

Home by Deb Downey

This week I had several opportunities to reflect on what it means to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself. Jesus said it was one of the two most important commandments, and I suspect that's not because it benefits our neighbor but, rather, because it benefits us.

We need to be in relationship. It's how we're wired as humans. But, being human, we also mess it up.

While Googling resources for this sermon, I came across the words of the Baptist minister, S. M. Henriques. He refers to Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul points out, to the arguing community, that the body of Christ is made up of many parts, just like our human body is. That all parts need to work together. AND that each part is different.

The Corinthians looked at each other and noticed how different each of them was from the other. They were allowing their differences to **divide** them. But these differences are designed by God. Paul tried to explain, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'"

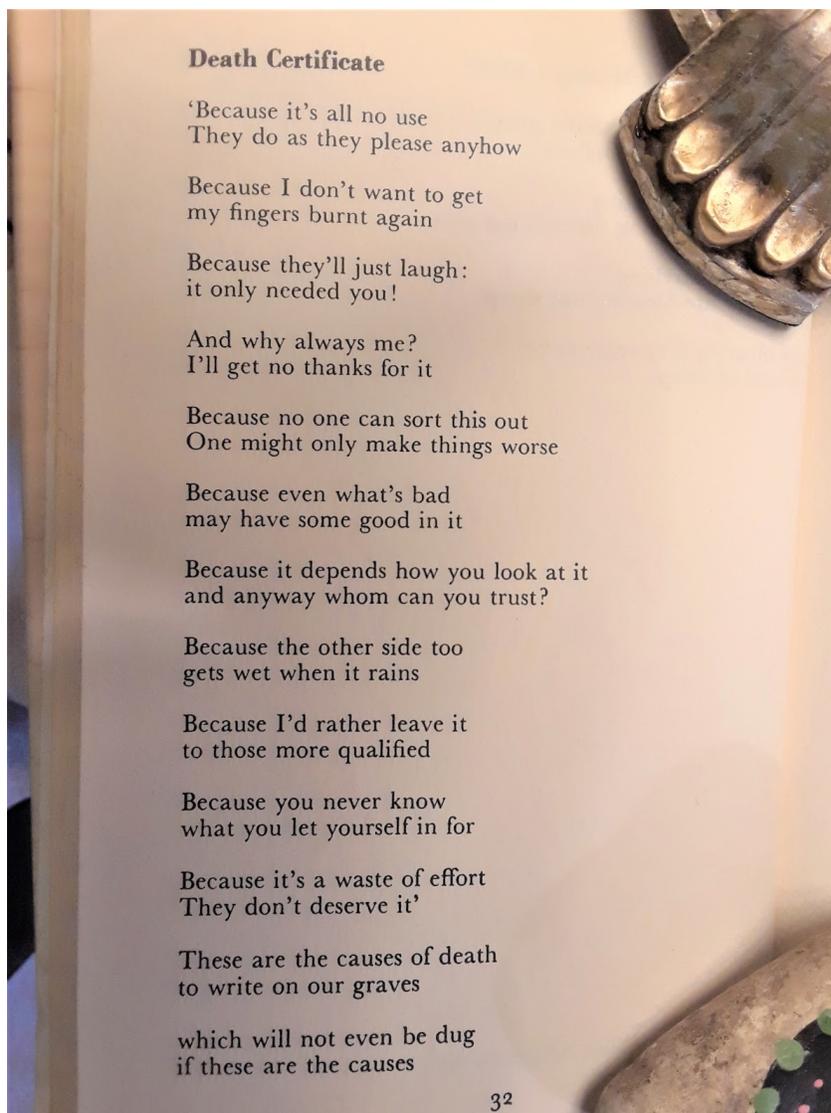
"The key to understanding this truth is to see that every one of us is an individual. But too often we fall into the same attitude trap as did the Corinthians. We act as though we believe everyone should be just like we are. They must act like us, talk like us, believe the same things we do, do the same things we do the **way** we do them, **when** we do them . . . They must have the same opinions, and when they do not, we are offended. When they do not conform to us, we act as though their elevator does not go all the way to the top – or if it does, it does not stop at every floor!"

Because we humans are so diverse, we *need* each other. Need is a strong word. It reminds me of Maslow's Hierarchy and, yep, Maslow lists the need for love and belonging - just above our need for safety, which is just above our physiological needs.

