

Who Are Our Children

Ken Briggs | Dec. 17, 2012 NCR Today

Science and common sense tell us that we human beings are intensely tribal by nature. That becomes the basis of treating those we regard as our own better than those we wall off as outsiders. But there are moments such as the death wound of Newtown, CT, when those boundaries expand and we are able to embrace "the other."

The brutally shot Newtown children become our children and their parents share our space. The question always is how to maintain that wider identity and compassion.

President Obama embraced those children as his own, grafted onto his own fatherhood. The heartfelt cries of people throughout America testified to our common human fate.

Staying on that path requires something much more elusive and contrary to our tribalism. It requires a similar kinship with children from places we've fenced off as undesirable and threatening. Kids in rat infested tenements. Kids in countries labeled a threat to our well being. It becomes all too easy to justify violence against them as not belonging to us. Lethal missiles are fired with Administration approval on Pakistani villages. Branch Dividian children are burned to death by officials of our government. Boys and girls in ghettos are consigned to schools we can't imagine our children would attend. Someone's sons and daughters are gunned down in the street every day.

This isn't to demean the compassion and good will flowing to Newtown. It is needed and inspired by a grand vision that says we belong to each other. Let's hope it continues when the impulse to revert back to categories like "deserving" and "undeserving" returns. The challenge is to keep the broader vision when we're again tempted to retreat behind our walls. In his pungent book, "The Big Sort," Bill Bishop shows that we're more economically segregated than ever before. Does anyone doubt that guns become the enforcers of that? Yet gun control obviously isn't the underlying problem: human nature's instinct for tribalism is. Jesus called for the oneness vision. Perhaps this latest carnage will bring us a little closer to that realization along with the willingness to pay for it to come true.

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