

Immigration  
By Rev. Meghan Cefalu  
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When it comes to the topic of US immigration I have a unique perspective. On one side of my family tree I can trace my heritage in North America to the Daughters of the American Revolution. My mother's people originally came from the British Islands and found their way to become hearty Midwestern farmers who helped settle "the wild west" in southern Missouri. My ancestors were true red-blooded Americans through and through.

On the other side of my family tree I am only a second generation American. My father's parents both emigrated from Norway to Ellis Island at around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My father and his brother and sister were the first of their family to be born in the US and they spoke Norwegian together at home. The family lived in Harlem, which in the 1920's and 30's was the heart of the "Harlem Renaissance" - the center of an unprecedented outpouring of African American social and cultural works.

These two historical experiences inform my viewpoint about immigration.

Before I go on I want to say that I find it uncomfortable and disingenuous to talk about immigration without also acknowledging that this land Europeans "settled" was an entire continent filled with thousands of native tribes of people; each with a complex culture and language, mythology and spirituality; people who had been living right here for thousands of years. I think it is important to hold that in perspective when we engage in the conversation about who does or does not belong in this land.

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Immigration is a multifaceted issue. There are economic, social, political and humanitarian components. It is a topic that has a way of touching on humanity's deep psychological questions of belonging, acceptance and rejection. It is in essence about boundaries. How wide do we draw the circle? Who is "us" and who is "them"? How do we decide? Who gets to decide?

In the 1920's the US congress began to radically alter our country's immigration policy. Before the passage of the Johnson-Reed act of 1924 there were few restrictions on immigration. The passage of that Act marked the moment that the door to this country was slammed shut — at least for some.

It was also known as the National Origins Act, this new law limited the number of immigrants to 2% of those already living in the U.S. from any particular country as shown in the 1890 census. The result was immediate discrimination against immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, favoring instead those from northern countries that had a higher population in the U.S. prior to 1900. It also completely barred immigration from Asia and India.

So in essence the law drawn up by wealthy white congressmen declared that “more people who are like us can come in to our country but we want less of the people who are not like us”. Immigration policy is and has been from the very beginning about maintaining power and control for wealthy European Americans; it is inherently racist and classist.

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Our country is now trying to figure out what to do about the estimated 6 million immigrants from Mexico and Central America living and working in the US without legal documentation.

On Thursday the Alabama legislature passed the toughest anti-immigrant law in the country, inspired by but far exceeding the notorious SB1070 in Arizona. If the Governor signs this bill, HB56, would make hiring, renting an apartment to or even driving an undocumented immigrant to church a crime. The local police can stop anyone who they suspect may be an illegal immigrant and demand to see their papers. It will also make it a crime for an immigrant to not have their papers on them at all times.

I honestly do not understand why there is so much anti-immigrant vitriol.

Being here illegally is a civil offense akin to a speeding ticket and yet I don't see us as a nation rising up in self-righteous anger and cracking down on people who drive too fast. There are not self-appointed vigilantes lining the highways with semiautomatic rifles shooting those who break the speed limit. Government agencies are not breaking into the homes of speeders in the middle of the night and taking family members to detention centers indefinitely, separating mothers and fathers from their children, husbands and wives from one another, from their elderly parents. And yet this is what is happening in the lives of Latino/a people who are living in the US without legal documentation.

I worry that with all the reactivity and emotionality around this issue the American people have become blind to the facts. There is unbiased data available to help us see the situation more clearly and decide on policies that could fix our nation's broken immigration system.

In my research I discovered the Migration Policy Institute. It is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. On their website are maps that show where immigrants from various countries have settled in the US and internationally, graphs that compare immigration trends and census data and lengthy well-researched academic reports about all aspects of immigration. These are the people working hard to consider the overall economic, cultural and humanitarian issues and make solid policy suggestions. They seek to help us answer the big questions: What is the economic impact on Americans of these low wage earning undocumented workers and their families? Is this really a problem? And if so, what kind of problem is it? And how do we solve it?

