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Detention Deficit Disorder

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Detention Deficit Disorder

Can't We Do Better?

*My encounter with the best and worst of humanity
in a visit to the County Jail*

Liz Rog, Decorah IA

My The only thing that keeps my eyes open tonight is what I saw today at the Clayton County Jail when I took my Guatemalan friend Jose' to see his friend who is a prisoner there. Even if I had no hands with which to type, I would find a way to tell you this story before I sleep.

Have you met Jose'? He is one of the 9 men who have lived in Decorah since November 2008, brought here by the US government after serving 6 months in as many as 16 different federal prisons following the raid on the Postville meatpacking plant. Jose' has a wife and 4 children at home in Guatemala with whom he speaks each week. They lost their home and land as a result of Jose' being in prison for 6 months; the 'coyote' (human trafficker) who had brought him across the border claimed those things when payments to him ceased. His oldest son, 13-year-old Jaime, died suddenly of unknown causes just 2 months after Jose' was brought to Decorah to serve this additional mandatory year away from his family. Anyone who knows Jose' loves him deeply. He is a devout Christian and practices the generosity, compassion, and faith of Christ throughout his days. You walk away from Jose' feeling in love with the world. You walk away from Jose' wondering if you could somehow be so loving, sure, and humble as he.

Today I called Jose' to ask if he wanted to go on a house tour with me. Jose' is a carpenter and has shown curiosity about our home: the solar panels, the corner cupboard, the wooden ceiling. He says he's collecting ideas to use back in Guatemala, when he next has a chance to work on the house of some Americans there. I had the idea to take him and a camera around to my friends' houses, and today looked like the right day for it.

Jose' politely declined. He explained that he had a friend in jail with whom he still had not been able to communicate, and he needed to go visit him.

Of course. I knew about this friend; Jose' had asked me 3 weeks ago to take him to there. I had been unavailable the day he asked, and then had forgotten all about it. I'm going to be honest with you the whole time I write this story: my selfish thought after being reminded about this need of his and the long drive to Elkader was "Darn! I don't *want* to drive there! I want to take him on pleasant visits to my friends' homes!"

But of course I offered to take him there, even as I hoped that he already had another way. I knew from earlier inquiries I'd made to the jail that Jose', as a "convicted felon," would not be allowed under any circumstances to visit with a prisoner. (All of the people taken in the Postville raid were given that conviction in the mass and fast-track trials. As

of May 2009 the supreme court has ruled that it was unconstitutional to convict someone of identity theft unless you can prove that they knowingly used someone else's social security number, but still those 389 people live as convicted felons.) I knew that he would need someone who was a US citizen to go with him and talk to his friend on his behalf. Someone who spoke Spanish. I'm not the only person that knows Jose' who fits this description, but I was the one on the phone with him, and I saw what I needed to do.

I offered to take him, and he gratefully accepted. I hung up feeling slightly sorry for myself, but also glad for any chance to be around Jose'. The prisoner in the Clayton County Jail might as well have been invisible; I didn't even have a passing thought of curiosity about him. It was for Jose' that I would go to Elkader.

So today was Saturday, and I was to pick Jose' up at 1:00 for the 50 minute drive to the detention center. Visitation hours at the jail are Wednesdays and Saturdays from 1:30-3:30. That's all. 15 minute phone visits are allowed, with a thick piece of plexiglass between the prisoner and the visitor, allowing for viewing but not touching. Earlier in the day, I had called the jail to double-check that the friend was still there, and they told me that he wasn't.

Why is it that so many of the people that work in detention centers fit the stereotype for jailers? With apologies to those jailers out there who surely do much better than this, I will tell you that those I've experienced are horrifically infatuated with their power over others. They are cruel and cold. Even on the phone, talking to me - in good old English! - they seem to do their utmost to *not* help, to *not* allow me to feel like a capable and worthy human being. They act as though *I* had done something wrong. I can only imagine how they treat the prisoners. When the jailer told me that Jose's friend was not there, I asked how I could find out to where he had been moved. She said I couldn't. I asked again - surely there's got to be a way to find someone in the prison system, I said. "Wait until he calls you - then he can tell you where he is," said she. But he has no money, so he can't make calls! "I can't help you, she replied.

