

A Justice-Seeking People
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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It is by our stories that we know ourselves. And by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and about the world, we find our place to stand, we choose and justify our actions. The young women and men in the 7th grade religious education class this year have been learning the stories of church members and their commitments to social justice – environmental justice, food and agricultural justice, economic and housing justice. Through the stories of these dedicated individuals and the causes they serve, our younger generation is learning how we Unitarian Universalists are a justice-seeking people, and how varied those causes and commitments can be.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a story. Being a justice-seeking people is one of the stories we tell ourselves, and others, about ourselves. In our free faith tradition, we call ourselves into covenantal relationship to live lives that demonstrate justice, equity and compassion for all persons, affirming our values to create a better world. We hold ourselves accountable. We seek to correct our tendency to slide into patterns of behavior that are self-serving, oppressive or exploitive of others, or into passive behaviors in the face of conditions that harm others. We are a justice-seeking people. We are the people who stand on the side of love. That is our story. As Paul Loeb said in the earlier reading, “People are spurred to action not so much by knowing the right facts and numbers, as by hearing stories that affirm human worth and purposefulness, and embody a worldview that makes sense of the confusion and contradictions in our lives.”

One of the most confusing and contradictory issues in this nation right now is immigration. In the interest of full disclosure, I have been an immigrant myself, and one of my stories about myself is that I am a citizen of the world. I grew up in downstate New York, and my parents moved to Ontario, Canada when I was on the threshold of adulthood. I was a landed immigrant in Canada for a number of years, and my brother still lives there. I went to college in Michigan and Missouri, I lived for nine months in Honduras, Central America. I have lived in Colorado and Florida, and now have come full circle back to the Empire State for a while. I have now chosen a profession that may take me to many more places on this continent before I stop moving around. But it is not my constant relocation that gives me this sense of being a citizen of the world, but rather the story I tell myself about myself – and of course, just like any story, it is only partly true.

A story I tell myself about the nature of being human, of living on this planet, is that we are all at some level citizens of the world, because throughout our existence, humans have moved around. The creatures of this planet, as far as I can tell, have always migrated from one place to another. The act of migrating can make the difference between survival and death in a seasonally harsh climate or changing environmental conditions. Human migration from one place to another has happened for millennia, creating shifts in population that may be miniscule or massive.

Human migration may be spurred by crop failure, political oppression, or sometimes, it seems, by simple curiosity to see what is on the other side of the mountain. Since the time our species originated in the eastern part of Africa, humans have spread to most parts of the world. Migration is central to our human story.

Political borders take migration and create immigration. Once we create a political boundary, once we claim ownership and control of a plot of land, we create a new story, and we set up a system to define who belongs to that plot of land, who is an insider or an outsider, who does and does not

belong. We create a story about our right to control who may come in from somewhere else and who may not.

Our new story is about ownership and rights and borders, about walls and fences, about “I belong here and you belong there,” about natives and aliens, about who is welcome and who is not. We create legal ways to enter into our land, and define other ways as illegal. As our story goes, since we own the land, that is our prerogative. We might be talking about a nation, or we might be talking about a neighborhood – Trayvon Martin was at risk for being in a neighborhood where someone decided he did not belong, just as much as a Mexican citizen is at risk if they cross over to the Arizona side of the desert without using the legally sanctioned system to validate their presence.

And yet that impulse to migrate remains in our human story, in our human heritage – an impulse that might be spurred by oppression and persecution, by intransigent poverty, by environmental destruction, by the urge to see whether things might be better on the other side of the border. When legal and approved immigration becomes more difficult, people choose informal migration, which we call illegal immigration.

How does it happen? People obtain visas to enter the country as students or tourists, and then they simply don’t go home. People find ways to move across the political boundary without going through the gate – they hike over mountains or they swim across rivers or make their way, at risk of their lives, through deserts. They insist on migrating, even when they know they will not be welcomed. They migrate, driven by that impulse to live where there are greater resources, a cleaner environment, an opportunity to earn a better living, a hope that their children might have a better life.