There are plenty of websites that say that undocumented workers are fueling poverty in the US by taking American's jobs. But the data collected by the Migration Policy Institute show that low-wage-

earning immigrant workers compete mainly with other low-wage-earning immigrants. And that "...in the long run immigration accounts for only a small share of the deterioration observed in less-skilled Americans' labor market employment and earnings."<sup>1</sup>

The piece of the puzzle that I'm not hearing discussed widely in the national dialog about immigration or unemployment is that every year hundreds of thousands of jobs are disappearing from the American marketplace. The Internet and inexpensive fiber optic and satellite communication systems are making it possible and much more economical for US companies to pay workers in developing countries. So the jobs that used to keep a large segment of Americans employed, from factory jobs to fashion and automotive design and manufacturing, financial analysis and oddly enough, call centers, are not being taken by immigrants, they are being handed over by US companies to workers in foreign lands.<sup>2</sup>

Many people opposed to creating a path to legalization and citizenship argue that undocumented immigrants cost U.S. taxpayers huge sums of money, draining the Medicaid, Food Stamp, and education programs. *But this is simply not true.* In fact, "immigrant workers pay taxes, ... but are unable to claim many public benefits their tax dollars support.... A large body of evidence [with studies from the Kennedy School of Government, the Pew Hispanic Center, the National Academy of Sciences, the U.S. Social Security Administration and the IRS] concludes that undocumented immigrants are net contributors to the U.S. economy, providing much more in taxes paid and work provided than they receive in public benefits."<sup>3</sup>

These folks are not taking our jobs, and they are not draining our social systems. So what is the issue?

In times of high anxiety people look for scapegoats, for easy answers. I think some people in power are eager to deflect attention away from the fact that the banks and other large corporations are reporting record profits while the rest of the people in our country stumble along, losing our homes to foreclosure and deferring medical care.

An article in Forbes magazine states that, "Twelve of the nation's largest Fortune 500 companies, while making \$170 billion in profits during the period of The Great Recession [from 2008 to 2011], paid an effective tax rate of negative 1.5%.... Not only have these twelve companies paid zero in taxes for the years 2008-2010, they actually received tax subsidies that added \$62.4 billion to their bottom lines...these companies include American Electric Power, Boeing, Dupont, Exxon Mobil,

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<sup>1</sup> Immigration Policy and Less-Skilled Workers in the United States: Reflections on Future Directions for Reform. by Harry Holzer. MPI.

<sup>2</sup> The Rich World's Disappearing Jobs By John Berthelsen and Indrajit Basu. Asia Times Online 10-8-3. <http://www.rense.com/general42/rich.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Interfaith Worker Justice, "For You Were Once a Stranger: Immigration in the U.S. through the Lens of Faith," p8.

FedEx, General Electric, Honeywell International, IBM, United Technologies, Verizon Communications, Wells Fargo and Yahoo.<sup>4</sup>

And “In the midst of a deep economic recession, America's health insurance companies increased their profits by 56 percent in 2009, a year that saw 2.7 million people lose their private coverage.”<sup>5</sup>

Americans have every right to be irate. What I think is happening is that the brown people who don't speak English and have no legal standing have become an easy target of the nation's anger and frustration.

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I think as liberal religious people it is easy to delude ourselves about our own capacity for racism. We tend to think we are open-minded and progressive and because we do not act overtly racist we must be enlightened! But I suspect racism is something we all contend with to some extent. I know it is true for me, and I can't imagine I am the only one.

I will confess a recent encounter with my own racism. Chris and I just switched our healthcare provider to Kaiser. I got an email inviting me to go to the Kaiser Roseville website and choose my primary care physician. Each doctor has a picture and several paragraphs of biographical information. To my surprise I found that most, if not all, of the doctors are foreign born. Many are from India, some from Asia. Many of their biographies give hints that English is not their first language.