It is easy to be lost in the US prison system. We have no idea how many are lost there now.

Since we no longer had a destination, I didn't fret when my translating appointment from the morning bled over to 2:00 in the afternoon. I knew that I would go to Jose' and give him the bad news, and then we would make a plan to start trying to figure out where the friend was. In the cases of many others prisoners, being transferred has meant being taken far away - 3 hours or much more. I hoped we wouldn't find this to be the case for Jose's friend.

At 2:15 I arrived and told him the bad news. He was surprised, and didn't seem to believe it. We talked some, and I started to second-guess myself. The truth is, though I've lived in NE Iowa for 29 years, I don't get out of Decorah much. I have never been to most of the towns around here, and have never gotten straight which one is in which county, nor where Fayette, Clayton, and Chickasaw counties lie in relation to Winneshiek and Allamakee. The ironic aspect of all that is, it is only since the raid and since I've become

friends with a number of Guatemalans and Mexicans that I've started to finally become familiar with these other towns! All of a sudden there's a reason to know where Monona lies in relation to Postville, and how far it is from West Union to Fayette. And it matters what town a person is arrested in, for unless it's a federal raid, the arrestee will land in the jail of the county within which that town lies. And believe me, if you have friends from Guatemala or Mexico, and it's the early part of the 21st Century and you're in America, then you know people who are in prisons and jails. The immigrants are involuntarily contributing to a healthy bottom line for the prison system.

I borrowed Jose's phone and started another round of calls to county jails in all these counties, and soon learned that my geographic confusion had indeed goofed me up: I had called the Fayette County jail, but he had been arrested in Monona which is *near* Fayette but *in* Clayton County.

By the time I got this sorted out it was 2:30. I asked the jailer on the phone whether we would be allowed to visit just past the 3:30 end time, since we were coming from Decorah and might not get there until 3:30. I received an unequivocal NO. Not one minute past 3:30. Rules are rules.

I hung up and sadly told Jose that I had goofed, and that his friend IS where Jose thought, but that now it was too late to get there in time. I told him we'd have to wait until next Saturday (and, I realized, I would be out of town next Saturday, so I would need to help him find another helper). I waited for his response.

He seemed to not understand what I had said. His eyes and his body seemed to be saying "let's get on the road!" I explained again that we wouldn't be allowed in after hours, and it would be impossible to find our way there before 3:30. "Unless..." his eyes somehow caused me to mumble, "...unless you think we can still make it...do you want to try?"

Yes, he did, and so we took off! I knew it was hopeless, but I was willing to do this to show Jose that I cared about him and also as a weird apology for having goofed up my geography. I drove fast, but I didn't take any chances passing slow drivers on the narrow county roads. We had a nice chat - about his family, about work, stuff like that. As we approached the jail I asked him what he wanted me to ask his friend. He wanted me to ask him how long he expects to be in; whether they've set a court date for him; how we can get him some money; how we could get him a phone card; and to give him these phone numbers so he can call me and a few others once we get him some money.

(Did you know that unless you have money, you can't call a soul from any county, state, or federal prison? This means that many, many people are lost in the system with no ability to speak with a loved one).

Luckily Jose knew the way. He had been there once before and remembered the winding way. Why did I imagine it would be in a town, in plain sight? It was hidden away among the cornfields, and Jose told me that most of them are like this. As we turned into the driveway, I checked the clock: 3:27. By the time we entered the door it would be 3:28. Two minutes until closing time. Though I had come without hope of accomplishing our

goal, all of a sudden I chose to do everything I could to make it happen.

We pulled on the door - - locked. We pulled again. We stood there, waiting for it to open. Unbelievably, we expected it to open. But instead a voice came from a speaker, asking what we wanted. I said we had come to visit a prisoner. The voice said the visitation hours were over. Case closed. I said I thought they went to 3:30, and it was only 3:27. I said that we had come from Decorah, and I would take even just those 3 minutes with the prisoner. And then the jailer-woman did something she is probably regretting right now: she let us in. She broke her rules. Who caused her to do it - me, or Jose'? Together we were a force. I feel sure she has never done it before, nor will she do it again. She made sure we knew that we were wrong and late and bad. "I don't care if you come from Arkansas to see him, you're not getting in late again." She was hard and cold.

