

Selfishness creeps in

By [L. Roger Owens](#)

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When you read children's literature you expect to smile at the quirky characters fumbling to figure out their growing independence. You might expect to cry as you watch characters face the pain of growing up.

You don't expect to be confronted by current events like a refugee crisis—and inspired to imagine the kind of society we could be even in the face of terror and fear.

That's what happened to me last week as I read several novels by Lois Lowry in preparation for her visit to the city where I live. Lowry, a two-time winner of the Newbery Medal and author of *The Giver*, spoke in Pittsburgh on Sunday and at my son's elementary school the next morning. I wanted to be ready.

Many people have read *The Giver*. It is the first in a quartet of books, and it is the third—*Messenger*—that brought to mind the refugees streaming out of Syria and the rancorous, sometimes callous debates here about whether they should be allowed to come. *Messenger* reminded me what a flourishing society can look like when it welcomes the gifts of refugees without fear.

The book takes place in the future after an unnamed cataclysm. Communities, separated from one another, live in deep suffering. But there is one, simply called Village, that is known for its hospitality. Many of the residents of Village came from places with "cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty, or false comforts."

In Village they found refuge, safety, love. They discovered that, broken as they were, they had gifts to offer others.

Matty, the main character, came to Village as an uneducated trickster and was welcomed, taught, and given a place where he could discover his own gifts. The people in Village are not rich, but they are richly blessed again and again by the presence of newcomers in their midst.

But things begin to change. People begin to fear there won't be enough if they keep letting refugees in. Not enough housing. Not enough food. Not enough room.

Matty's guardian diagnoses the problem: "*Selfishness*, I guess. It's creeping in."

A law passes to close the borders. They begin to build a wall. Selfishness starts to win.

*Messenger* offers a picture of the stark alternative we face today: Will we be communities where the gifts of others—outsiders, refugees—find a place and where we flourish together? Or will we let fear and selfishness cut us off from these possibilities?

As I hear about governors refusing to let refugees into their states and of my representative in Washington voting to stop the resettlement of Syrian refugees, I can't help now but think of a scene from this book: a few angry, frightened people, some former refugees themselves, stacking logs in the mud, waiting for the day the new law takes effect and they can build their wall.

I teach at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and earlier this month our president, David Esterline, sent a letter to the seminary community. He reminded us that our vision statement says we "seek to be a generous and hospitable community." In the face of a refugee crisis, what does that mean?

It might mean, he suggested, we should consider using some of the vacant apartments the seminary owns to house "refugees and sojourners who may be coming through Pittsburgh."

Has he been reading Lois Lowry? Probably not. He has been shaped by another refugee story and by the vision of another community called to welcome strangers, remembering that Christ himself had no place to lay his head.

But Lowry's book is a story communities can gather around, with people from all religions and cultures, as they discern how to respond to fear and selfishness. It's a book that can help us have difficult conversations with children, and to learn from them and receive their gifts.

It's a book where we can spy, whether Lowry intended it or not, another way: the way of Christ, who welcomed us when we were aliens and strangers from God's own village.