

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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By Duane Bidwell

### Remaining Human: “What Can We Do?” vs. “Who Will We Be?”

As I write, a federal judge in the United States has ruled that the government cannot jail asylum seekers indefinitely, but must determine within seven days if a person faces a credible risk of persecution or torture in their own country and, if asked, release that person to wait in freedom for a final asylum decision. I celebrate the ruling.

Yet there are still more than 2,500 unaccompanied children being held in camps on the US/Mexican border; reports of physical and sexual abuse in the camps are rising; and more than 24 immigrants from around the world, including five children, have died in US custody this year. A US teenager was held illegally for three weeks by immigration officials. Others detained by the system have died by suicide after release.

Feelings of despair seem reasonable in the face of this situation. Outrage rises easily. Yet constructive responses are more difficult to muster. What can we do, really, to address this intentional, systemic cruelty? I suggest that asking, “What we can *do*?” isn’t the first question to ask.

From a relational, constructionist perspective, a more vital starting place might be: Who do we want to be, together, in the face of this situation? In daily life, what relational practices make a difference toward enacting that position? And what difference might those practices make in our relationships?

These questions grow from the work of Spanish philosopher [Miguel de Unamuno](#), who framed them as a *proyecto vital* or life project. They invite us to frame the US/Mexico border crisis primarily as a human, moral question rather than a political and legal conundrum.

Such questions help me avoid being swallowed by rage and despair. They also keep me from using logic and theory to distance myself from the pain I feel when I see and hear reports from the border and the home countries of asylum seekers.

For me, feeling the pain provides a way out of despair. Numbing my emotions—distancing myself from the pain—only leads me to dehumanize the people who enact and support these atrocities. I tell a flat, one-dimensional story about them, their motives, and their humanity.



When I'm numb, I don't have to acknowledge or name my complicated and nuanced responses to such situations. I tell a flat, one-dimensional story about myself, remaining silent about more profound, less easily digested dimensions of my experience.

Such silence, I suspect, allows others to construct public dialogue and action on my behalf, without honoring my values and preferences. It hides the real consequences of the suffering we experience because of the pain of others.

Who benefits, I wonder, when we quiet our rage, ethics, morality, and visions for the future? And what suffering gains power and momentum?

For me, telling others how I feel when I see and hear about the border camps serves as the most concrete and immediate way to clarify and enact who I want to be in this situation. I can share my feelings, describe my physical responses, and invite others to do the same with me without judgment.



When we make space to witness and honor embodied, emotional responses—our own and among others—we become vulnerable together. And in shared vulnerability, new possibilities emerge.