And so they come, and they just keep on coming. In Spanish, the term used for immigration is identical to that for migration – migración. On this continent, if people are poor and cannot get into college, or cannot easily pose as tourists, they use informal rather than legal migration. They swim the river and cross the desert, on their own or aided by the human transporters we call coyotes, under that impulse to seek a better life.

And we do not welcome them, because in general, we figure that our plot of land is about as full as we would like it to be. The migration into the United States is mainly from Mexico, though there is also a largely unsecured border right here to the north as well as to the south, and of course oceans with unsecured beaches on the east and west coasts. Informal human migration from Canada has not been perceived as much of a problem, and we don’t get so many folks from Haiti or Cuba these days, though I suspect there may still be the occasional boat pulled up on the beach of a Florida shore.

And these informal migrants, who go to such lengths to get into this country, what might their story be? We hear their stories: stories about hope and dreams, about the land of milk and honey on the other side of the ocean or river or desert – a story about plenty, and opportunity, about clean air and clean water, safe streets and decent housing, health care that can save your life, a story about a place where smart kids can go to school and grow up to be doctors or lawyers or business leaders.

The story may be shaped by the fact of a prosperous well-organized nation sitting right next to one that has not managed to prosper, where law enforcement is often ineffective, health care unavailable except to the wealthy, where in many places the air and the water can make you sick. Their story might be that if you can make it to the well-organized prosperous place, you too may prosper, and most important, your children might grow up into a brighter future.

And so the story draws them here. But the reality is that, once they are here, whether from Haiti or Cuba or Canada or Mexico, they are “illegal” immigrants, because they did not come in the legal way. Of course, coming in the legal way can take as long as twenty years, and that is for people who have education and financial means, or family members who are citizens, or a skill considered necessary to the US economy. If you don’t have any of those characteristics, even if you can get on the list, it is unlikely you would get to immigrate legally within your lifetime.

And so they come -- across the rivers, in the trucks, across the deserts and the oceans. The human urge to migrate – to go to where the grass is greener, where children can thrive and be educated, where hard work earns a living wage -- is very strong. Current estimates of the number of people in this country without benefit of legal sanction are about 11 million these days.

That is a lot of human beings, and we find them in all sorts of places. They work here. They have been hired by employers who overlook their lack of legal permission, to cut our lawns and wash our dishes and care for our children. They are hard workers, and they are often doing necessary jobs. They raise families and go to school and they live their lives here. And there is no way, just by looking at or listening to someone, to know whether they are in this country legally or outside the law.

And there is another story, the story of the United States of America, we who call ourselves the American people. As the story goes, we Americans are a justice-seeking people – we have a strong commitment in our society to live under, to create and enforce, laws that are reasonable – to live under laws that protect the dignity of persons, that allow for freedoms that we cherish – freedoms to speak freely, to earn a living, to own property, to create and raise our families and to practice our beliefs as we find best. The rule of law is central to the democratic system in this nation.

And so we come to the confusion and contradictions, the reality of ambiguity and not knowing where to stand, how to act to be in true alignment with our values. We come to Arizona Senate Bill 1070, and similar laws passed in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah over the past two years. We Americans like laws, remember? The laws in Arizona and those other states legally mandate that the officials who enforce state and local laws – state and local police and sheriffs – can and must also enforce federal immigration law.

These state laws require that anyone who has violated a local law may also be required to prove, to provide documentation, that they are in this country legally. They must demonstrate that they are in compliance with the federal law that defines a person’s right to be in this country, on this plot of land we call the United States of America. It sounds pretty reasonable on the face of it, perhaps. This is just about enforcing existing laws, although it is unusual in that local officials are enforcing federal laws. We have the federal immigration laws in place because we believe that in our plot of land we get to say who can be here and who cannot. We believe that other people should simply stay on their own plots of land unless we give them permission to come in. I belong here, you belong there, and I have the right to say whether you may come here, whether you may be here, or not.

