Weekly Devotion for the week of April 27 – May 3, 2020
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John McGee, founder of the Gentle Teaching movement, was a psychologist who worked alongside people who were marginalized his entire career. Through these experiences, he developed Gentle Teaching based on the principles that all individuals need 3 things present in their lives in order to be healthy, both physically and emotionally. He identified these needs as to feel Safe, Loved, and Engaged. It’s important to say that these are needs we all have, not just people who are marginalized; they are just the ones who are so often missing it. For this reason, St. Joseph Home has made Gentle Teaching (which we call Gentle Presence) the foundation of our approach to the individuals we serve and to the way we relate to each other as staff. These needs exist both at the macro level and the micro level and McGee taught that we are constantly communicating to each other the realities of these dynamics by our words, our eyes (a euphemism for our body language), our hands and our presence. At St. Joseph Home, we have repurposed his words a bit and express these needs as the need to be

1. Safe (both physically and emotionally)
2. Connected (to benefit from, and bring benefit to a community)
3. Engaged (to have a say and be the primary author of our lives)

What McGee taught is that people who are marginalized often are missing these three things, and as such they break down in ways that we mistakenly attribute to their disability, when in fact it is the absence of feeling safe, connected and loved.

Right now in the midst of a pandemic, we are all finding that we are also experiencing an absence of the feelings of being safe, connected and engaged. We have a dangerous virus among us and it is impossible to feel safe or to feel that the people we love are safe. We are certainly disconnected from each other in ways that we are not used to. Finally, we are denied the freedoms we are used to and cannot go about our day to day lives as we normally do. As I watch protests in my state and see a number of people in our communities reacting so strongly against this after just 5 weeks, I couldn’t help but reflect on the realities of McGee’s work and the fact that this is a normal existence for so many people in our community. Just one example...what if many of the “behaviors” we label in our system (prompting us to create plans of intervention, etc.) have little to do with one’s developmental disability, and far more to do with the fact that we don’t truly understand the extent to which they often don’t feel safe; that they don’t feel connected to their community; or that they don’t feel the freedom to make decisions as they see fit. One of the reasons that I love the LSA-DN so much is that I know every one of you works so hard every day to change this reality for the individuals we serve, but if we are honest we know that when they go into their communities, they often encounter a world that often doesn’t foster feelings of safety, connectedness and respect of their choices.
We have an opportunity to build something different on the other side of this pandemic. None of us would choose a pandemic to bring change, but the pandemic is here nonetheless and our obligation is to use the way it makes us feel to build a different, better world for people who feel that way with or without a global pandemic. I came across this quote from Sonya Renee Taylor that captured what I want to say beautifully. She said:

"We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

I think we have an opportunity, for reasons we never would have chosen, to craft a new future for the individuals we serve. As Taylor said so beautifully, to stitch a new garment that fits everyone.

We have two choices. We can either write the next chapter of our story, shaping it even as we encounter these unprecedented challenges out of our control, or we can passively let it be written for us. But if we choose the latter we must not act as if we are victims because it will have been us that missed the opportunity.