

In a world already plagued by the effects of late-stage capitalism—economic inequality, voter suppression, healthcare inequality, racial injustice, and an escalating climate crisis—how do we continue fighting for meaningful progress in the middle of a pandemic? Encouragement and insight from a climate crisis refugee and human rights activist.

What Would Anne Frank Do?

Making Humane Decisions in a Time of Crisis

by Johnny Townsend

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Johnny Townsend

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Let's Stop Digging Our Own Graves

(published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on 21 February 2020)

A Canadian friend of mine complained that indigenous First Nations people kept refusing the jobs and industry offered them, insisting on government “handouts” instead. They should just “get over” their past abuse, he said, assimilate, and get on with life. My follow-up question was, “What kind of jobs and industry are we talking about?” Most of the industry I see on indigenous lands supports fracking and tar sands operations. Accepting such a job, no matter the salary, is like getting paid to dig your own grave.

We all know about the billions of gallons of water permanently contaminated by fracking. In a climate increasingly plagued by drought, that's no small matter. Most of the toxic chemicals are supposedly injected deep below ground to avoid polluting our drinking water, but the act of injecting water itself is directly responsible for the marked increase in earthquakes as large as 5.8 in every region where fracking takes place. And much of this “safe” drinking water is easily ignitable as it issues from residential taps.

Toxic water and damaging earthquakes aside, carbon-based fuels are the driving force behind the climate crisis. Driving faster is like thinking the solution to creating safer roadways is to speed when you see the stoplight turn yellow. Fracking also significantly increases emissions of methane, an even more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

During World War II, Japanese soldiers often forced Filipino and American prisoners to dig their own graves. In Jim Crow times, white mobs sometimes committed this same atrocity against their black neighbors. Nazis not only forced many Jewish victims to dig their own graves, but they also forced black Allied POWs—and gays and Roma—to do so as well. Today, ISIS forces some of its victims to dig their own graves, too. It's a popular war crime.

Why would anyone agree to dig their own grave? They *know* what's going to happen when they finish. Why would they agree both to the hard work and the extreme humiliation? Why would they *help* their oppressors murder them?

People do it to buy time. Not time to be rescued. They know that won't happen. And not quality time. They get only a few awful, miserable minutes. But they are minutes of life.

So people of almost every culture, of every socioeconomic level, in conflict after conflict, agree to dig their own graves.

But some indigenous First Nations people refuse to take part in drilling. They and other activists pile barricades on railroad tracks to stop coal trains. Native Americans and other environmentalists are blocking pipeline construction in the Dakotas. Members of the Puyallup tribe are fighting a liquified natural gas facility in Washington state. Navajo and other concerned Utahns are fighting to prevent mining and drilling on public lands. Still other Utahns are fighting Salt Lake's inland port for aiding the transportation of fossil fuels.

These folks often suffer poverty as a result. They are routinely imprisoned for protesting.

But they don't dig their own graves.

In her Emmy acceptance speech, actress Alex Borstein spoke of her grandmother being led to a pit where she would be shot and dumped along with other Jews during the Holocaust. The woman turned to her guard and asked, “What happens if I step out of line?”

The guard assured her that although he wouldn’t have the heart to shoot her, someone else would.

Borstein’s grandmother stepped out of line. She survived while everyone else in the group was murdered. “So step out of line, ladies,” the actress told the crowd. “Step out of line.”

We don’t have to accept fracking and oil wells and pipelines. We don’t have to dig our own graves, even if we’re being paid well to do the job. And we certainly don’t have to accept being shamed for choosing life over death.

Corporations driving the climate crisis have forced us all into a global catastrophe. We’re scared. We’re hungry. Our kids need shelter.

But they don’t need the shelter provided by a tombstone or a vault. If it’s an atrocity to make us dig our own graves, it’s unconscionable to force us to dig those of our children.

We must refuse all new fossil fuel extraction, storage, and transport. We must step out of line if we want a fighting chance at life.

Give a Man a Check...