In light of the U.S. government's decision to incarcerate people who seek asylum – and to separate children from their families – this seems like a time to ask, *what happens to us when we decide we don't need these diverse others? When we decide that Love Your Neighbor doesn't apply here?*

I propose that when we decide we don't need *particular* others, or a group of particular others, we become armored, defended, and protective. We usually have to convince ourselves that these others are dangerous in some way. We tell ourselves stories about them, perhaps based on our own experience, or perhaps based on generalized fear. We use the stories to justify our actions or lack of actions.

I ran across a poem the other day that I didn't like, but have to share 😊



By Erich Fried in *100 Poems Without a Country*

While I'm reading things to you, I want to share this letter, from Sheena Tran to Joni Ernst:

"My mother and father were born into the Vietnam War; during the end of the war they were forced to move around, country to country, until they were able to be sponsored in the United States. My father was sponsored to live in California, but only for a little while as he and my grandmother moved to Iowa for better job opportunities. My mother was already sponsored in Iowa and she worked as a waitress.

My mother eventually became a nail technician and my father a mechanic for an envelope company, but of course they did not live the American dream. They lived through discrimination, racism, and unjust means of inequality. This was not a pursuit of happiness for them, but rather a pursuit of success for their children. For me.

It took years for my mother and father to perfect their English but still, it is not enough for some Americans who would rather hear English without an accent, or rather, for the xenophobic Americans who discourage immigrants/refugees from coming into our country. My parents were not able to live in Vietnam because of an amplification of violence caused by Americans, but even as America became their ironic savior, they still receive hate and prejudice because of their skin color, their accent, their first language, their culture, and because of who they are.

No one deserves disrespect like this, let alone an immigrant trying to survive in a cruel world. My mother wasn't even an American citizen until 30 years after she came to the United States, which says more about the system rather than the immigrants. Even if immigrants are crossing over without documents, America gives the right to due process to everyone in the country, not only citizens, and that's because the U.S. constitution can apply to non-citizens as well. I believe that we shouldn't be turning away people who need the help and who need the opportunities.

Immigrants aren't stealing our jobs or our neighborhoods. Most of the money in the economy is made from immigrants! They are given little to no respect while having little

to no pay with their careers as well, which are both unnecessary evils. They labor, have to survive, rather than have the privilege to actually live their lives, and they prove to be more hardworking than American citizens themselves. They actually want to be in America! Can you believe that? And ripping families apart is not going to fix this immigration problem.

And to be clear, the problem isn't the number of immigrants trying to come inside of the United States. The problem is the high number we are turning away. The problem is deportation. The problem is the injustice. It's the citizenship all immigrants coming into the U.S. deserve but are not getting.

Children are inside internment camps while being caged like zoo animals. The government treats animals better than actual human beings. They aren't getting soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes, or even a place to sleep. If that doesn't scream inhumane or harmful to those children, then what does? That's why we need to close these camps. And we need to close them now. Thank you for reading my message. Sincerely, Sheena Tran." Sheena is 17 years old. Her high school teacher, Petra Lange, brought the letter to Joni Ernst's office on Tuesday as part of the Moms Against the Camps action.

I learned about Moms Against the Camps from the Newton UCC Pastor. She couldn't attend, but Julia was there. We started Monday night with an organizing meeting – my first ever. I figured it'd be a bunch of middle-aged women, like me and Julia, but no. We were definitely the seniors; nearly everyone else had a young child. As people told why they were there, I fought back tears. They reminded us that not only are children being separated from their families – they're being poorly cared for. Five have died. These moms are willing to stand up because they don't want anyone's child to suffer.

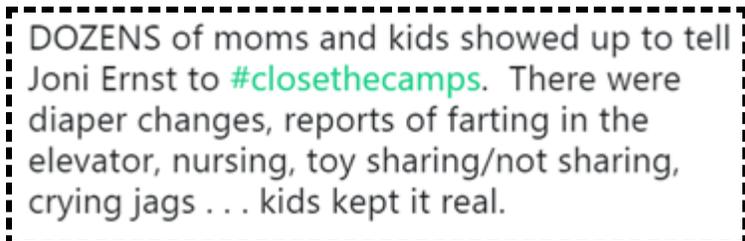
Why was I there? Because I recently learned about the effects of childhood trauma, while writing a research paper. According to the CDC and others who have done similar studies, multiple traumas cause a child's stress response system (known as the fight-flight-or-freeze response) to be triggered so often that it remains on at all times.

This toxic stress damages their brains and immune systems. We have a humanitarian emergency! Children should not be separated from parents and, in cases where it's absolutely necessary, they sure as heck shouldn't be kept in the conditions that exist at present. As Julia said, "Atrocities are being committed."

