

“Getting to the Root of the Immigration ‘Crisis’”

© 2010 Rev. Wendy L. Bell

Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church

Harvard, Massachusetts

October 10, 2010

This past June at the UU General Assembly, the delegates chose as our new Congregational Study/Action Issue the topic of “Immigration as a Moral Issue,” urging all of our congregations to spend four years learning about Immigration.

I’m not sure that four years will be enough time. For this is a complex issue. Illegal immigration itself is a real problem with real costs and real decisions to be made. For every argument on one side of the issue, there is a counter-argument on the other, and often both seem to reflect some piece of the truth.

But as complex as this issue is, some basic facts are undisputed. There are currently 37 million foreign born people living in the U.S. 35% of them have become naturalized citizens. Another 33% are lawful permanent residents; they have “Green Cards.” And another 2% have temporary resident status, a temporary visa for work or study. Together, those groups make up 70% of the total of foreign born people living here, and their status is entirely legal.

The remaining 30% of foreign born, approximately 11-12 million people, have no valid immigration status. Of those, somewhere between 40-50% entered the country legally with a temporary visa and then overstayed that visa. The rest entered without inspection, crossing the border illegally, which is, by the way, a misdemeanor, not a felony.

Of those who have come or stayed illegally, 56% have come from Mexico and another 22% have come from other Latin American countries. The remaining 22% have come mostly from other continents, more than ½ from Asian countries.

The history of U.S. immigration policy is complex and interesting. I spent some time with the Women’s Alliance on Tuesday night outlining the highlights. For this morning, suffice it to say that when the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed it marked a turning point; the first time that a visa was required to enter the country; in other words, the first time an immigrant to this country had to get permission from our government before setting out on his or her journey. All of a sudden, it became much more difficult to immigrate “legally.”

And the process remains difficult today. The system is complicated – a system of quotas and qualifiers – but basically, it is nearly impossible for someone who is poor to enter this country legally – even if he or she has a very good chance of finding work, even if he or she has family here to sponsor and support him or her, even if he or she is coming to escape political persecution. And those who are allowed to enter often have to wait up to 20 years to come in.

As I've said, this is a complex issue and it is not just we who deal with it...

“The poor are in motion everywhere today. Worldwide, the number of immigrants has doubled in the last 30 years to almost 200 million people. (1) Almost one in five lack proper documentation. (2) This is a massive global phenomenon.”¹

And it's not an issue that's going to go away any time soon. Experts on climate change predict that increasing incidents of extreme heat, drought, famine, and flood as well as conflicts over increasingly scarce resources will result in more people moving in search of a better life. This problem is only going to get worse.

Anxiety, fear, and rhetoric are all on the rise. In the aftermath of 9/11, with two wars going on and the economy in bad shape, it seems everyone is looking for someone to blame. And so we hear more and more often these days that illegal immigrants are criminals, that they bring disease, that they take our jobs.

It is ironic to note on Columbus Day Weekend that the same could have been said about the guy that some people refer to as this continent's first illegal immigrant...that he and those colonizers who came after him came without permission, stole land and resources, spread disease, and left natives less wealthy and far less self-sufficient than they'd had been before.

Why do people come here today in such great numbers and so often without documentation? And how are we connected to this issue? After all, we are reflecting this month on our 7th UU principle, about the interdependent web of all existence. What light does that principle have to shine on this complex issue of immigration?

As Jesuit theologian Dean Brackley who teaches in El Salvador has written:

“The scale of migration northward from Central America, and also from Mexico, and of deportation southward, is mind-boggling. What does it say about conditions in our neighbor-countries to the south?...At least two-thirds of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Hondurans are poor...It's worse in Guatemala.”²

“Poverty and lack of opportunity are propelling the migrants northward. They are not looking for the sweet life; they leave reluctantly, out of necessity. John Paul II called this the ‘migration of the desperate.’ The notorious wall rising along the southern U.S. border will not stop this migration. Hunger is stronger than fear.”³

Donald Kerwin of the Migration Policy Institute points out that since NAFTA was passed in 1994, “more than two million persons [have] lost their jobs in the Mexican agricultural

