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A revolution of friendship

by Jocelyn A. Sideco

NCR adds a new voice to our Young Voices Column: Jocelyn Sideco. Her first column follows.

Each generation has been given its own challenges. For my parents, transitioning from the Philippines as a young married couple with young twin daughters, minimal resources and few relatives to depend on offered the challenge of a lifetime.

While in the States, they created community with other immigrants in their neighborhood parish. They participated in the sacraments of Eucharist and first holy Communion, baptism, and confirmation regularly, deepened their commitment to one another through their own marriage and supported those around them who made a commitment to ministry and tried to be present to those in need. The Catholic school claimed time and attention. Appointments filled my mother's oversized calendar hanging in our breakfast nook: parent/teacher conferences, basketball games, the Pastor's Crab Cioppiano Night, yard duty, the crossing guard schedule.

My parents knew America through our church and through our neighborhood.

There were no African-Americans in our Irish/Filipino parish in the Sunset district of San Francisco. We might have had a few Latinos, but definitely no Indigenous peoples. Diversity and difference meant freckles, pale faces, and a rough English.

They missed the revolution of freedom through the Civil Rights movement by less than a year. Their revolution was happening each day as they made a life for themselves and now their daughters.

After much involvement in the Catholic church, I am called to step away from what I know and take risks in our church. My revolution does not look like leaving family and friends to seek out freedom in a foreign country that promises opportunity. My revolution does not look like preaching in the pulpits in the

South and leading marches or sit-ins. My revolution does not look like 18 days of peaceful protest to insist on a national leader stepping down from authoritarian rule. My revolution begins with a radical trust in God and leads me towards freedom through simply knowing and respecting myself and others around me.

This generation's revolution is in the heart. We are called to make real changes in our thoughts and actions. We are called to step across the aisles of our churches. We are called to find a community where faith and justice kiss.

We must take the tough, yet simple journey of putting ourselves in a vulnerable place. We must be open to the challenge of coming to know and respect others, at the risk of being misunderstood ourselves. Our revolution requires a deep commitment to the spirit of God that dwells within us and needs to radiate out towards people who hurting, lost or afraid.

This revolution takes time. It is a slow churning of the heart, a constant adjustment of our habits.

Our generation is desperate to make connections. We get involved in one another's lives, and we schedule community service activities into our mobile and online calendars. Yet, many of us are looking for ways to engage deeper with people with similar priorities and values.

We make friends (and defriend) quickly on Facebook and other social media. But is this the friendship our relationship with Jesus calls us to?

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After Hurricane Katrina, I served people affected by the storm and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans. Throughout my five years in New Orleans, I became friends with a guy in the neighborhood, Johnson (he was cool enough to go by his last name). Johnson introduced himself as an able body ready to mow our lawn and take care of the overgrown brush around our house. Over time, he would come over to our house just to hangout and chat.

Sometimes he would bring a "project" that he needed help with. One day, while we were faxing a form so that he could get a free government cell phone, he turned to me and said, "J, you are a good person." I looked at him, and said, "Thanks, but really it's not a big deal."

That night I thought about it. It was a big deal for Johnson. So many times I invited him into our home. So many times we were able to chat and figure things out. He was able to see how reliable I was.

I have been so conditioned to help others that I had failed to see my own responsibility in this friendship. As I spent more time with Johnson, he invited me over his house. He was so proud of his backyard. We shared a pile of bricks one day, some for his yard, some for my front walkway. I was moved to reflect on how I had grown to depend on Johnson, not just what he did for me, but how he spent time with me; how he made me laugh.

We are more likely to help people than seek help ourselves. We are also more likely to help people we know than those unknown to us.

This is not a difficult concept to wrap our minds around, but the habits in our everyday life can prove to be quite difficult to change.

Friendships take time and energy. How does Christ call you to develop friendships with people you do not know? Maybe they look different than you. Maybe they have different experiences, different education. Maybe they speak a different language or have different values.

Take a risk this week and continue this revolution toward real freedom in your heart.

[Jocelyn Sideco is a founding member of Contemplatives in Action, an urban ministry and retreat experience that began as a response to the needs in post-Katrina New Orleans and now continues as an online ministry offering spirituality resources for those working for justice throughout the world. Visit www.contemplativesinaction.org for more information.]

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