch” posters in their front windows.
I have devoted this much space to describing these two different types of dwelling in order to suggest that our expectations can be embodied in various ways and, in fact, can be very diffuse for the most part, only congealing, as it were, in particular contexts, such as would arise if and when my car broke down at night. If I can expect help from the isolated dwelling on the highway, it is because the very inhabitation in such a remote spot, but one nevertheless within sight of the main thoroughfare, itself signals a preparedness to receive such visitations. Again, a particular individual may refuse to recognize such an expectation on the part of the visitor, and I am not claiming that there is any kind of binding obligation upon them, only trying to point out that that individual would be mistaken to be surprised by such an expectation. In contrast, the suburban dwellings, in their somewhat forced “single” and “detached” independence, are constructed in such a way as to discourage such expectations, so that if perchance my car broke down on one of these crescents late in the evening, I should not be surprised if my solicitation was greeted with considerable suspicion, if not outright hostility. That is not to condone such hostility: I am merely concerned with the logic of expectation.

This discussion of the ways in which some of our expectations of helpfulness from others, or the lack of it, can be translated in terms of social space can be framed within a more general consideration of hospitality. Here we turn to another essay by Kant, “Perpetual Peace” (1795), in which he attempts to articulate and set out in a series of articles the basic rational tenets that would need to be understood and respected if peace among human beings is to be envisaged in any lasting sense. This piece is in many ways a continuation of the speculative effort in his “Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View.” There, as we have seen, Kant argued for the telos of a “universal civic community,” which, as he recognized in the seventh thesis of that essay, is “dependent upon the problem of a lawful external relation among states.” “Perpetual Peace” can and should be read as contributing to the attempt to solve that problem.

The third of the “definitive articles for a perpetual peace” that Kant proposes in this essay states that: “The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality.” Kant means to move the question of hospitality away from mere sensibility, or an arbitrary dependence on particular dispositions, into the realm of legal recognition. He goes on to explain what he means by hospitality:

Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. One may refuse to receive him when this can be done without causing his destruction; but, so long as he peacefully occupies his place, one may not treat him with hostility. It is not the right to be a permanent visitor.
that one may demand. A special beneficent agreement would be needed in order to give an outsider a right to become a fellow inhabitant for a certain length of time. It is only a right of temporary sojourn, a right to associate, which all men have. They have it by virtue of their common possession of the surface of the Earth, where, as a globe, they cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other. Originally, no one had more right than another to a particular part of the Earth [my emphasis].

Kant’s understanding of hospitality raises a number of interesting questions. Although it is clear that his own definition considers the hospitality that we owe others to be conditional, and that he would like to see the conditions for hospitality lawfully and rationally codified, his justification for considering hospitality at all can lend itself to an unconditional interpretation. That is, if it is the case that, “Originally, no one had more right than another to a particular part of the Earth,” then one might say that the “original” condition of our relations to one another is an open one, in which no one has a particular claim against another for occupying exclusively a particular piece of the Earth’s surface.

Of course, this “original” condition is not our actual one. Our actual condition is one that is structured in very specific ways, indeed in very specific legal ways. Yet the very specificity of these legal structures leads one to question their claim to be universal, applying to everyone equally. Laws are, after all, formulated by lawmakers in response to particular contingent circumstances and they are bound to reflect those circumstances. This is why we appeal to lawyers when we are faced with legal matters. We need them to help us interpret what the law is actually saying in its own peculiar language about our always particular situations.

Buying a house, for example—that is, in Kantian terms, making a claim to a particular piece of the surface of the Earth as constituting our home—is an elaborate, even arcane, process, the details of which many homeowners do not bother to master as long as they are suitably convinced that they are the legal “owners” of their home. What does it mean to be the “owner” of one’s home? In the context of the foregoing discussion, it means that I am the one who decides who is allowed to enter it, to cross its threshold, as I open the door first a crack, then the width of a human face, then the width of human shoulders, and finally sufficiently wide to let a body pass through. Ownership, then, sets up the conditions of hospitality, or at least of conditional hospitality.

As Meyda Yegenoglu argues (in her “Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization”) conditional hospitality
is offered at the owner's place, home, nation, state, or city—this is, at a place where he is defined as the master and where unconditional hospitality or unconditional trespassing of the door is not possible. The host, the non-guest, the one who accepts, the one who offers hospitality, the one who welcomes, is the owner of a home and therefore is the master of the home.

At least, this is how things look when one attempts to codify both hospitality and ownership. However, one need not own a home in order to have one. If it is true that hospitality presupposes hosts in their home, absent explicit codification, their home might merely be demarcated by the space they occupy, a space that remains their space in the sense that they can expect to return to it after they have left it. Home is here understood as a “private” space where one finds shelter from the exigencies of a wider world, that space that Georges Duby describes, in *A History of Private Life* (Volume I, p. viii), as:

> a zone of immunity to which we may fall back and retreat, a place where we may set aside arms and armour needed in the public place, relax, take our ease, and lie about unshielded by the ostentatious carapace worn for protection in the outside world.

