

## PeerSpirit Newsletter: The Owl and the Tree – September 2018



### Love Thy Neighbor by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea

Earlier this summer, standing in a line of several hundred local protestors raising our outrage at the separation of asylum-seeking parents from their children, the woman next to Christina was holding a sign that simply said, "LOVE THY NEIGHBOR." As we began talking with her, she said: "Everything depends on this: Will we or won't we love our neighbors? I think our ability to address any of the issues facing us is based on our answer, personally and collectively, to this challenge." Christina thanked her for her straightforward teaching and was moved to post a short story about this interaction on her FaceBook page.

Amidst the likes and smiley faces, alongside comments that we would expect among "friends," were several challenges to the story.

*"It's hard to love the neighbor who moves into your house uninvited."*

*"What about all the people born here who are poor, without work or medical insurance. Can we take care of them first, please? Thank you."*

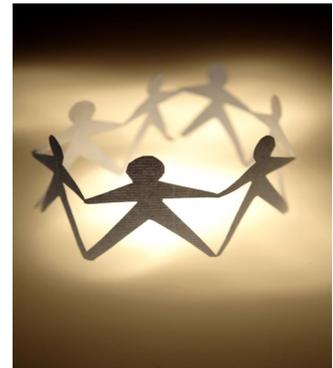
*"Maybe we already are loving our neighbors, this woman's sign implies that we are not doing it enough, or appropriately."*

Christina could have deleted these comments, but decided to let them remain for people to think about. And our thinking about them has led to this newsletter topic.

To us, "love thy neighbor" doesn't mean just one thing. Looking out into our own neighborhood, we have many different relationships, from close friends, to wary hellos. The friends are the easy ones, the wary hellos are a practice in showing up and working with differences in emotional stability, sociability, religious beliefs and political opinions.

Love thy neighbor is a practice in civility, in dialogue, and in entering situations with curiosity instead of judgment. And most of all, it's taking time to slow down and listen. It is an invitation to inquire, to show up fresh and ready to see what is possible *now* in terms of communication, understanding, and connection.

The comment about "hard to love a neighbor who just moves into your house," made us smile - because that is the very definition of a neighbor: someone who moves alongside our lives without being invited. The apartment down the hall goes up for rent, the house next door goes up for sale. After a while, the moving van shows up and the new person or people move in... without asking, without introduction, without being vetted by the folks already in residence: ***Hello, we're here.***



We moved into our neighborhood that way. We bought this house 25 years ago because it suited our needs, we could afford it, and we wanted have beach access and a view of water and mountains. We put down some earnest money and began negotiating toward a deal: we never thought about the "hood," though we liked the dead-end road and boundaried feel of things. Focused on closing the sale with the folks moving on, it didn't occur to us to meet the folks who would remain. Now, we would recommend that to anyone buying into a new place - not out of suspicion or vetting, but to better understand where you are arriving.



We found out later that the sellers had ongoing issues with their neighbors and were eager to start over somewhere else. We found out they thought that selling to us (two women with two Asian teens) was a parting punishment to the neighborhood. Turns out, we weren't such bad people (neither were the teens). And it turns out the neighborhood is full of well-meaning people able to manage our differences and extend gestures of support, kindness, and acquaintanceship to one another.

None of us were born here. We are mainlanders who came ashore, discovered, and now love the island life: one might call us "immigrants." We don't think of ourselves that way, we proudly proclaim that we're islanders now, even the "newbies" say this - and the newbies keep coming. And every now and then the "oldbies" sit on our decks and talk about the stress of all this immigration to our particular sense of community and how we wish - now that we are safely here - that no one else would come. Oh, a little chain migration would be okay, welcoming extended family or friends, people safely in the category of "just like us." But that is not America today: that has never been America.

There are only four categories of Americans: Native, Slave, Refugee, Immigrant. Check the boxes that comprise who you are; check the boxes of your descent. Except for "Native," none of these categories is more entitled to America than any other, though European-American immigrants have been acting like we "own the place" since the pilgrims put foot to Plymouth Rock. It is perhaps this horrible history of immigrant dominance over any people already here that is activated by this current policy and the fear-based hysteria behind it. Perhaps it awakens a kind of collective memory of how poorly some of our ancestors behaved, and therefore a fear that current immigrants will do the same to us. Some will, a great majority won't: a great majority of the 35,000,000 refugees currently wandering the globe are just looking for a safe place to be, to find work, to feed themselves and their families, to re-educate and re-orient themselves, to make home.

Huge issues cause such dislocation. We can't even fathom most of it, but every day we can practice ways to welcome the stranger, to help people feel at home, to love our neighbor. This is the American behavior that is deeply needed at this time.

