

Hard plans changing a hard heart: Empathy for immigrants fearing deportation

When I worked as a lobbyist, I dealt with no issue more wrapped up in emotion and anxiety than immigration. It was the only one I ever had people call and scream at me about, it was the only one that tested my personal relationships, it was the only one that made me feel attacked and betrayed.

But it was also the only issue to really change something in my heart.

Having come from a conservative background, there was something in me that was wary of the immigration question – not opposed, exactly, to immigrants or immigration, but cautious, skeptical, reluctant. Soon after diving into the issue, however, my heart was changed. It was changed by the warmth of the immigrants I encountered and by their anxiety too; it was changed by their stories, their hopes, and their fears.

It was also changed by their plans.



A woman holds a child's hand as they arrive for a rally in support of immigrants' rights in New York City Dec. 18, 2016. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

There is nothing from that immigrant-advocacy period of my life that has stuck with me more than the memory of undocumented immigrants making contingency plans for their own arrest, imprisonment, and deportation. It's not anything I'd ever had cause to think about before: I mean, if somebody's doing something illegal, how much is there to think about? They get arrested and they're locked up or sent away – end of story. Right? (Wrong.)

Back then, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) was conducting a series of workplace raids that had the immigrant community very nervous. We are a social animal, we humans – we do not live on our own. We live in families, in friendships, in neighborhoods and communities. We have responsibilities. People depend on us. We help others and we (hate to) ask for help ourselves. So when I say that the immigrant community was nervous, I don't just mean that undocumented immigrants were nervous; I mean that their documented and citizen family members were nervous, their schools and churches were nervous, their friends and neighbors

and daycare providers were nervous.

The advocates I worked with offered training to immigrants to prepare them for the raids. They helped people to understand what their rights were, what they were and weren't legally required to say and do. They encouraged them to prepare for the possibility of arrest: Put your documents in order; keep them in a safe place; tap a friend or family member to retrieve them in your absence. Organize your financial responsibilities - your rent or mortgage, your insurance, your car and phone and utility bills. Set aside some money to pay the most essential ones.

And here's the kicker, the one that chokes me up every time I think of it: arrange for someone to pick up your kids from school. Do not leave your children to come to the end of the school day and find no one there to get them because Mommy's been detained by ICE. Identify a person you trust, in whose care you can leave your children, and ask them to take on that responsibility - possibly for a long time.

I recently found myself struggling with an issue that, while not important in the grand scheme of things, was causing me real anxiety on a daily basis. It struck at my sense of security; it made me feel less than whole. One afternoon as I walked across my back yard, I felt as though I were being swarmed by this issue, like my pack of needy children were chasing me, clamoring for my attention.

Suddenly I stopped short, remembering those immigrant families who don't know from one day to the next when one of them will be taken. Talk about insecurity, about not feeling whole - can you imagine fearing, day after day, that your husband could be taken from you? That you could be taken from your children? Can you imagine the anxiety of not knowing how long your family will remain intact?

These days too many people know that anxiety. With ICE broadening its enforcement targets to include those arrested or convicted of even minor crimes, it's been estimated that three-quarters of undocumented immigrants now find themselves prioritized for deportation. (Not because undocumented immigrants are more prone to crime than you or I, but because "minor crimes" include even some traffic violations - and of course the flubs people make when they don't have legal access to documentation like Social Security numbers.)

This is why so many in immigrant communities across our nation are anxious right now. They're having to plan for the possibility that their families - their very lives - will be torn apart. What a thing to plan for.

I think that we - as Christians, as descendants of yesterday's immigrants, as people who have the luxury of expecting our life to continue along the path we've set out on - ought to dwell on those plans right now. We ought to think on what we would do and how we would feel if we were suddenly plucked from the home, the work, the family we love. We ought to have empathy for and mercy on those who find themselves in that position today.



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