So Jose' was right. He knew we would make it just in time. Or maybe he didn't know that, exactly; maybe what he knew was that he had to try, and if he tried then God would see what could be done to help.

They ran my ID through a high-tech machine, and found me to be worthy of entering. ("Does it say that I was incarcerated in the '80s for civil disobedience?") I wanted to ask.) She told me to step over to the second window. I was surprised! How could I have been so naive as to think that there would be a private-seeming conversation, even if it were being secretly listened to by the jailers? But no, there are three little visitation windows, so close together that I imagine it would be hard to hear one's own loved one through the receiver of the phone if others were also visiting just 2 feet away. And it's right there in the lobby, where anyone would hear the whole conversation. Not to mention the fact that it's probably recorded...

I stood there waiting, concerned whether I would be able to remember all my jobs and get them done in the 2 minutes I would have. By now I could see that Jose' was in the siteline of his friend, as there was only 25 feet, plexiglass, and me between them. I wanted to stay out of the way enough to allow them to see each other, and also to convey Jose's concern as well as his questions, and to try to repeat the friend's answers so Jose' could hear them, and to remember all the answers correctly to report later, and to allow space and time for the friend to convey what he had to say. There was no time or space for butterflies in the tummy. Time to try, that was all.

The prisoner came toward me in his orange and white striped uniform. I have saved his name to tell you now, for it was at this moment of course that he became a real person, a real person that really mattered, someone more than just "Jose's friend." His name is Davi Lopez Chala. An American first name, a second name from Spain, and a last name from his Mayan ancestors. Davi Lopez Chala. Say "Cha-la." Then say a prayer for him.

He approached, and I swear to you it was as though Jesus himself approached. The look on his face was peaceful, and joyful, and loving. I soon realized that his gaze was fixed behind me, at Jose' who now stood gazing back, with the same joy-and-love looks. This lasted just a moment, and then Davi brought that gaze down to me. I took in all that kindness and appreciation that Davi was sending to Jose'; he treated me like the trusted

childhood friend that Jose' is, and I easily returned the connection.

Though I had all those assignments in my head, I also had my manners and my heart with me, and so the first words that came out of my mouth were "How are you, friend?"

His answer was this. His hands and arms made signs of struggle and trouble, and his words did the same. He spoke briefly and quietly about how hard it was; about how he was treated, how nobody would tell him anything about what was happening to him...he mumbled these things quickly, but I had to blink to believe what I heard, because to look at his face, one would think he was gazing at his newborn babe, or some other miracle of God. He radiated peace. His words spoke of struggle, but his face spoke of light and hope.

I want to understand the look in Davi's eyes. Would I have to be a Guatemalan in order to understand all the layers? If your family and all the generations as far back as anyone remembers have suffered endlessly, are you left with only the options of serenity or self-destruction? Is it a cultural history that brings out that look, that seems to say "I know I am not alone, that God is with me. I cannot hide my suffering, and I don't need to hide it nor explain it to you, for I know that you too are part of the secret of God's love." ? You could also wonder if it's a half-crazed look, which would be understandable. Whatever it is, you cannot feel separate from other human beings, or, if you are a god-speaking person, from God, when you are in the presence of such a gaze.

I cruised through the other questions and reported the answers loudly into the lobby for Jose'. Another jailer had walked through behind me, and, observing Jose's non-verbal interaction with the prisoner, said loudly in English to him that he was not allowed to communicate with the prisoner - but she didn't stay to watch over him, so the only thing that changed was that Jose' sat down. He still gave his whole being into Davi's sight, twisting in his chair to face the window fully and offer gestures of support. Though I couldn't see it with my eyes, I was aware that there was this heart-communication going on between them as Davi and I spoke.

I unfolded the torn paper on which Jose' had written three phone numbers: his own, and those of two friends in Guatemala. I faced it toward Davi and asked if he had paper and pen. He glanced to either side and said that no, he couldn't write them down. I felt helpless there, lamely holding in front of me this small but essential piece of information that Jose' wanted to convey. It should have been a simple thing to do, but it would be impossible here and now. For lack of a paper and pencil, but what's more, for lack of seconds and of the right to ask for what one needed, that part of my job would be left undone. Really, how much did it matter at this point? - for Davi had no way to make calls anyway.

