

The God Who Sees Me

by Cristy Starkweather July 8, 2018

I know that immigration and the separation of families has been on the top of the news feed lately, and I want to share some of my stories with you. I'm particularly interested in these stories because I spent time in Guatemala in my early 20s, working with a medical missionary, and have maintained relationships with people from this experience throughout the years. Additionally, I like to talk to people in Spanish, and ask them questions about their experiences. Over the years I've heard a number of stories, and I'm going to tell you some of them. I want to emphasize that all the little vignettes are real experiences, told to me first-hand by the people who experienced them.

But first, I want to tell you about 11-year-olds. I have one. He pretends that he doesn't know me in the school hall, but curls up next to me on the couch at night when no one is looking. I also want to tell you a bit about 9-year-olds—I have one of those, too. They think they've got life down, but when things are hard, they crumble. They are still clearly children. And 6-year-olds, the little ones who jump around but crumple into sobbing messes when they turn the corner at the grocery store and then realize they can't find you just 2 aisles away. I don't have one of those, but my friend Yeni does. An 11-year-old boy, 9-year-old girl, 6-year-old boy. This past week, they saw their mother for the first time in almost 2 months. An 11-year-old just entering adolescence, who is trying to keep it together for the sake of his younger siblings, but really just wants to curl up next to his mom and be parented. A 9-year-old girl—who can't understand how big this country is and cried asking her mother on the phone why she isn't being picked up. A 6-year-old boy, without his mom or any other adult he knows and trusts, separated for 2 months.

So Yeni ended up sitting on my couch last week. I was just one brief overnight stop in a long chain of cross-country driving—from a detention center in Arizona, to Colorado, through Nebraska, Michigan, and finally ending in New York. But it's not the 3 days of non-stop driving, or the hours of lost sleep that matter most, nor the new clothes and suitcases and tags cut off scattered on my living room floor for re-packing in new suitcases, purchased at the Ann Arbor Saline Target just hours before by kind volunteers, to supplement the one small backpack with one change of clothes for each family member, all the worldly possessions brought on the journey from a rural

Guatemalan village so small you can't find it on Google maps. After the volunteers had left, Yeni shared her experiences with me.

She didn't tell me about her village, but it's ok, because I've seen rural Guatemalan villages before, the kinds of places that look like living National Geographic photos. Hers is so small it doesn't appear on Google maps when we look it up. But there is nothing romantic about living in hard, grinding poverty, where infant mortality can reach upwards of 40%, medical care is virtually non-existent, and clean water and a diet with sufficient protein are daily challenges. Yeni is a single mother of three children, who supports herself cleaning houses. I didn't ask her why she left, but I can guess. Poverty and violence often go hand in hand. Sometimes people come because they are looking for a better life for their children or hope to work and send money back to support their family back home, but sometimes it's direct violence, especially in certain areas. For example, a Honduran construction worker who left because he had to cross gang territory to go to school, and one day the gang approached him, requesting that he join, not really a "request" but a "join or we'll kill you" decision. He made the journey north & crossed as an unaccompanied minor at about 15 years old.

Yeni didn't tell me about how she financed her journey, but that's ok, I've heard those stories too. The one where the poorest and least educated family in the village had nothing to pay the smuggler for their oldest son's passage, so they mortgaged their ancestral farmland using two loans, at 15% and 19% interest, with an agreement that they would have to pay all of the 15% loan before they started paying the 19%.

She didn't tell me about her journey through Guatemala and Mexico to the US border near Arizona, but that's ok. I've heard those stories before—the one where the girl selling fruit on the streets of New York City made it across the burning desert, but her group had a mom with a young baby, and the baby died during the journey. The one where your two favorite naughty, jokey, 17-year-old boys from your introductory English class and Computer class were each handed two gallons of water by a smuggler on the edge of the burning Sonoran Desert in 100 degree heat, shown a landmark in the distance, and told that if they made it walking to the other side in 2 days, there would be a car waiting to pick them up. The one where the woman who cleans houses was given methamphetamines by the smuggler & told to keep up, because if you fall in the desert no one will carry you, no one will come back for you, and be careful where you step because there are scorpions and rattlesnakes out here.