Such private spaces are constructed or, perhaps better stated, carved out of the world, sometimes with considerable difficulty and only relative success, at any stage of one’s life.

Take, for example, a situation masterfully described by Anita Brookner in her most recent novel, *Leaving Home*. The passage in question describes an occasion when the protagonist, a young woman in her twenties, having met an older, recently divorced man at a party (the party having been arranged in part for precisely this purpose), is invited after dinner in a restaurant to have coffee in the man’s home. The host leaves the room and the guest observes (p. 87):

> I took the opportunity of his absence in the kitchen to look round the room from which he was anxious to escape. I understood his reluctance to spend a Sunday afternoon here. It appeared to be half-furnished: perhaps his wife had carried off the more attractive pieces. The house was handsome enough in its flat-fronted way from the outside, but gloomy within. Dark stairs led up to this first-floor drawing-room, which seemed redolent of absence. Three widely spaced armchairs and a small round table were marooned on a hardwood floor, throwing into stark relief a set of unembellished shelves. Dull striped curtains, of an obviously expensive material, obscured much of the light, although the day had been sunny. Now I was aware of a chill which seemed not so much physical as emotional. Yet he was not obviously deprived; his conversation had if anything been bracing. I thought that he had made a respectable job of his semi-widowed state, and gave no sign of torment, though
Indeed, she takes her leave very soon after having her coffee, neither of them being ready to pursue their budding acquaintance within the context of a home that the legal owner is still in the process of “mastering.” What I think this passage can be said to reveal is that, within any context of conditional hospitality that structures our interactions with others, there is also a sense of the basic openness and vulnerability to others that describes an unconditional hospitality or human openness to other humans based, in Kant’s words, on our “common possession of the surface of the Earth,” the surface upon which we are called to interact merely by the fact that we find ourselves here, at any particular time, and in the particular space we find ourselves occupying. In other words, an unconditional hospitality is one that acknowledges the basic vulnerability at the heart of our attempts to live out our own lives among others. That acknowledgement, perhaps epitomized in the taking into one’s home of a newborn life, quickly becomes a structured set of particular norms and rules and ways that, ideally, are meant to shore up this essential vulnerability, but can never replace it.

My grandmother gave birth to ten children. I can hardly imagine what that means, although, of course, at the very least it meant feeding many mouths. Much of her life was given over to the feeding of those hungry mouths. The home she maintained and the time she lived in were built on an understanding of the importance of hospitality, but her particular openness to any stranger shows that she understood how the notion of hospitality in itself, as Jacques Derrida argued in his essay “Hospitality,” is one that cannot sustain itself. It “implodes” by insisting on a conditionality that undermines it. Derrida writes (pp. 4–5):

“This is the principle, one could say the aporia, of both the constitution and the implosion of the concept of hospitality... Hospitality is a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only self-destruct spur otherwise, produce itself as impossible, only be possible on the condition of its impossibility or protect itself from itself, auto-immunize itself in some way, which is to say, deconstruct itself—precisely—in being put into practice.”

That is, by unconditionally opening her home to the “complete strangers,” my grandmother was in effect not treating her home as a home, as a private space
of immunity and self-preservation. If the door is always open, then there is no door and, if there is no door, then there is no hospitality. Or rather, as Derrida writes (p. 14):

To take up the figure of the door, for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. There is no hospitable house. There is no house without doors and windows. But as soon as there are doors and windows, it means that someone has the keys to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality. There must be a threshold. But if there is a threshold, there is no longer hospitality. This is the difference, the gap, between the hospitality of invitation and the hospitality of visitation. In visitation there is no door. Anyone can come at any time and can come in without needing a key for the door. There are no customs checks with a visitation. But there are customs and police checks with an invitation. Hospitality thus becomes the threshold or the door.

If I think again of my grandmother, she was quite literally leaving the door open for a “visitation,” in her terms an otherworldly one, in my terms here one of basic and fundamental worldliness, of the basic fact of worldliness, that we all are born into a world that only then, if it accepts us, begins to shape us and that we attempt to shape. Whatever those shapes turn out to be—good, bad, powerful, lost, bored, troubled, troubling, erratic, inspiring, consistent, puzzling, ordinary, extraordinary—they presuppose and embody a basic openness to others. As Kant says, “Originally, no one had more right than another to a particular part of the Earth.”

I have used these pages to discuss Kant, Derrida and my grandmother because they show, through their understanding of the notion of hospitality and its inherent limits, what lies at the heart of, and at the same time delimits, the notions of “culture” and “society” as these continue to be challenged by a world that is becoming increasingly multicultural. Such a world, a world of increasing migration and resettlement, challenges us to think anew what it means to claim to be “at home.” Is it to defend a threshold? Or does it mean that we should be more willing to open our doors to those who find themselves outside? Or perhaps we are called upon to question and think anew the very notions of a “threshold” and of an “outside.” As Kant says, the very fact that we inhabit a globe implies that we “cannot infinitely disperse and hence must finally tolerate the presence of each other.” Is such tolerance the basic expectation that our increasingly multicultural world demands? Or might we not expect something more from recognizing the presence of each other?