

Sanctuary

Where do you go when people in your home country want to kill you, and the government of the country you've personally helped and where you've taken refuge, wants to send you back to your home country to your death? If you can't go to another country, I guess you buy time until you can find a way to stay in that country safely.

My husband David and I had had this exchange several times in the past year. Now we were having it while accompanying an Iraqi man, Kadhim, who had gone into Sanctuary for that very reason. He had served American troops in Iraq during the first Gulf War and had paid the price with the Iraqi government after the Americans left. The US, under a new administration, was rescinding Temporary Protected Status for Iraqi migrants who had previously been allowed residency here.

"It's so peaceful out here, if only he could stay." David and I looked over the mesa beyond the Norbertine monastery south of town. The sun was setting on a June evening, 2017. Jack rabbits were coming out, and birds were fussing as they roosted in the cottonwoods. Our four-hour accompaniment shift would be over in 30 minutes.

"But is a retreat cell at a monastery enough of a "sensitive location" for ICE not to pick someone up?" I wondered, looking down the lane to the entrance road to see who might be coming in. The 2011 ICE memorandum, not a law, states that schools, hospitals and churches were "sensitive locations." They were, therefore, to be avoided when picking up people for deportation. ICE had already taken immigrants from schools and hospitals elsewhere in the US. Were churches next? Was the Norbertine retreat center, strictly speaking, a church?

Kadhim had been brought here temporarily with utmost secrecy as he was under deportation orders and, if not in a church, risked being picked up by ICE. A church in Albuquerque, where he might be allowed stay in sanctuary, was to vote on Sunday whether they would house such a person - or not. He could stay at the Norbertine's only a couple of weeks until the retreat rooms were again booked.

Kadhim was not well. Diabetes and COPD from smoking had taken a toll on his 60-year-old body. The stress of facing deportation did not help his well-being. But he had been advised that, with time for due process, his case had a chance of success. Going back to Iraq meant certain death. Sanctuary seemed a better option than moving his family to another country.

Kadhim and Reham, his wife, were in the retreat accommodation next to ours. They had been out in their cell's courtyard talking after dinner. Their high-school-age daughter had already gone home, but Reham would be spending the night. The gate to their courtyard was locked; ours was not.

We knew what to do in the event ICE were to come to get him. We knew they wanted to pick him up, but did not want negative press. Three and a half hours had passed quietly. It seemed like it would be another uneventful shift. Then Reham came out and called frantically to us over the wall to our courtyard.

"Please, come! Kadhim is sick. I don't know, having a seizure? This has never happened. Please, come right away!" she cried out.

We did not have the protocol to handle this. We could see immediately why this place was not ideal for sanctuary. Reham opened the gate for us and went back inside to Kadhim's side. David went over and locked the gate behind him. He found Kadhim lying on the bed shaking, a pillow clapped over his ears,

Protocol if ICE, or any unidentified person, asked to be let in:

1. Do not open the door or gate and stay calm, no matter what they say! ICE agents are under no obligation to be nice or to tell the truth. Just follow the protocol.
2. Contact the Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice telling them ICE is there.
3. Contact the Lawyer telling her ICE is there.
4. Ask to see the warrant. ICE would have to produce a judicial warrant, not an administrative warrant that Homeland Security is authorized to issue. Without that judicial warrant, we would not have to let them in. With the right warrant, there would be no resistance.
5. Take a picture of the warrant and text it to the lawyer.
6. Film the entire event on our phones to send the video to the ACLU via their phone app.

writhing and crying out in Arabic. Reham spoke to him – asking questions in his native language, trying to find out what was happening. But Kadhim did not respond. He was clearly in pain, not present to the room he was in. Was it a seizure? Was it his appendix? He would go still and then writhe, screaming and moaning. Neither David in English nor Reham in Arabic could reach him. David and I talked over the wall. He couldn't tell what was going on. Was there a DNR? We surely couldn't call 911.

Reham stayed with Kadhim as I called Marion, the Faith Coalition Coordinator. We went through our options with her. Marion then realized who was coming on the accompaniment shift after us in just a few minutes: An ER doctor and her partner, a psychologist, both of whom dealt with trauma victims. That was a car we were happy to see turning into the dirt parking lot.

During the first Gulf War, Desert Storm, in 1990, Kadhim had helped the America forces with translation and logistics. After the Americans left, US sympathizers were rounded up, imprisoned and tortured by Saddam Hussein's government. During the second Gulf war, many Iraqis were given visas to come to the US. KADHIM had been living in the US since 1994. Kadhim met Reham in Los Angeles while both were doing contract work on US Military bases. They married in the late 90s and had children, the youngest still in high school. Reham was by now a citizen. Donald Trump's election, the "Muslim ban," and Iraq being willing to take back its emigrants provoked deportation orders for thousands of Iraqis who had not already become citizens. Albuquerque ICE agents wanted very much to pick up Kadhim. His fear of going back combined with being in the small narrow cell in confinement had triggered a flashback for Kadhim of his torture in Iraq. This is why Reham had never seen this behavior before in all their marriage.

We covered the watch as our replacements focused on Kadhim. They made sure Kadhim was not physically in crisis or pain, and then helped him deal with the memory of his trauma. They got him through the night.

"There couldn't have been two better people to cover that 8 PM to 8 AM shift. I think God helps Marion schedule accompaniment," David reflected. Again, we were grateful to have a safe place to go home to.

Kadhim was soon moved to the UCC church in Albuquerque that had voted to provide sanctuary. House was set up in two large basement rooms with high windows, and he could wander around the large church, as long as he stayed inside. He eventually adapted to the long, lonely hours of confinement. He had good days and bad days. His health went up and down. He tried again and again to quit smoking. That wasn't going to happen. For two years, one or two volunteers at a time provided around-the-clock accompaniment at the church, watching the locked door, keeping an eye on the cars in the parking lot, ready to execute the protocol if needed.

In the winter of 2018, his son passed away. He was not able to attend the funeral. ICE vehicles patrolled the church and mosque parking lots in order to pick him up if he were to go outside. Another son was married. He did not attend that wedding. In May 2018, his daughter graduated from high school. He did not attend graduation. "Due process" can take a long time.

In June 2019, a celebratory press conference was held at the UCC church. Kadhim's attorney had won a Board of Immigration Appeals decision to rescind Kadhim's deportation order. He was able to go free. The intense fear of being picked up for just being who you are, however, doesn't go away so quickly. How could he believe that ICE would not pick him up now? He stayed at the church for another ten days, asking for accompaniment. When he went home, he asked that the people who had stood by him for two years, be with him and his family in the evenings for just a couple more weeks. Now friends, we were happy to oblige until he could again, feel safe at home. Next, he will apply for permanent residency, and eventually, citizenship.