Columns
Horizons
Social Justice



Sr. Tracey Horan and her imaginative niece, Eliza (Provided photo)



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"Pretend the tigers are surrounding you. And then you try to run." I glanced down at my 5-year-old niece with a smirk, both impressed at the intensity of her imagination and a little annoyed by her authoritative tone. During my home visit last month, I jumped at the chance to spend time with my nieces. Sometimes this means hours of imaginary play.

"Eliza, maybe someone else has an idea about what they want to play," I said, mostly wanting to avoid running around in the backyard muddied by a rain the day before. "Ughhhh!" Eliza growled throwing her arms in exasperation, "No one ever wants to play what I want to play!" I responded that that wasn't true, that we had been following her lead for the past hour (enacting a dramatic scene about a lost spider monkey, which she directed play by play). She sighed audibly, getting even more fired up: "How would YOU feel if no one wanted to listen to YOUR ideas?!"

Uh oh, here we go. The classic, "How would you feel?" move. I wonder where she learned that one? I looked over at her, taken aback by her strategic retort and not quite sure how to respond. Her question gave me pause. It forced me to stop and consider this moment in Eliza's young life. The week before, she had welcomed a new baby into the family, meaning the attention of her parents and relatives, which was previously half hers, was now divided into three. And, of course, given the needs of a newborn, it couldn't be evenly divided. As the second of five children, I could relate. Younger siblings, as much as we love them, change things.

Eliza was in the middle of a family transition over which she had no control. She could, however, control the outcome of a certain protagonist fleeing a pride of imaginary lions.

"I don't know," I replied to her. "How does it feel?" "Bad!" she said, kicking the ground. We ended up coming to a compromise Eliza wasn't quite happy with, and I did eventually run from the tigers; but this simple call to imaginative empathy

rooted in connection stuck with me.

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For some years, especially encouraged by my time as a community organizer, I have explored what it is about me and my story that has put a fire for justice in my belly — a drive to stand on the side of David with my slingshot, ready to face Goliath alongside my comrades. My childhood was happy, and I felt loved. I can't point to a particular trauma that informed my imagination about oppression. Yet what I've learned is that as social beings, experiences of exclusion as well as the desire to belong, are common experiences that drive us. Every person I've ever met could name a time they felt they did not belong, that they could not show up as their full authentic selves. And in these common experiences, there is a place in us where we can begin to imagine the pain of exclusion in others.

For me, the first such moment I can place in my memory happened when I was in little league. I was a pretty driven kid, and I wanted more than anything to have the most coveted position on the team, the person who was in on every play: pitcher's helper. (This says something about how little we were: Parents pitched for us!) My dad and I practiced toward this goal. We did 100 throws a day. I was ecstatic when I finally made pitcher's helper. I did not, however, anticipate how a co-ed league would respond to a girl stepping into a lead position. One of my first games as pitcher's helper, I heard laughter and chanting coming from the other team, lined up to bat. I was so serious about my new position that it took me a minute to realize they were making fun of me. They were laughing and yelling about the fact that our team had a girl for a pitcher's helper. What a joke!

I tried to keep my cool, but eventually I ran off the field with tears streaming down my face. My dad came to console me, and I did later return to my position, but the message came through loud and clear: Girls don't belong in the infield.

The sentiment at the core of this statement expresses the root of all social sin. Just fill in the blank: [*group of people*] don't belong [*place, rank, occupation, etc.*]. LGBTQ people don't belong in the Communion line. Black people don't belong walking down my street, especially with their hoods up. Poor people don't belong in high quality schools. People fleeing Central America, especially if they have dark skin or no college degree, don't belong in our country.

Although for some the pain of not belonging is more present in daily life and social structures than for others, we can all fill in the blanks in one way or another, at one moment in our lives. With that, we can touch an awareness within that opens us up to empathy, to imagining the experience of another. And, if we let it, this imagination invites us to stand with others to fight for belonging.

According to the Scriptures, Jesus never directly asked the question, "How would you feel?" He does, however, direct us to treat others as we would like to be treated. Implicit in this commandment is imagining the experience of another as our own.

Jesus weaves this imaginative reflection throughout his teachings as he invites disciples into vivid stories, and then asks them questions about the outcome. When Jesus was challenged about the legality of healing someone on the Sabbath, he asked those gathered to imagine themselves in a similar scenario: "Which one of you who has a sheep that falls into a pit on the sabbath will not take hold of it and lift it out?" (Matthew 12:11)

In his final days before being crucified, as he saw his persecutors circling, he asked his followers, "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" (Matthew 20:22) Could they imagine the weight he was carrying? What would that be like for them?

The teachings of St. Ignatius invite us into this type of imaginative empathy in contemplation of the Scriptures. In the Spiritual Exercises, for example, Ignatius suggests that in contemplating the birth of Jesus, we imagine "the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us."

As social structures ensure we have less and less contact with people whose experiences are different from ours, we lose spaces that nudge us into this empathic imagination. We bristle at imagining how someone from a different side of town, a different religion, a different political party might feel. Mercifully, the Holy One gives us children to remind us of our God-given capacities. As we seek to create spaces of belonging within a divided reality, may the Elizas of the world continue to call us to imagine and to feel with one another.

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