As I scrolled through the pages of possible doctors I found myself feeling disappointed. And I was surprised, and a little embarrassed, at my reaction. I guess I had in mind that I'd have a doctor who looked a bit like me. As I probed my reaction a little deeper I realized it had to do with fear of differences. Could someone born in the East understand me? I was looking for someone I felt I could connect with. But in reality there is no way of knowing from a picture and a few words what anyone is really like. I look forward to meeting my new doctor in person and discovering if she is someone I will grow to trust and rely upon.

I think one of the major concerns in our society, conscious or unconscious, is that immigrants will force us to change. Change is frightening, we fear the unknown. This fear has some grounding because immigrants *are* changing our culture. The recent census data shows that 38% of California is now Hispanic.

Some of the changes are admittedly not for the better. In my home town there was no gang activity to speak of when I was a teenager. In the last twenty-five years there has been an influx of Latino families and now the town is contending with a sharp increase in Mexican gang violence.

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<sup>4</sup> How Our Largest Corporations Made \$170 Billion During Great Recession And Paid No Taxes. By Rick Ungar. <http://blogs.forbes.com/rickungar/2011/06/01/how-our-largest-corporations-made-170-billion-during-great-recession-and-paid-no-taxes/>

<sup>5</sup> Health Insurers Post Record Profits. By Emily Walker. February 2010. ABC News. <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/HealthCare/health-insurers-post-record-profits/story?id=9818699>

But there are also great rewards to having a diverse community. Now Petaluma not only has many great Mexican restaurants and bakeries, and a widely celebrated community Dia de los Muertos event, thriving Catholic church outreach programs, but also more Latino/a owned businesses of all kinds, public art, and several civically-engaged Latinos and Latinas are bringing a refreshing non-Euro-centered perspective to the table.

W.H. Auden wrote, “Civilizations should be measured by the degree of diversity attained and the degree of unity retained.”

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Our immigration system is broken, yes, but these people who are risking their lives for a better future, who are crossing a deadly desert and a militarized border, leaving their friends, family and culture behind to pick tomatoes and strawberries for 45 cents for a 32-pound bucket, are not the cause of our economic problems.

One by one states are passing legislation that mandate racial profiling creating fear and even more danger within these communities. ICE continues to raid neighborhoods and workplaces arresting people and tearing apart families. Private citizens are taking up night vision goggles and firearms along the Mexican border and shooting people attempting to cross under cover of darkness.

How does our faith call us to respond? What is our answer as Unitarian Universalists?

As my colleague Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie wrote: “This is the heart of our faith: love, service, justice, peace. As Unitarian Universalists, we stand at the intersection of every major world religion that calls us to this [radical] welcome:

The Jewish people, remembering the time of their enslavement as strangers in Egypt, begin their credo with the words, ‘An ancient Aramaean was my father.’ ‘You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,’ says their law, ‘for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’

Christians worship a Messiah who was homeless; Jesus said, ‘For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me.... Inasmuch as you have done this unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.’

And in the Qur’an, the central religious text of Islam, it is written that Muslims should ‘serve God ... and do good to ... orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, [and those who have nothing].’

As Unitarian Universalists, each of these faith traditions informs the first principle of our faith: the commitment to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every being.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie. “Sanctuario: Sanctuary for All” Preached on December 2, 2007 at Arlington Street Church.

As people of our free and thoughtful faith we are called to seek out non-biased, fact-based information and to encourage our law-makers to adopt an immigration policy that respects the humanity of these people while also protecting the true economic interests of our country.

As most of us are the descendents of immigrants ourselves, excepting any Native Americans or descendents of slaves among us, we owe it to our ancestors to work to create a fair and just path to legalized citizenship. And we owe it to ourselves to never lose track of just who were the true architects of our financial crisis; who has suffered and who has prospered by the suffering of others.

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Can we commit to seeing the humanity in one another's faces, no matter the color;

To hearing the voices calling out to be known for the individual each person is, no matter the language.

To feeling the delight of recognizing we are all part of one tribe, a tribe that has always been, and whose existence we can prove right now.

May it be so. Amen.