¹ Brackley, Dean, “Migrants: Illegals or God's Ambassadors?” in National Catholic Reporter, May 14, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

sector. As a result, many formerly independent, small family farmers joined U.S. migrant labor streams, most without legal status or protection.”⁴

And as one immigrant worker has said, “We come here because of horrible economic conditions at home. We are not here by choice. Who in their right mind comes here knowing they will be insulted and looked at as a threat? Who risks their lives crossing a militarized border and leaves [behind] their family, their culture, their life...unless they have to?”⁵

In their book *Welcoming the Stranger*, authors Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang write:

... We are challenged to think about how our lifestyles – our consumption habits, our use of energy, our country’s foreign policies – might affect how others live. Few young men eager to be married, for example, stop to think about where the diamond in their fiancée’s engagement ring came from, and if it helped to fund a civil war in West Africa. Most would rather pay \$1 less for a bag of coffee rather than spend the additional money for the assurance that the coffee farmer was paid a reasonable wage. Few of us seriously consider the environmental impact on the poorest nations as we hop into our cars instead of using public transportation, walking or riding a bicycle. And not many take the time to investigate how U.S. trade policy, foreign aid policy, or support of a particular foreign political leader will affect individuals in other countries...⁶

The truth is we, as consumers, like low prices. Businesses like high profits. They need to cut costs, so they try to keep labor costs low. But this is a democratic society where workers have struggled for and attained certain rights.

The problem is that when groups of laborers get rights, the cost of production goes up and profit goes down. Businesses which are trying to maximize profits need to find a new way to lower costs, including finding sources of cheaper labor. They can do that either through supporting policies that keep labor cheap here at home or by leaving the country to find cheaper labor elsewhere. Or they can bring cheaper labor into this country.

Just look at the textile and garment industries, for example. They started here in New England in the mills of Lowell and Lawrence. When they needed to find cheaper means of production, they moved south where there were lower taxes and no organized labor movements. Then they told the workers here that if they wanted to keep their jobs, they’d have to take lower wages to remain competitive with their southern counterparts. When they went global, moving some of their operations about of the country to Puerto Rico and other locations in Latin America, they used the same tactics to cut labor costs in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Interfaith Worker Justice, “For You Were Once a Stranger: Immigration in the U.S. through the Lens of Faith,” p. 2, as quoted by the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie in her sermon “Santuario: Sanctuary for All,” preached on 2 December 2007 at the Arlington Street Church, Boston, Massachusetts

⁶ Soerens, Matthew and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), p. 184-185.

their US plants. “If you want us to keep factories open here, you need to be willing to receive competitive wages and fewer benefits.” Then, “when they had reduced conditions in their U.S. factories to make them competitive with the Third World, they began to import Latin American workers – claiming that no U.S. workers wanted the jobs.”⁷

The bottom line is that our current economic system of high profits and cheap products relies on inequity and on maintaining a poor, vulnerable class of workers. The acapella singing group Sweet Honey in the Rock sings a song that speaks to our place in this tangled web of economic relationships...

I wear garments touched by hands from all over the world
35% cotton, 65% polyester, the journey begins in Central America
In the cotton fields of El Salvador in a province soaked in blood,
Pesticide-sprayed workers toil in a broiling sun
Pulling cotton for two dollars a day

Then we move on up to another rung – Cargill
A top-forty trading conglomerate, takes the cotton through the Panama Canal
Up the Eastern seaboard, coming to the US of A for the first time
In South Carolina at the Burlington mills
Joins a shipment of polyester filament courtesy of the New Jersey petro-chemical
mills of Dupont

Dupont strands of filament begin in the South American country of Venezuela
Where oil riggers bring up oil from the earth for six dollars a day
Then Exxon, largest oil company in the world,
Upgrades the product in the country of Trinidad and Tobago...