So, on Tuesday afternoon I joined about fifty adults and children at the Federal Building. At first, the officials were going to allow five people at a time to go upstairs and talk to Joni's staffers. But with a lobby full of kids, they decided we should all go on up. We waited in the hall outside her office, and about 10 people at a time were able to go in. We took turns telling her staff why we were there. Here's my favorite video from that experience.

VIDEO: <https://youtu.be/uoVZQ7JMDns>

Throughout the afternoon more people came, around 100 in all. There was an air of determination. For someone like me, who loves children, it was bliss. I mostly sat on the floor, chatting and handing out markers. On Twitter, Julia wrote:



DOZENS of moms and kids showed up to tell Joni Ernst to #closethecamp. There were diaper changes, reports of farting in the elevator, nursing, toy sharing/not sharing, crying jags . . . kids kept it real.

Near the end of the day Rev. Alejandro prayed, and afterward I was able to express my gratitude to the moms, to tell them how touched I was by their willingness to bring their babies and speak out.

Joni's staff said she couldn't talk to us on the phone that day, but would do so the next day. (A handful of people stayed and insisted . . . and talked to her.)

The next day, Wednesday, we began outside with a press conference and then moved into a meeting room. About 40 people were there. I think everyone, Joni included, was

disappointed in the experience. Joni was upset that she wasn't getting to respond in full before she was interrupted. We were disappointed that she wanted to talk about things like "being a nation of laws" (to which a 9 year-old boy said, "Laws aren't always right. We've had bad laws, like slavery and stuff.")

The Moms Against the Camps were able to make some good points, and I'm sure Joni could hear the passion. She said twice that she is opposed to abuse; she doesn't support abuse. However, she said that since she wasn't getting to talk she was going to end the conversation. Bummer.

Before leaving that day I said to one of Joni's staff members, "It's really not Joni's fault – she's not a teacher, and she's not a psychiatrist – so she may not understand what trauma does to the brain. When she talks about abuse I imagine she is like most people and thinks of physical or sexual abuse. However, we know that when children are deprived of the right stimulation and nurturing their brains don't develop properly. Also, trauma can create other problems. I had a student who had been in the same school since he was four years old. When he was in third grade and the fire alarm went off, he still clung to me, whimpering, while his classmates lined up and walked out into the hall."

The staffer said (and I'm paraphrasing), "Oh, it's like the people who adopted children from Russia! The kids looked normal, but then when something happened that reminded them of the past, they had extreme reactions. And that was because they were in those orphanages without good care."

"Exactly!" And I asked him to please convey that idea to Joni, and I left him with a research article. Why did I have the article with me? Because I was guided in prayer that morning to bring it.

There's a body of research around resiliency and children, and it's safe to conclude the single biggest factor determining resiliency in "children under diverse risk conditions is the presence of a strong, supportive relationship with at least one adult that shows a sustained degree of continuity and consistency."

I know a couple of us here grew up in "diverse risk conditions." Thank God for people who reached out, right? For me there were grandmas when I was little, a neighbor who took me to church when I was in middle school, and then a high school teacher who was safe and had high expectations. Mr. Larsen.

We may have mixed feelings about the Internet, but it can help provide community, too, as well as vital information. For example, a parent whose child has a rare condition would be unlikely to gain specific information from a local support group. However, by joining an online disability-specific group, they can talk to other parents who have similar situations.

I felt like a community grew up around me this week - something I didn't expect, but needed. It was mournful work to be thinking about and talking about children who are suffering. Community is one of the ways I see God's hand in things. On Tuesday I met one of Alice's very favorite co-workers, who took time off to speak up as a mom. Late that afternoon I Facebook messaged Senator Claire Celsi, whom I'd never met, to ask if she could attend the second day of action, because not everyone could come back. She immediately said yes! Also on the second day I got to spend time with Carmen Lampe-Zeitler who I hadn't seen in a while. She was the Director of CFUM for many years.

In fact, the last time I saw Carmen was at a Dances of Universal Peace Retreat, and we learned a song together. I won't sing it, but it's based on this Rumi poem, which I'll end with.

The Clear Bead at the Center

By Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi

The Clear Bead at the Center
changes everything.
There are no edges to my loving now.

I've heard it said, there's a window
that opens from one mind to another.
But if there is no wall
there is no need for a window,
And if there is no window,
there is no need for a latch.