

Give Me Your Tired, Your Hungry...or Not
UU Fellowship of Durango
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Gooooo moooooorning, Duuuuuuf! Durango UU Fellowship has such a great acronym. Did any of you ever see Robin Williams in the movie "Good Morning, Vietnam?" That's the way the character the movie was based upon began his cheerful radio program every morning. I'm so grateful for the return invitation... and special thanks for being asked to be in your pulpit on May 1st -- the day around the world on which workers are honored. Well, maybe I should have said, "around the world *except* in the United States." I was asked to speak today on immigration, but has immigration ever been far removed from the issues of workers? So today I'll speak about the Siamese twins of immigration and workers rights, which you'll hear in a moment have been joined at the hips since our nation's birth.

When you go to 'sermon school' at UUSC, lead ministers like John Buehrens and Bill Schulz instruct you to "begin a sermon with a joke or a humorous story. "It will," they tell you, "put the congregation at ease." "Furthermore, it may even relax you," they advise. Since you seem pretty at ease this morning, maybe what follows is for me?

Marilyn have you ever heard of Igor Stravinsky? I thought so. That's right he was a Russian composer born in 1882. Many of you may not know that at age 57 he immigrated to the United States. A year later decided it was okay here and applied for American citizenship. He made an appointment to see the appropriate official, who had all of his documentation in front of him, but asked the famous composer his name. "*Stra-vin-sky*," he replied, speaking each syllable distinctly, "*Igor Stra-vin-sky*." [pause] "You could change it, you know," suggested the official.

Thank you. It worked...I feel more at ease.

So let's begin with why the rest of the world celebrates workers on May 1st. Where did that come from? Well it started in the U.S. in Chicago. In 1884, when the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, predecessor of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was calling for an eight-hour workday. Talks didn't get very far and a general strike was organized for May 1, 1886. In what most historians recognize as the first 'May Day Parade,' more than 80,000 workers marched down Chicago's Michigan Avenue. There were sister strikes called in a number of other cities including as Milwaukee, Cincinnati and New York.

A few days later when police tried to break the strike at the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago four workers were killed by police. Tempers were running high and by the next evening a huge crowd gathered at Haymarket Square to protest the police brutality. Then the police moved in to disperse the crowd and a bomb went off killing seven policemen and a number of protestors. The police in turn opened fire on the crowd killing and wounding an unknown number of civilians.

The police response was swift. Brutal interrogations followed homes broken into in the middle of the night. There were hundreds of detentions and forced confessions. For many immigrant neighborhoods, it was remembered as a reign of terror. Many innocent people were arrested without charges. Eight people were eventually convicted for the deaths of the policemen, even though *no evidence was ever presented directly linking them to the bombing in Haymarket Square*. Four of the defendants were publicly hanged in 1887. (Lin, 2011)

In Paris in 1889, the International Workingmen's Association called for worldwide demonstrations on May 1, 1890, commemorating the struggle of Chicago workers. It has continued since around the world EXCEPT in the United States, which didn't want to be reminded of Haymarket Square, the kangaroo courts and executions of labor activists, nor did we want to be associated with trade union movements around the world that were largely tainted by socialist or even communist ideals. So in 1894 Congress established Labor Day as a national holiday in September, but divorced from the struggle of working class people around the world and the martyrs of Haymarket Square. By the way, it would take another three decades to get the 8-hour work day, when Congress passed the Adamson Act in 1916.

We have been ambivalent about immigrants and immigration since the earliest days. The founding-est of our founding fathers, George Washington wrote to John Adams in 1794, "My opinion with respect to immigrants is that except for useful mechanics and some particular professions, there is no use encouraging it." On the other hand, people like Benjamin Franklin recognized the economic advantages and even necessity of immigration. Franklin wrote, "America hails newcomers to its shores as the bulwark of democracy. (Eller, 2006)

In 1848 some 300,000 Chinese came to America to help build the railroads and harvest the fields, but in 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed preventing further Chinese immigration. About the same time as that bill's passage a new California law prohibited clothes being washed in wooden buildings! How many Chinese laundries do suppose could afford brick structures?