What Yeni did decide to tell me—in her slow, village Spanish at first, and then later in the faster clip of someone who has lived through trauma and is still living it, is this.

She was taken by the Customs and Border Patrol. Her three children were with her. They were separated, and she didn't know where they were taken. She was put into the congelera, the icebox, which is one of the types of US government detention facilities. In the icebox, it is not quite cold enough to give you frostbite, but cold enough to make you extremely uncomfortable. Of course, you don't have extra blankets or jackets, because that would ruin the purpose of the icebox. She was there for 17 days, not entirely sure of whether it was day or night. She says the food was really bad, on the verge of spoiling or spoiled—but it didn't matter because she couldn't eat, she was depressed and despondent. She spent 17 days, crying for her children, praying and fasting, and around her, while other women around her cried for their children too.

Then she was transferred to a regular detention center, for 29 more days. 29 days of waiting, no certainty of when or if she will see her children again. Praying to God because she doesn't know what else to do. She shows me her fingers with the skin peeling, tells me they hurt all the time, and she doesn't know if it was because she was pushing up off the cement on the ground, or because there were cleaning chemicals on the cement. Days of just waiting, one after the other. One phone call to her children, in two months. And then she was released on bond, raised by a woman in NYC who heard Yeni's lawyer speak on NY Public Radio, called up the lawyer, and asked how she could help be part of reunification. The answer was fund-raising to help post bond. After the bond was posted and Yeni released, she was told she could take a bus from Arizona to New York -by herself—to recover her children, but with great fear that Immigration & Customs Enforcement would board a bus, take her into custody and then the process would start again. At this point Yeni did not possess any picture identification. So a chain of volunteers organized to drive her to New York, set up shelter, and help her begin the long process of completing the necessary and complex legal requirements to gain custody of her children. That is how she came to be sitting on my couch, telling me her trauma. Telling me “I have suffered a trauma, but I just want to be reunited with my children so we can start moving on.” Such little time to talk to me. So she chooses the part that is closest to her heart. She just wants her children back, to live with them safely, and she is at the bottom of the power structure in a society that

values money, utility, beauty, intelligence, education, racial preference. On her own, the odds are deeply stacked against her.

What do you say to people who have experienced deep trauma, deep recent wounds, to the pieces of the story and the suffering that I didn't include here because it would take too long? There isn't anything I can say. My children are sleeping in the next room. So I sit with her in silence, as she cries, and tries not to cry, and I am also crying, and trying not to cry.

Hagar. Her name means migrant, or immigrant. Her son Ishmael, is named 'God Hears.'

For those of you unfamiliar, I'll give you a brief synopsis of the story of Hagar. Abraham, regarded as a "Father of Faith" by Christianity, Islam and Judaism, is married to Sarah during ancient times. Abraham receives a promise from God that he will have many descendants, extremely important during a time in which family is your source of support and protection. The text states that Sarah is barren—can't have children—which is effectively a catastrophe in a patriarchal, ancient society that values sons to continue on with the family line. Abraham receives a promise from God that he will have many descendants—like the grains of sand on the beach, or the stars in the sky. However, over time, this promise seems more and more fantastical as the couple continues to age with no descendants. Sarah decides to take matters into her own hands and gives her slave Hagar to Abraham to sleep with, and Hagar becomes pregnant with a son.

Of course, when Sarah herself eventually becomes pregnant with a son, this brings to the surface the jealousy and competition for her own son to be the "rightful heir" of Abraham's wealth, power and protection. The hope for financial and physical security and protection—represented here in the ancient story through a male heir—isn't that different from our hopes today. In our modern society, we substitute well-paying jobs, financial security, cars and housing accommodations as assurances that life will go well for us. Perhaps like Sarah, it's easy to see groups of people like Yeni who might take our jobs, displace us, or otherwise jeopardize our well-being, and make us complacent when the power systems in place treat them like threats, rather than human beings in the image of God.