He said that there was another Latino in the jail, the only other person who spoke Spanish. He was from Mexico. He expected to be let out soon, and told Davi that when he got out he would find a lawyer to help Davi. I know about these kinds of stories and intentions; they are good and important, and as often as not they don't come to much, but you never know what those seeds of hope might bring about instead.

He said that there was one jailer who was kind to him, a woman.

The harsh jailer who had somehow found it in her to let us in stood just a few feet away having a loud conversation though a speaker with one of her co-jailers. To hear Davi through the telephone receiver over her voice, I needed to press my ear into the plastic and I needed to ignore the irritated voice in my head that was noting this, another behavior that seemed designed to take away power and dignity from a prisoner and anyone who cares about one.

Maybe I attracted her attention by thinking bad thoughts about her. She turned and said that time was up. We had talked for approximately 6 minutes. We hurriedly finished our sentences, stood and said goodbye. We took the extra second for a silent sending of love. As I turned toward Jose' to take our leave, I caught the quick gesture Davi sent out to him across the space of the lobby: looking right into Jose's eyes with that serene gaze, he pounded twice on his heart with his right fist, then held his two fists together in front of his heart, as though he were holding a branch--and then he broke it. A broken heart. Friend, my heart is breaking.

And then, as I continued that turn away from his broken heart, in the same second I caught a glimpse of Jose', standing straight and looking directly back at Davi: he, too, with serenity and surety in his whole countenance, and his palms together in the form of a prayer, and then lifted up high to God. His fist on his heart, and then the prayer again.

In two seconds it was all over. I had seen this private moment between two life-long friends. One has already known the loneliness and sadness of 6 months in jail, and much more. One is just at the beginning. They are one. What more can we have than this, and our faith in whatever we have faith in?

Before I could even take one more step toward the door the cries ripped through me, bursting out of my mouth with such force than I could not stop them. I heard them and willed myself to stop, but it didn't happen right away. I desperately did not want this to become a spectacle of me, but the things I had seen and heard, both beautiful and evil, hopeful and hateful, were now over the top. Jose' and I turned toward the door, he dignified in his quiet power and I taking in the last glances at sights and sounds of that terrible place: the plastic window, now vacant; a prisoner in her orange and white stripes, now being led through the inner door; the jailer, who heard my cries and thought - what did she think? Does she hear such cries of anguish all the time? -and Jose's kind gesture of consolation as he put an arm around me. I didn't want to need consoling, by anyone and not by someone who has suffered as Jose' has - but this is the way things go, isn't it? He is older and wiser than I. We both have our roles to play.

Long ago, I spent 5 days in an Iowa county jail. I had participated in civil disobedience and had a choice to pay my way out of my sentence with \$50 or spend 5 days in jail. The choice might seem obvious, unless you are single and childless and wanting to understand more about the underbelly of the world, as I was. And so, though my experience of the jail was utterly distinct from those of Davi and Jose' and all the rest who have no choice and no exit date and precious few people to advocate for them from

the outside, I do know a little about how it feels to watch human beings try to strip away other people's humanity. I do know a little about windowless rooms, and days that start and end in utter sameless, boredom, and tedium. But this was altogether different. This left me feeling socked in the heart, out-of-breath.

Two minutes later it was all over. Jose' and I got into the car and drove toward Postville, where he bought me a coconut drink that is a favorite around there. Driving on toward Decorah, he told me more stories about himself and Davi, and more stories about how one is treated in a jail or prison. "...like a little animal, not a person." He talked again about his faith in Beautiful God (Diosito Lindo), and how he would not be alive today were it not for all the gifts of God. He believes - because he's seen it proven true again and again - that when things can't get any worse, Diosito Lindo will bring something to help you through. He counts his being able to live among and get to know the Gringos of Decorah among one of those gifts.

Of Davi he said: "Davi had a very good job with a local tradesman. He had been taught the trade by the owner of the company, and he was well-liked there. But then everything changed, as it always will for an undocumented worker. One day you're free and making it, the next day you're a prisoner or deported. All the days in between, you try to not live in fear of whether this is the day when everything will change."

