

YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE: THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE
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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Call To Worship--*The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Reading--from "We Are One," by Peter Morales

America has already been transformed by the latest waves of immigration. Our children and grandchildren are going to live in a multicultural society.... We need not be afraid of that multicultural society. Barbed wire is not the answer. More border guards and more deportations are not the answer. Paranoia and panic will solve nothing.

Instead, let us embrace the possibilities before us. Let us be guided by love and hope. Let our actions emerge from the deep conviction that people from Mexico and Korea and Canada and Vietnam are ultimately part of our extended family. Surely, religious people who have learned to embrace the wisdom of Judaism, Christianity, humanism, Islam, and Eastern religions can lead the way. We are people who have always affirmed human diversity. We have always looked to the future and seen new possibilities. We must do so again. Let us be the people who break down the arbitrary barriers that divide us from them. We are one, and love and hope will guide us. Let us, together with all our brothers and sisters, build a new way.

Sermon

"We are one," says Unitarian Universalist president Peter Morales. Lest we miss its importance, that phrase is the title of Peter's essay in the book, *A People So Bold*."

Do we believe that? If we do believe it—believe in our seventh principle about the interdependence of all—are we able to practice it with our hearts and bodies? Do we *know*, with Quaker George Fox, that there is that of God in everybody? Do we *know* that our common gift—life, with all its wonders and awfulness—unites us more than all the differences we so commonly see? How well are we able to transcend those differences?

I don't know about you, and I'm not going to confess about myself at the moment—but humanity has, at many points, been spectacularly bad at such transcendence.

There are few topics that make my point better than immigration. Right now, as pretty much everyone freely admits, our immigration system is just plain old broken. We have a country to our south that has had its economy thoroughly disrupted by American policy. In the '90s, a lot of service jobs became available to the formerly-rural workers from Mexico, and they poured into the US.

But then— It began to be noticed that "they" were different from "us," and that there were a lot of "them." They were terrible Americans, in fact, speaking another language, eating different foods, decorating with unseemly combinations of wild colors, behaving with distinctly non-Anglo passion and warmth. A whole bunch of them had entered illegally. We make a noun out of that word, calling human beings "illegals," as though that sanctimonious label could describe any brother or sister.

(Parenthetically: I know there are many other takes on the reasons for this mess our country is in. But I choose, this morning, to lift up a fundamental religious/moral issue that shapes it.)

A crackdown was called for. Never mind that legality and morality are quite different things. Peter Morales reminds us:

The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal. The importation and sale of African slaves was legal. South African apartheid was legal. The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal. The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal. Burning Michael Servetus at the stake for his Unitarian theology was legal. (Morales)

Mexicans die by the 100s each year, trekking across the desert in hopes of finding a way to support themselves and their families. They are met by a giant fence. If they make it in and settle, they live a life of fear. The Federal government's so-called "Secure Communities" program is Draconian, forcing local law enforcement to be an arm of immigration, a civil matter. It has a lamentable record of catching US citizens in its net, disregarding protections of law such as due process, and turning local police into agents of terror for immigrants. ("Secure Communities By the Numbers")

The human cost is intolerable, as Mexicans die, turn to a life of flight and fear, and have their families quite literally torn apart, with no recourse.

It is a very big mess, and very few of us have the answers. We can but work locally and nationally, act compassionately, and hope that President Obama meant it in his State of the Union speech, when he called for comprehensive immigration reform.

Today, though, as I reflect on this complex topic of immigration, I want to focus on the mysterious human tendency to separate ourselves into us and them, to live by our fears rather than our ideals. I want all of us to look into our hearts as honestly as possible, and feel our attitudes toward "the other." The hope and possibility of transformation lies with all of us.

We are Americans, living in the fabled land of immigrants. We have, on the base of the Statue of Liberty, a poignant poem welcoming the wretched pilgrim who yearns to breathe free. And yet, we have an abominable legacy we must rise above, a legacy that pretty much stopped welcoming the tired and poor when the huddled masses started coming from places besides England and North Europe. ("Nordics," in late 19th-century anti-immigration jargon.)

Let me just recap a little of this sad, sad history.

- In 1882, Congress invoked a ban against the entry of any more Chinese people (who had been building railroads and other parts of our country's infrastructures) (Marty, 390)
- In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act set drastic quotas about immigration, particularly affecting Jews, particularly during World War II. (All sources) "More producers, fewer peddlers," was the slogan. (Marty, 392)
- In 1952, over Truman's veto, another "quota" act was passed. (*New York*, 109) One of its sponsors said, "I believe that this nation is the last hope of Western civilization and if this oasis of the world shall be overrun, perverted, contaminated or destroyed, then the last flickering light of humanity will be extinguished. ...we have in the United States

today hard-core, indigestible blocs which have not become integrated into the American way of life, but which, on the contrary are its deadly enemies." (Wikipedia, *caveat emptor*)

Many presidents have contributed to the apparent American determination to exclude all but White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. In 1866, Congress overrode Andrew Johnson's veto of the first Civil Rights Act, which guaranteed citizenship for anyone born in this country. (*New York*, 184) Warren Harding wrote in support of racist causes. (*Marty*, 390) Coolidge signed the Immigration Act of 1924. In 1942, Franklin Roosevelt authorized the uprooting and incarceration of 110,000 Japanese American citizens. Secure Communities has flourished under President Obama.

Pretty depressing. But not cause for despair.