The largest increase in our U.S. ethnic diversity occurred with the annexation of half of Mexico in 1848. Yet, later in the mid 1930's, as the depression hit, there was deep concern about the number of Mexicans in this country, i.e. that they were taking away jobs. Five hundred thousand were forcibly removed and relocated to Mexico, some of whom had been U.S. citizens for generations. (Eller, 2006)

So it shouldn't be surprising that in the midst of this economic downturn, anti-immigrant sentiment is abundant. There have been many immigration sermons preached in the last five years of attempted, but failed immigration reform. I hope many of you have read one called "Thoughts from an Arizona Jail" written by one of our ministers after UU led civil disobedience

in Phoenix last year. The Rev Peter Morales, the Pope of UUs as I like to fondly tease him, has delivered a powerful one called simply “Immigration,” which is available on the UUA website.

While I was president and CEO of UUSC, one of our major program areas was economic justice. So I am conversant with many of the issues that link immigration and labor rights. I have been told poignant and powerful stories by immigrants, who have been regularly victimized by employers who would refuse to pay them knowing they had no legal recourse or the employers would call ICE (short for Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

We all know that this country is in bad need of immigration reform. I hope this administration will be successful that regard, but until there are bills to support, opposed, or debate, what can we do? The answer is plenty and today I want to inspire you with a few examples.

We can all start with respectful language. Think about the language of how the debate is framed. Workers who are here without papers are often referred to as “illegal aliens.” Immediately the conversation is prejudiced. “These people are criminals,” the Glen Becks of the world will say. Right away we have to be fearful, because criminals are dangerous. But *people* are not illegal, only actions. *People* can have documentation or not. It is useful to remember that being in the United States without having gone through the proper immigration procedures is not a crime. It is a civil offense—like jaywalking—and it is handled outside the criminal justice system. And that is why deportation rather than a jail sentence is appropriate. The undocumented person is guilty of nothing. Calling undocumented people “illegal” is a deliberate obfuscation and inflammatory.

So we can all do is de-escalate polarizing language of the debate. Another thing we can all do is address some of the misconceptions. Some claim that undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America are damaging our economy. The facts are that our economy now depends upon this source of low-wage workers to maintain our standard of living. The facts are they undocumented workers are primarily employed in a few sectors where most Americans do not want to work for those wages – construction, food service, Landscaping, agriculture, food manufacturing, services to buildings and dwellings such as janitors, and private households. I am sure a number of people in this congregation employ undocumented workers and I suspect there are not Americans knocking on your door asking to have those jobs.

Some say that undocumented workers are paying little taxes as they take much of our social services. The facts seem to be that most immigrant workers are paying taxes, including an estimated \$500 billion in Social Security taxes. At the same time, most undocumented workers, and many other legal immigrants, are not taking advantage of social services, being afraid of deportation or harassment. So they pay into social security and unemployment, but don’t receive benefit.

Yes, this is a terribly difficult time for many people, who are unemployed, but the answer is not to round them up and deport them...or criminalize the behavior of trying to put food on your table for your children. Undocumented workers in this country struggle to make ends meet and live in fear of being deported, some to a country where they don't even speak the language...because they were born and raised here.

What else can be do besides de-escalate the rhetoric and reframe the misconceptions? We can do what the UUA calls 'standing on the side of love.' Put concretely it means we can reach out and help the 'strangers in our midst' to no longer be and feel like strangers.

There are small towns like this in Colorado that are establishing community run services to assist undocumented and legal immigrants integrate into their communities. I visited a health care clinic in a small Colorado town the other day that used to serve almost no Latino clients. They consciously studied how they could become more welcoming, which began with language – making sure they had a translator for anyone who needed it. Then they began understanding undocumented workers fears and reached out to them with assurances that seeking care in that facility would not lead to deportation. They then began to look for some funds that might be available for emergency or urgent care situations, where the client could not qualify for Medicaid or state indigent patient assistance. Now three years later 17% of their clients are Latino and many of them either pay or have insurance.