"Davi helped me to get to the US - he had already been here for 2 years, and he helped me find a coyote to get me across. When I arrived in Postville, he bought me clothes and food and helped me to find a place to live. When I couldn't work at ArgiProcessors anymore because my body was in too much pain from working 14+ hour days in the cold of the kill room, he found me a job with him. Eventually I had to go back to Agri because there wasn't enough work there. He has helped so many people in this way, but no one is reaching back to help him now in his time of need. He is a good person, and a "paizano" - a countryman. I will do whatever I can to help him, until the end. "

Back in Decorah, I invited Jose' to come with me to Matt and Randi's where we could use the internet and phone to find out how to send Davi a phone card and money. The house was empty; we helped ourselves to some trail mix from the kitchen table and started in. There's a company called Reliance Telephone through which you can buy minutes for people in the prison system. After many phone calls to customer service, entering my credit card, and printing off the right documents, we had the PIN number for Davi's electronic phone card. The only way to get him the PIN and the instructions for using it was to send him a letter, so I found some paper and Jose' set about that task. I went looking for an envelope, and not finding one in the house went to neighbors' houses. I finally found one at the Taxi garage. An hour later we were stamping the envelope and then walked it down to the post office. For me, getting that done was the perfect antidote for the poisonous sadness that had landed since Davi became a real person to me, and since I got a taste of the Clayton County Jail.

We parted at the corner, where he would walk home and I back to Matt and Randi's to gather my things. He opened his wallet and took out \$20 to give me, the amount we had started the Reliance account with. I looked around in my mind for a second wondering

what would be more polite, to accept it or not. I accepted it. Then he took out more, for gas; I turned that down. He thanked me deeply and eloquently for the many hours we'd spent that day, and again told me that God would thank me too.

God thanks me every day, and gives me more chances to learn from the beautiful people that are our new neighbors. And God, in the form of Davi and Jose', asks that we not allow people to become lost and forgotten in our jails.

I am truly amazed that we got to see Davi, against so many odds. Did Jose' know it would work out? Of course not - he just knew that we ought to try, that he wanted to try. Did I want to try? No, not really. The fact is, almost every time I receive a call or request to help one of the immigrants, it is inconvenient and I sometimes wish I hadn't picked up the phone. Doesn't everyone experience that? -that even for things you know you want to do and also should do, sometimes you wish you be the one to choose when and how? But it doesn't work that way.

I've had enough chances now to learn the truth: when I spend time with these people, I always come home richer. There's nothing better than to keep answering the phone, and keep writing down whatever I can.

I am an average Iowa citizen. Middle class, partial college education, business professional for 25 years, now self-employed. Married, mother of two.

Why then do I keep handy a list of the names, addresses, phone numbers, and visitation hours of many county jails in our region? I do not work in the criminal justice system. I am not a prison minister.

It's because the world has changed since you last looked. If you ever thought that the only people who served time in jail were criminals, you were always wrong and you are even more wrong now. If you ever thought that the only people who served time in county jails were people who have been convicted of a crime, you are so wrong. They wait and wait and wait for their court date, and then often they go back and wait more months.

You just might want to start noting the names, addresses, phone numbers, and visitation hours of regional jails, because if we can lock up immigrants for months to years over unproven crimes, then it is not long before it will be done to someone we know and love.

Maybe you already know that most of these Hispanic immigrants have done nothing wrong, that they have done nothing that our immigration and economic policies have not encouraged and depended on. Maybe you already know that the US prison system locks up more people per capita than any other nation on earth. Did you also know that,

according to a new report by the Congressional Research Service, over the past 30 years the federal prison population has increased by nearly 790 percent? Today we imprison some 716 people out of every 100,000.

Someday soon you too may have to learn the complicated way to send minutes to an inmate so that they can make collect calls to you, or so that they can buy some supplementary food for the meager rations given them. Someday you will find out what it means to drive hours to spend the allotted 15 minutes with your loved one, looking through a plexiglass, talking into a phone receiver. Someday you will look into his or face and know the effects of months without seeing or feeling the sun.

Someday you may have to learn all of this, and maybe it will be then that you will ask for prison reform. But it may be too late. The new jails will be built, and they will need to be filled. It's the bottom line. Business is business, and this is the USA.