We are a country founded on that magnificent document, the Declaration of Independence. Slavery was abolished. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was, in fact, passed over the presidential veto. Women got the vote. Schools were desegregated. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 addressed various kinds of discrimination. Public opinion helped end the debilitating war in Vietnam. Americans with physical disabilities are now guaranteed access in public buildings.

All these things happened because of people recognizing what was right, instead of what was comfortable, and working for change. We can do that. We can get involved in race and immigration issues here in our own community. (The *Boise Weekly* reported last May that Idaho's Hispanic population increased by 73% between 2000 and 2010, compared to overall population increase of 21.1%. This is not a hypothetical issue for us Idahoans, who sometimes feel isolated and insulated from mainstream issues.)

We can go *en masse* to the Justice General Assembly in Phoenix this coming June. Immigration will not be the only justice area covered, but it will be major, since Arizona has been the scene of some of the system's most outrageous immigration practices. (With a sheriff who has said it is an honor to be called a member of the Ku Klux Klan, who is being investigated by the Justice Department, and who has been pulled off immigration detail by that department.) [Morales, internet])

It takes time and resources to go to GA, but this one could change our lives. We could come home energized personally, and empowered socially. When you go, I will introduce you with such great pride to my fellow UUA Board members. I would love to meet every day of GA with all BUUF folks who attend, for debriefing, sharing and hoping and planning.

And, as a foundation to our social action work, it is imperative that we all do our deep personal work. I return to the mysterious human tendency to focus on perceived differences, instead of what unites us as fellow travelers on this planet: our griefs and joys; our failures and triumphs; our ordinarinesses and our times of blazing presence; our loves and disappointments and loneliness and connections. Our pettiness and the nobility that allows us to transform, to reconcile and heal.

A good friend of mine died last week, Rev. Roger Otis Kuhrt. Roger was a UU minister who entered our faith over 30 years ago. He served various congregations, full- and part-time, in the Pacific Northwest District: Olympia, Tacoma, Twin Falls.

He was brilliant, outrageous, larger than life and absolutely stuffed with information about everything under the sun. He was ordained in a Sufi order and was active in the Order of Sofia (I don't really know what it is.) He wrote a book about communication in Martin Heidegger. His ideas tended to be either brilliantly insightful, or so off the wall that a person just couldn't figure out whether he was having one on or not. He dressed in dashiki-type shirts, and always wore a large, green and black medallion of the yin-yang symbol. He was funny and super outspoken, and I loved him dearly. He cracked me up.

However, there were members of our ministerial chapter who basically would not stay in the same room as Roger. They would speak of him in disparaging, eye-rolling tones of voice. He was clearly different enough that they saw him as "other." And when we see someone as truly "other" from us, we see them as less worthy, and can be dismissed. For a couple of the colleagues, whatever they felt went beyond simple dislike or not having much in common, and seemed to have a deeper component I didn't understand.

I don't think Roger gave a hoot about the negative opinions (he probably got a kick out of yanking their chains), but I always felt a little disappointed in those judgmental colleagues. Their antipathy seemed unexamined [I could be wrong, of course!].

In my perfect world, the judgmental colleagues would have made an effort to know Roger as a person. They would have found the generosity and the strength and the courage to sit down and get to know him—to unhardened their hearts, open them to the possibility of finding important things in common. And, if they didn't end up really liking him, because of human personal differences, in my perfect world they would at least have realized that he was a human being like the rest of us, and that would have released their animosity. In this world I'm creating, our ministerial chapter would have benefited. Energy would have been released. It would have strengthened the depth and

trust we need, to help each other to be authentic, strong, vulnerable ministers, living out of love.

Is there a person or category of persons who serves as a negative Roger in your life? If you reflect fearlessly, in the privacy of your heart, do you find someone(s) you are willing and able to dismiss?

It may seem a long jump from a few UU ministers hardening their hearts against a colleague; a long jump from you or I closing ourselves off from someone who makes us uncomfortable, to the wholesale injustices practiced on immigrants of color—but it's not. Seeing whole categories of people as so different they are dismissable is an extension of dismissing individuals.

The good news is that transformation is possible. And we can be agents of transformation, or what's a religion for? You've seen it, I've seen it: in your own heart, as the miracle of compassion enters, and you feel your human bond with the one who seemed so alien, so threatening; in the faces of other people who have dismissed us, that blessed gift of forgiveness; in the hard, hard conversations maintained by people who won't give up, and so move toward each other.

In my 24 years as your minister, I have witnessed and participated in enough transformed relationships to know that they happen all the time, when people become willing and able to let go of attachment to difference. Of course, things fail sometimes and the alienation is continued, or even built upon and spread around. But I have faith, based upon experience of open hearts and willingness to feel the "other's" heart, to know that that's not how it is most of the time.

If more and more of us make the brave decision to attend to our foundational heart and soul matters; if more and more of us have the persistence and grace to set aside those protective otherings—we will shine in the world, and we will have the quiet strength needed to work in determination and compassion with powers and principalities.

Peter Morales asks us to be guided by love and hope, because we are one. He asks us to dissolve the arbitrary barriers that divide us, and as sisters and brothers, build a new way. May it be so.

Closing Words—from "My Tribe," by Alberto Blanco

From lake to lake,
Forest to forest,
Which tribe is mine?
--I ask myself—

But if I have to belong to some tribe

--I tell myself—
Make it a large tribe,
Make it a strong tribe,
One in which nobody
Is left out,
In which everybody,
For once and for all
Has a God-given place.

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