There was an inspiring story in the NYT (Preston, 2011) this week about a young woman named Olga, who had been attending a small college in a suburb of Dallas when she was pulled over by local police. She hadn't committed any traffic violation, but didn't have a license and they turned her over to ICE for deportation. ICE had been trying to deport her for two years to Mexico where she was born, but hadn't been since her parents brought her here without papers when she was five. She feared being deported to a violence filled country, where she had no family and no memories.

Suddenly informed her they were dropping deportation proceedings and she could remain in the U.S. as long as she remained in college and kept up her grades. ICE was responding to an apparent directive from the Obama administration to focus on undocumented workers who have committed criminal acts in the U.S. not law abiding students like Olga. That directive, which has not been made public, seemed to be the result of twenty senators writing to President Obama to reign in ICE more known for middle of the night raids with guns drawn that terrorize immigrant communities.

So you can make certain both senators from Colorado, if not signatories to that letter, add their names. The hero of this story is a businessman in Dallas, who helped Angela fight deportation with delays even after her final deportation date in February. He stood beside her, he stood up for her, he stood 'on the side of love' as we like to say UU world. You could do the same here for a student at

Fort Lewis College or at the community college. ICE may continue to do 'business as usual' until they see someone is sticking up for the persons they are targeting.

Last week immigration authorities also suspended the deportation of Mariano Cardoso, 23, a Mexican student at Capital Community College in Connecticut, according to Senator Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat, who had pressed Mr. Cardoso's cause. ICE's decision ended a two-year battle against deportation for Mr. Cardoso. (Preston, 2011) What kind of signal would it send...what kind of news would it make, if it were reported that a congregation acted on the dictates of their faith to keep a student – high school or college – from being deported?

This is what the UUs who went to Czechoslovakia in 1939 and France in 1940 did...they saved one person at a time.

There was another inspiring story in the news last week, but I didn't read it in the U.S. press...I picked it up in the *Montreal Gazette*. (France-Presse, 2011) A Guatemalan immigrant who came here without papers when he was carried across the border by his grandmother, when he was only five years old, just one a Pulitzer Prize as a reporter for the L.A. Times for an investigative story about corruption. His mother cleaned the house of and looked after the children of an L.A. Times columnist. That woman introduced him to a lawyer who helped him get a green card and then the columnist offered him a job as an office assistant. He spent ten years making photo copies, sorting the mail, doing research, but all the time taking journalism classes whenever he could. After he was asked to do some translations on an investigative piece, someone noticed his talents and he was hired as a journalist. Three years later he said, "My story is like that of any immigrant who has worked hard in this country. But now it's different: I am a journalist and we won the Pulitzer." The woman for whom his mother worked got to know the woman who cleaned her house, asked about her children, and eventually offered one of them an entry level clerical job.

You give people dignity by listening to their stories. You are not obligated to resolve their problems. You can help them take a small step. You can stand on the side of love. If you remain fearful that you'll have to rescue them, then you may be blinded to the small thing you could do that would make a difference.

Following an ICE raid in a nearby community in Ohio, several residents wanted to make certain the immigrants, undocumented or legal, were not hesitant to seek out public services such as the police or fire departments. They decided to create a resolution for City Council. It really wasn't that radical a resolution and merely sought to codify the already prevailing practice of not inquiring about the immigration status of those who sought out public services. Do you know if Durango has an unofficial or official policy or inquiring about immigration status? Some communities have prohibited their police forces from cooperating with ICE, which means they can't pull over someone like Angela because they suspect she's undocumented. Do authorities in Durango collaborate with ICE or do they say "It's not our job to enforce federal immigration laws?"

A town near here helps low income residents buy subsidized housing. To be eligible the person must work 32 hours per week in some sort of community-related service job, not make more than a ceiling income, and sell the house back to the community when they leave or to someone else who is eligible -- with a limits on how much they can profit. There are nurses living in such homes, school teachers, people who work in sanitation. Imagine how wonderful it feels to a woman from Central America, who is undocumented, but lives in and owns one of these homes with her children. There is a lot communities can do. (Administrator, 2011)

Many communities have established 'worker centers,' where undocumented laborers can be matched with people in the community who want to hire them. They help establish a fair wage. They help the workers recover wages, if the employers fail to pay them. They may offer English as a second language classes or offer other services such as tutoring for immigrant children, because their parents can't assist them at home.

