

# Lent Margin: Make a Plan

March 23, 2024

## Frozen

Many of us are protecting our mental health by limiting our news consumption. It's a reasonable, even wise strategy. However, in doing so, you may have missed the story a little less than a month ago about Dr. Teresa Borrenpohl, an Idaho woman who was loudly protesting at a town hall meeting in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The story goes that she was being verbally disruptive and was asked to leave multiple times. When she did not, three unidentified men in black zip tied her hands and feet together and forcibly removed her from the town hall. All of this is on video, including her repeatedly asking them to identify themselves. They did not. Later, it came to light that they were from a local security agency who had been hired to staff the event.

My reflections today aren't about Dr. Borrenpohl's politics. They're not about her first amendment rights. They're about the fact that 450 people looked on as three unidentified men hogtied a woman and carried her out of a room AND DID NOTHING.

Lily Sterling frames it this way:

Why didn't anyone try to stop them? Why didn't anyone try to stop the unidentified men who zip tied and dragged a woman out of the Idaho town hall? Because no one prepared for this situation in this context, and no one was assigned to stop them.

Quick: what are the exact words you will say when a uniformed law enforcement officer knocks on your door and says, "Good afternoon. We don't want to take up too much of your time. We were just checking up on your neighbor and we were wondering if you could help us."

How do you know right then and there if they are standing on your doorstep because they were called to do a welfare check by a concerned relative or if they are there to capture and send your neighbor on a one-way flight to Gitmo? How do you find out that information, and how do you respond? What if the welfare check is itself a ruse? Are you going to make things worse if you don't cooperate?

This is what the people in the auditorium were trying to process. Who are these people? Who is this woman, has she broken the law, are they breaking the law, will I be arrested for trying to help? Does she even want me to help? Will I make it worse? And crucially: if it's wrong, wouldn't others be trying to stop them?

This is why in 1964 a woman ran around outside her apartment screaming while 38 people witnessed her assault and murder. It's called Genovese Syndrome, after this unfortunate woman. They didn't stand by because they hated her; they just had no idea in that moment what to do, and everyone hoped someone else would act correctly.

Everyone likes to think they will do the right thing because they have the correct attitude, values, and intentions. But humans are shockingly bad at translating beliefs into action in novel periods of intense conflict and stress.

(So the Lent margin I'm imploring all of us to engage in today is practice: that is, practicing standing up for others.)

So you need to practice. Do it while you're driving or riding to work or the store. Recite the following statements: "Am I being charged? Am I free to go?" and "I choose not to answer any questions without an attorney present." And then practice shutting up when you are asked questions every which way. Practice asking people if they need help. Practice how to phone a hotline and an attorney. Because the reality for most folks is that the social contract kicks in hard for encounters with authority, even dubious authority, and it can feel silly or scary to not cooperate.

(Most of us, especially churchy folk, are rule followers by and large, and acquiescing to perceived authority is woven into who we are.)

**YOU HAVE TO PRACTICE.**

And you need to practice how you will respond in a multitude of scenarios. Write them down, say them out loud, even practice with another person.

If you are ever in the situation Dr. Borrenpohl found herself in, you have a better chance of someone intervening if you point at someone and say, "YOU! Help me!" It breaks through the Genovese Syndrome effect to follow authority, and people will actually go to spontaneously courageous lengths when they know it's their job to do so and people are witnessing them.

This isn't to imply she was in any way at fault for not doing so, or that people should be excused for standing by when they should act. I'm simply pointing out a behavioral hack, one that you should also practice.

A lot of people will want to comment that there were malicious people in the room cheering on her assault, and that is true, too. Some people deliberately didn't help and enjoyed watching. This is exactly why we all need to be ready to respond with reflexive aid and support, so we do not by inaction become as culpable as those who cheer on the advance of violence.

### **The Scriptures**

Listen once again to the end of Psalm 27 which Karen read for us today: If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up. Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! Teach us your ways, O LORD!

When the Psalmist laments that everything that they held dear, everything they thought they could count on, including their parents, seemed to no longer be on their side, they rest in the fact that God is still on their side. And what does it look like in this day and age to have God on your side?

At least one answer is that the people of God, you and I, will have practiced the margin of standing up for one another. Being God's hands and feet and voice and not watching violence go on right in front of our faces. When, "false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence," it is our moral imperative to put our passage from the Letter to the Philippians into practice and imitate Christ, be willing to put ourselves out there, that evil does not go unchecked.

### **Conclusion**

We all know what to do if we catch fire, right? What do we do? We stop, drop, and roll. How do you know that? It's not instinct. It was drilled into you.

So, too, we need to practice how we are going to stand up for others, so that, when the time comes, we don't freeze.

In the 1960s, amidst the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee held trainings on how to actually implement the principles of nonviolence. The idea was that, fight, flight, or freeze are instinctual, and if we are going to affect any sort of social change, we're going to have to practice what we will actually do in the place of evil. They practiced being spit on, having people scream in their faces, how to link arms with others to create a human shield (and how to do so without having your shoulder dislocated), even how to fall and protect one's vital organs from being beaten. They practiced saying, "I choose not to answer without a lawyer present," and then staying quiet.

Friends, it is my sincerest prayer that none of us will ever experience or witness something so extreme that we'll need to worry about how to protect our kidneys from punches, but the prospect of observing the misuse of authority looms all too real. Whether we're talking about immigration status or gender identity or women's reproductive rights or race, the prospect of witnessing the misuse of power against another human being is staring us in the face, and our project, indeed, our mandate is clear: protect the vulnerable, stand up for the marginalized. I'm not being hyperbolic when I say that this is THE true measure of whether or not one is a follower of Jesus. Oh, Dear God, give us the strength to answer your call. Amen.

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**Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1**  
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