So what is the problem with these new laws? Well, I think there are some cultural norms and expectations – another part of our story about life in the United States -- that are challenged by these state immigration laws. Fundamentally, we Americans like to have as little law as we can get away with, just enough to protect and preserve our freedom.

In fact, the Federal government is challenging the Arizona law, with arguments before the Supreme Court beginning week after next (on April 25), arguing that states do not have the authority to preempt federal law with their own regulation of persons who have migrated into those states from other countries. It all comes down to who has the right to determine and enforce our rules about who belongs where.

So the entire idea of having to carry documentation to prove that you are in the country legally violates our common notion, our story, about what kind of country we are, what kind of people we are. The requirement to document your legal status raises the specter of oppressive nations where people must carry their papers. The idea of having to prove our identity simply runs against our grain, undermines our story, and makes us feel unsafe, threatened, at risk of losing our freedom.

A related concern is that even though the law says very explicitly that it is not to be applied based on racial profiling, in our culture it does encourage racial profiling and invites harassment and discrimination against Latinos and other persons of color, regardless of their citizenship status. Although the law does not specify that it is targeting illegal immigrants from south of the US border, no one seems to be too concerned that Swedes, Bosnians or Irish will be targeted, but rather those of Latin American heritage. Our Latino and Latina sisters and brothers feel threatened, targeted, by this new level of enforcing the right to migrate across the political boundaries of our nation.

As the Unitarian Universalist Association prepares to hold our annual General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona this June, we are called to take a stand on national and state immigration policies. Many in our faith movement have concluded that the Arizona law and its clones in other states take a dangerous step in the direction of racial profiling, undermining human dignity and justice, imposing the tyranny of the state. Our faith movement has stood against these laws since the spring of 2010 when the Arizona law went into effect. Nearly 500 UU's, including 50 ministers, converged on Phoenix for a march and rally on May 29 of that year,; some of them went to jail, protesting Senate Bill 1070 in the name of human dignity and justice, standing on the side of love.

And here is another element of the story. The protestors, and many others, are advocating for new federal immigration laws that will respect the dignity and rights of all and will provide a fair, safe avenue to documented status for law abiding immigrants. Their story is not that we should throw the borders open, but rather that we need to admit that the immigrants are here, and that since they are working and raising families here, they do belong. Since they are part of our society, we should acknowledge that fact and welcome them fully onto this plot of land that we in reality already share.

But that does not sit well with those whose story focuses on the law, on our ownership; on our right to say, "You do not belong here," and to send those who entered illegally back to their own plot of land, back to where they belong. And so the battle on immigration reform is a battle of stories, unlikely to be decided by reason, facts and figures. Facts and figures are managed and manipulated to serve the stories in our human lives, not the other way around.

And so in a few weeks, thousands of Unitarian Universalists will gather in Phoenix, showing up in solidarity and support for those within Arizona who are fighting to have the law overturned or repealed, standing with those who argue for changing the federal immigration laws – to make the UUA General Assembly a demonstration for justice and human dignity.

At this afternoon's Interfaith Impact forum, you can learn more about immigration and migration issues from a local perspective with local official, activists, and service providers who work with

the immigrant community. In the Doctrine of Discovery class that Jean Ott and I will be teaching in May, you can learn more about the fundamental issues at hand.

I agree with Paul Loeb when he says that the important thing is to look at the problems, to make a decision, to step into our power, and to act. We may make mistakes, we may find we are on the wrong path and need to change direction. But the gift of citizenship, the gift of our human power to create a better world, is ours only if we use it, only if we make the effort to learn and think and talk and decide and act. Then we will be doing our best to stand on the side of love, we will be doing what we can to create a world of more justice and wholeness, we will build the land that can be. Amen, so may it be.