In South Carolina
Burlington factories hum with the business of weaving oil and cotton into miles of
fabric for Sears
Who takes this bounty back into the Caribbean Sea
Headed for Haiti this time – May she be one day soon free –
Far from the Port-au-Prince palace
Third world women toil doing piece work to Sears specifications
For three dollars a day my sisters make my blouse

It leaves the third world for the last time
Coming back into the sea to be sealed in plastic for me...
And I go to the Sears department store where I buy my blouse
On sale for 20% discount
Are my hands clean?⁸

⁷ Chomsky, Aviva, *“They Take Our Jobs!” And 20 Other Myths About Immigration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), p. 62

⁸ “Are My Hands Clean?” Words and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon, Songtalk Publishing Co., 1985

Sweet Honey has another song, too, which has recently become a favorite of Katelynn's. It begins:

Oh my goodness, look at this mess
I'm the one who made it, I do confess
Oh my goodness, look at this mess
I think I better clean it up!⁹

And that of course is what we realize we must do when we begin to see how our lifestyle and policy choices have contributed to the so-called immigration "crisis." We begin to see that we have some responsibility for how things are today.

When we talk about immigration, we most often hear economic, social, and legal arguments. What we don't hear so much are the ethical and moral arguments. What is the right thing to do – regardless of costs?

This morning we heard the passage from Leviticus in the Bible which says, 'the foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself' (Lev. 19:34). [According to Dean Brackley] No ethical precept is repeated more frequently than this in the Old Testament."¹⁰

In divinity school we frequently were asked to reflect on one question: Where is God in this situation? Even now as more of a Zen Taoist, with a less clear concept of a personal God, I think about the answer to this question. Where IS God in this immigration debate?

And I'm convinced that even if you don't believe in a God, it is still worth asking, if there WERE a god worthy of your worship, where would that god stand? With the multi-national conglomerates? Or with the mothers and fathers trying desperately to find a better life for their children?

I have always believed that god would be on the side of equity, justice; on the side of the underdog, and the have-nots. I have always believed that god would want the playing field leveled. And that is, in fact, the god we find in the bible when it comes to immigration...

"The Biblical Story is a migration story," says Joan Maruskin.¹¹

God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden after providing them with protection. God sends Cain away after he kills Abel, but only after offering him protection, too – even though he was a criminal, a murderer. Noah and his family are forced to flee because of a great flood in their homeland. God tells Abram to know for certain "that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs." (Genesis 15:13a)

⁹ "Oh My Goodness, Look at this Mess," words and music by Nitanju Bolade Casel, 1999

¹⁰ Brackley, Dean, Ibid.

¹¹ Maruskin, Joan M., "The Bible as the Ultimate Immigration Handbook," Church World Service, 2003, 2004

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot welcomes the strangers, but the townspeople don't. And "their lack of hospitality to the stranger brings about their destruction." "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy." (Ezekiel 16:49)

A famine causes Isaac to resettle in a foreign land. Joseph's brothers migrate to Egypt during a famine seeking grain and it is given to them. Moses grows up on a foreign land, a stranger. God sends the Israelites into the wilderness to wander for 40 years after escaping persecution at the hands of Pharaoh. God goes with them and provides manna and water for them in the desert to ensure that they will survive the trip.

Once the people are settled, they are reminded of how to behave toward strangers and sojourners in their midst: "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers once in the land of Egypt."

And this is just the beginning. Remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to which his parents migrated. He and his family had to flee to Egypt to avoid persecution and the threat of death. Jesus spends his whole ministry moving about with "nowhere to lay his head." He taught that we all have an obligation to take care of our neighbors, even if they are strangers.

You were strangers once, the Bible tells us, and God was with you, so treat the stranger well. That is the basis of compassionate action. As Joan Marushkin has written,

"We are all migrants on the face of this earth. Take a moment and consider your personal migration. Are you where you were born? Have you moved and if so for what reason? How many times have you moved? Many of us move by choice others by necessity and others by force. Humankind's story is a migration story. We all are, or have been migrants, immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers."¹²

And so...putting ourselves in their shoes...thinking about what is right...Complexity aside, arguments and counter-arguments aside...what do we need? What we need is a world in which no one has to leave their homeland and their families to risk their lives crossing a militarized border, because there is potential for a life worth living at home. As Aviva Chomsky has said, "Immigration is a humanitarian problem. People leave their homelands, their families, and their livelihoods and risk their lives. What is needed is a humanitarian solution..."¹³ More equity in the world, not less. More justice, not less. More respect for one another, not less.

May it be so...as the debate continues...may our hearts, our minds, and our eyes remain open... And may we be transformed by the power of love and compassion. Amen and Blessed be...

¹² Marushkin, Joan M., Ibid.

¹³ Chomsky., 166