As the story of Hagar continues, Hagar calls out to God on two separate occasions after being banished to the desert, facing certain death, and receives assistance from God, along with promises of reassurance and a hopeful future for her and the son she loves. As biblical commentators note, the idea of God answering personally to a low-status slave woman was a revolutionary thought in a time when even wealthy women were second-class citizens, and the attention of a deity needed to be attracted by sacrifices, or specially trained priests. Hagar summarizes her experience with God, saying: You are the God Who Sees, and you have seen me. It is a plot twist in the ancient story where God directs attention and assistance specifically to the person with the least power & value in society. I don't expect that God operates any differently today.

I tell Yeni a brief version of this story, she is a believer and probably knows it. In this moment, I believe that "Seeing" means Seeing with a capital "S." The kind that means "to take into account, to know, to take note of." It's knowing that you aren't alone in your suffering, that while other people are passing you over thinking you're not high enough on the power pyramid to really matter, a powerful force in the universe turns that pyramid over, so that the injustice, the voices of the oppressed are seen and heard.

Many of us can relate to Hagar's story in some way. Maybe you've experienced being on the bottom of the power pyramid for economic, social, or any countless number of reasons that our society devalues people. Maybe you carefully conceal important pieces of your identity, such as who you really love—so as not to be cast out and rejected from your family, culture or community. I've often thought of the story of Hagar when I evaluate my own support network, and worry that it's lacking. If something bad happened to me, my birth family sure wouldn't show up for me, and I'd be dependent on the kindness of others, just like Yeni. Some of us are closer to the top of the power structure, and even though it can be uncomfortable to admit it, the closer you are to the top, the more you fear falling lower. Like Sarah, it can be tempting to see resources like a pie that gets cut up—more for someone else means less for you.

By participating in Yeni's journey, and being up close with someone who handles suffering with far more maturity than I, it makes my current unemployment situation seem small in comparison. I am humbled, and there is little room for self-pity, and I recognize how many resources and privileges I actually have at my disposal.

So many people want to know—what happened to Yeni? What’s the happy ending? At this point, Yeni’s story is still unfolding. She has seen her children and spent time with them, but doesn’t have them in her care. She needs the continued help of her lawyer and her volunteer community in NYC, to help her move through the red tape necessary to regain custody of her own children. This may involve at least one court appearance in NYC. Additionally, I don’t know the status of her asylum case. It is possible that she may need to return to AZ to continue her own legal case from that point. As you can see, it’s pretty complicated and virtually impossible for her to accomplish these steps without significant help from caring people donating time, money and effort to support her efforts. Fortunately, there are people willing to help, but it takes an intensive financial and time investment from a variety of backgrounds. For example, my neighbor, Jessica, who is a pretty committed atheist, is a frequent organizer and activist for various causes in the area, she set up a good part of the organization for this part of Yeni’s trip. Rabbi Josh was the one who showed up at my house at 6am the next morning to be her driver from MI to PA on this leg of the journey. If you feel at all compelled to be involved, don’t underestimate your value even if it is a small time or money donation. Every little bit made a difference to Yeni, and it can make a difference to another mother as well. We can honor the God who sees us, by caring and “Seeing” those who are most vulnerable as deeply valued by God.

I want to thank everyone for your time & attention.

Invite us to do 3 things for our meditation.

First minute: Relax into what we’ve just heard of Yeni-Hagar, and consider a situation in your own life that helps you relate to them—where you feel vulnerable, invisible, mistreated, powerless.

Second minute: imagine God as “The God who sees me” (repeat phrase over and over for a minute: **“The God who Sees Me”**)

Third Minute: God help me to notice someone who might be feeling unnoticed, invisible, this week, **“Lord, help me to notice an invisible person this week.”**