Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



Susan Francois, in blue, stands in the intersection by the Federal Building. (Susan Whitsell)



by Susan Rose Francois

NCR Contributor

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I was in sixth grade, the day I found out — not in history class or from my parents, but from a novel I'd checked out of the library. I remember waiting for my Mom to get home from work so that I could spring my indignation upon her.

"Why didn't you tell me? You knew, and you never told me," I said. In my memory, I'm shaking my head, both disappointed and angry. I may have cried, or at least shed a tear. She looked blankly at me, no idea what I was talking about.

"How did you let me get this old before I learned that we locked up innocent people during World War II, including children. And grandparents. And babies! Locked up in America! And I had to learn it myself from a book!"

I'm pretty sure I stomped off, not giving my mother a chance to try to explain the shameful history of the estimated 120,000 people rounded up by executive order. Taken from their schools, business and homes, these people of Japanese descent, more than half American citizens, were relocated to inhospitable, cramped and dry places, like repurposed racetracks not meant for human occupation, and held under armed guard for the duration of the war. The novel I'd been reading was about a child in one such family that lived in a small partitioned room in a race-track that they could never keep clean from all the dust, dirt and mud.

These adults and children were considered unworthy foreigners and enemies — even those that weren't — and were therefore not to be trusted by the government and the American people. My 10- or 11-year-old self found it so hard to comprehend that we could treat other human beings that way in the not so distant past. It broke my heart in a way that obviously stays with me, the memory being so vivid even now.

In truth, I've always been haunted by that early memory of discovery of the shadow side of our history. Later in life, when I moved to the Pacific Northwest, I made a friend whose family had been interned. He told me that his grandparents had never really gotten over the experience, especially after losing their hard-worked land. Yet he also told another story, about a relative whose neighbor had tended his farm while his family were in the camps and helped him get back ownership after the war. Finally, he regaled me with how his parents met and courted in the internment

camp. His story was embedded in this history. Even where there is social sin, there is goodness and life.

I found myself thinking of this memory of discovery of our national shadow side last week, when I participated in the Catholic Day of Action for immigrant children in Newark, New Jersey. I was one of the more than 50 folks who risked arrest that day.

My decision to participate was not taken lightly. While most of us in the end were not arrested, we might have been. I had never risked arrest before, although I have certainly demonstrated many times for peace through justice. I seriously discerned and prayed with the possibility of participating in the civil disobedience action outside the Federal Building where Immigration and Customs Enforcement has an office. It felt important, critical even, to do this at this time.

Part of my reflection was not that different from my sixth-grade self. I find it so hard to comprehend that we can treat children and families so inhumanely today. It breaks my heart that children are separated from their parents, detained in devastating conditions, cages even, with only aluminum blankets to keep them warm. Even those that are in slightly better conditions are still locked up in sterile environments, away from their families — children. What truly breaks my heart even further is that we, the people of this country, know it is happening in our name.

We know that it is happening in our name, and yet, collectively, we stand by. Perhaps it is because we don't know what to do, or maybe we feel powerless or numb from so much inhumanity. Some may think this inhumane treatment is justified, and for such souls I pray for conversion of heart.

For the past few weeks, I have not been able to get out of my heart and mind the viral video of 11-year-old Magdalena Gomez Grigorio, crying out for the release of her dad who was swept up in the immigration raids in Mississippi this summer. She reminded me of some kids I know in mixed status families. She was so real, so human, such a loving daughter, alone and missing her Dad. She was about the same age I was the day I learned about Japanese internment. Sadly, she learned about the shadow side of our history-in-the-making firsthand in the worst way.

Dallas Urban video on YouTube of Magdalena Gomez Grigorio

Her strength to stand up and cry out for the release of her father changed me. She gave me the strength to stand in solidarity with her, her father, and all the families torn apart by our broken and inhumane immigration system. And so on September 4, I marched with 400 other Catholics and people of goodwill to the Federal Building.

We listened to speeches and stories, including a grandmother named Angela Lopez with her grandchildren who happened upon us while she waited for her daughter, the children's mother, who was inside for a meeting with ICE officers regarding a deportation order. She expressed the strength we gave her, simply by being there, and she joined us in prayer, lying down to help form the human cross in the street.

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I cannot explain the connection I felt during the civil disobedience action. I was on the opposite end of the street from the speakers, so I could not really hear the stories being read about the seven children who have died in detention since December. I simply stood in the intersection and prayed, joining in the communal Hail Mary's between the stories.

Like the others risking arrest, I wore a picture of one of the children — 16-year-old Juan de Léon Gutiérrez. I prayed for Magdalena, Angela, Juan, and all the other families suffering from inhumane policies. I prayed that they experience goodness and life in the midst of such uncertainty. I prayed for a change to our unjust immigration policies. I prayed for strength for the people of this country to join in saying: "Not in my name."

I cannot stand by while these inhumane things are done in my name. I am called, pushed even, to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters — to pray, act and speak out. I have a feeling my 6-year-old self would join me.



Those willing to risk arrest at the protest gather at St. Mary's Church before the procession to the Federal Building in Newark, New Jersey. (Frank McCann)

[Susan Rose Francois is a member of the Congregation Leadership Team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. She was a Bernardin scholar at Catholic Theological Union and has ministered as a justice educator and advocate. Read more of her work on her blog, At the Corner of Susan and St. Joseph.]