(published in *LA Progressive* on 18 May 2020)

We've all heard the saying, "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime." Helping someone care for their own needs rather than just offering a handout is clearly the better approach. And yet many on the right feel that *any* taxpayer-funded program that helps people take care of themselves is somehow instead hurting them. One of my former missionary colleagues describes most of this "purported" aid as "giving someone a check," insisting that the only thing it accomplishes is to make the recipient feel both entitled and dependent. Perhaps we should rephrase the left's approach in a more relatable way. "Give people a check, pay their bills for a month. Teach people job skills and let them pay their own bills for life."

If the U.S. could offer its citizens tuition-free college and vocational training, as many other nations do, no student need get "a check" at all. Students instead gain access to classrooms and teachers. They gain access to information, tutoring, labs, and fieldwork. They gain access to job and career competency so they can succeed in the workplace and provide for themselves and their families. This means a reduction in demand for taxpayer dollars directed to food assistance or subsidized housing. A reduction in demand for funds directed to jails and prisons filled with those spurred to find "alternate" methods of employment.

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If the U.S. could offer its citizens genuine socialized healthcare, lowering the cost of drugs and medical supplies as an essential ingredient, as a nation we'd spend far less on healthcare than we do now. Those are funds that can be spent on consumer goods, on renewable energy research, on roads and bridges. With guaranteed healthcare (and guaranteed sick leave), fewer workers would need to come to work sick, spreading their cold or flu or COVID. There would be less absenteeism, more productivity. No one will be "giving a check" to someone to see a doctor, with the accompanying suspicion the recipient might run off to the race track instead. The ill person simply gets to seek medical care without having to worry about not having enough of his or her own funds left over to pay the light bill.

"But if we just let people get all the education they want and all the healthcare they need, they'll be spoiled brats. They won't appreciate how good they have it."

To be fair, that's a real possibility. But right now, the privileged children of rich parents get a good education and all the medical care they want, and no one seems to mind. There are no laws forcing all college students to pay their own way without any assistance from their parents or from scholarships or grants, forcing everyone over eighteen off their parents' insurance. Why are those on the right only worried about the gratitude of the masses? If getting an education without groveling is good enough for children of the wealthy, why do the rest of us have to clean toilets eight hours every night for the same privilege?

Why is it so, so important for peasants never to forget their place?

So they won't dare to rise out of it?

The truth is that students from low-income areas almost never receive the early education they need to succeed in college, even if they do manage to find a job that will allow them to earn the application fee. Adult children of the moneyed elite often turn out to be pretty awful human beings, but it's only the grown kids of the poor that we like to label "losers." If "giving someone a check" is so destructive to the poor, we'd have to believe that *not* helping them has proven a well-traveled path to virtue. And yet we've been judging and condemning these folks all of our lives for their moral failings.

Since *not* providing a good education hasn't worked either to improve the character of the poor *or* allow them skills to provide for themselves, maybe we've chosen a different motto altogether than the one we've enshrined. "Don't give a man a fish, starve him for a day. Refuse to teach him how to fish and starve him for a lifetime."

It's not as if folks who can't afford tuition are asking for honorary degrees.

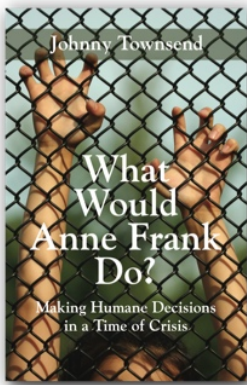
Those on the right often demand that recipients of government assistance be working to qualify. And then make it almost impossible for the unskilled to get a job, especially when the job pays such low wages they can't even earn enough to cover childcare while they're working.

A society of educated, competent citizens with full access to healthcare is better for everyone, even if the newly educated and competent end up with a little attitude. Because let's face it, what we have now is a society filled with desperate, unhappy people lacking the education or healthcare they need, and there's still more than enough attitude to go around.

We may never be able to guarantee our citizens a good moral character. Let's leave that up to religion and other

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organizations. What the state *can* do, and must, is make sure we all have the education and medical care to succeed in life, and that we have at least the remote chance of being happy about it when we do.



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