Finally, I cannot be in a pulpit on the day in which working men and women are remembered and not mention what is happening in Wisconsin. Collective bargaining is one of the rights mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19, section 4 states "Everyone has the right to join trade unions for the protection of his interests." Let me tell you what some of those interests are in 2011. (Lawyers, 2011) 'Some friends of mine who are labor lawyers are helping a union in Alameda County, Ca today, because their workers, bus drivers, are not permitted biological breaks, because they must keep 'on schedule.' The women wear Pampers and the men wear condoms connected to a tube that empties into a leg bag. The female workers were too humiliated to talk about these conditions that sound more like a *maquiladora* than the United States in the 21st century. Collective bargaining gave us the 8-hour work day. Collective bargaining gave us the weekend. Collective bargaining gave us safer workplaces. We need to protect collective bargaining.

The United States needs a comprehensive immigration reform that protects the rights of all workers. (Prayer)This reform would include:

- A plan to regularize the status of most undocumented workers in the U.S.
- A halt to the deportations that separate parents from children and husbands from wives.
- Strong enforcement of all employment and labor laws.
- Elimination of guest worker programs – programs that bring in temporary workers with few or no rights – unless they include full workplace protections and provide a path to permanent residency and citizenship.
- Finding better ways to use U.S. trade and aid policies to reduce poverty and despair in developing countries.

So as we wait for immigration reform to take shape for the estimated twelve million undocumented people in this country, there is a lot we can do with them...a lot we can do as individuals, congregations, and as a community of people that want a kinder and gentler response to the people, who do so many important jobs for us -- quietly, humbly, efficiently -- all the while hiding the fear with which they live every day.

As I mentioned earlier in the sermon, this country has always displayed an ambivalent attitude toward immigrants. Let us recall that they have often made perilous journeys to come here, making heart wrenching sacrifices in the name of hope, of need, of love of their children for whom they want a better future. Unless we are Native American or descendants of slaves, these are very likely the same hopes, needs, and love that brought our own forbears here...and which we would pursue if we were in their circumstances. We don't have to wait for the federal government to reform our immigration policies. Even as our nation sends an ambivalent message, we can send a message that is not. We can stand on the side of love.

Benediction (from the Talmud)

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief

Love mercy now

Walk humbly now

Love justice now

You are not obligated to complete the work,

But neither are you free to abandon it.

READING:

From the 1917 U.S. Immigration Act:

That the following classes of aliens shall be excluded from admission into the United States: All idiots, imbeciles, feebleminded persons, epileptics, insane persons, and persons who have been insane within five years previous; persons who have had two or more attacks of insanity at any time previously; paupers; persons likely to become a public charge; professional beggars; persons afflicted with tuberculosis or with a loathsome or dangerous contagious disease; persons not comprehended within any of the foregoing excluded classes who are found to be and are certified by the examining surgeon as being mentally or physically defective, such mental or physical defect being of a nature which may affect the

ability of such alien to earn a living; persons who have been convicted of or admit having committed a felony or other crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude; polygamists, or persons who admit their belief in the practice of polygamy, anarchists, or persons who believe in or advocate the overthrow by force or violence of the Government of the United States, or of all government, or of all forms of law, or the assassination of public officials; [persons coming for immoral purposes ;] persons hereinafter called contract laborers, who have been induced or solicited to migrate to this country by offers or promises of employment or in consequence of agreements, oral, written or printed, express or implied, to perform labor in this country of any kind, skilled or unskilled...

NOTES:

This sermon is *not* intended for publication. That said, when sermons get posted on a website, they take on a life of their own. I have included references here, both to acknowledge those on whose shoulders I stand on and so that people interested in articles like that from the NYT or the Montreal Gazette may find them more easily. I collect quotes and anecdotes as I travel and don't always have source for them. If anyone is not acknowledged here, who should be, please consider 'imitation the highest form of flattery' and accept my apology.

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