

I Could Be Illegal: Standing with Our Immigrant Sisters and Brothers,

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I'm guessing that most of you heard about Arizona SB 1070 last spring or summer. SB 1070 is the infamous Arizona state law that many people, including myself, believe is in violation of civil rights as well as racist. In essence, SB 1070 calls on Arizona law enforcement officials to ask a person for proof of citizenship if they suspect that that person is in the U.S. illegally. There was a national uproar against this, as it sounded like it would lead directly to racial profiling, and so the law was amended to state that it does not allow racial profiling. But one has to wonder.... What would lead a law enforcement official in Arizona to suspect that someone might be in the U.S. illegally? I mean, I could be illegal. How could someone look at me and know whether I'm illegal? Well, I guess there are clues. My English is fluent. I think I appear to be of European descent. Oh, but wait. That *is* racial profiling. In spite of the amendment, I can't wrap my mind around how you could suspect someone of being in the country illegally without relying on cues such as racial characteristics or stereotypes or imagined racial characteristics... or without relying on ethnic and language stereotypes. Realistically, how could the targets of SB 1070 in Arizona be anything other than people of color – and Mexicans in particular?

“Immigration as a moral issue” is the new “study/action issue” of the Unitarian Universalist Association for the next four years, selected by the delegates at our annual General Assembly. In light of SB 1070, “immigration as a moral issue” is a timely study/action issue indeed. Today, I want to talk about immigration in terms of this congregation's own mission statement. You actually know our mission statement, perhaps without knowing that you know it. It is basically the words of our weekly chalice lighting. Our mission statement “is to seek the light of truth, share the warmth of love and live the energy of action”.

So, let's start by seeking “the light of truth”. I'm sure you've heard it said that this is a country of immigrants. Unless you are 100% Native American by descent, then at least some of your ancestors immigrated here to the United States from somewhere else. And there's something romantic about this; it's part of our national identity, the story of the American Dream. The story is, our ancestors (sometimes our grandparents or parents) came here seeking a better life – seeking a chance for a better life for themselves and especially their children and descendants. They came here to this land of opportunity as a kind of noble journey, a “hero's journey”. And they are the ones who, through courage and vision and hard work, made the United States what it is. There are many truths to this story, but it does leave out the tragic reality of what the early immigrants did to the native peoples who were here already. And this story leaves out the tragic reality that not everyone came here so freely. Some came here as indentured servants. And of course many were brought here from Africa as slaves, completely against their will. The truth gets more complicated the more you look at it... So it is approximately true that we are a country of immigrants.

Sometimes I will hear someone of 100% European ancestry say, with pride, “My ancestors came to this country legally”. And there's a good chance that that's true, since we're still on the topic of truth. I have never been into genealogy, and I don't know many details, but with the possible exception of some rumored Cherokee blood way back in my family, it seems that my own

ancestors on both sides came here from western Europe in the 1700s and 1800s¹. And though I know nothing about the details, I can say today that my ancestors came here legally. Well, probably. The truth is, the U.S. immigration system was very different in the 1700s and 1800s... almost unrecognizable from what we have today. Had today's laws been in place back then, who knows if my ancestors could have gotten in legally? As Dave Bennion puts it in his article "The Myth of the Legal Immigrant Ancestor", "Until the late 19th century, there was very little federal regulation of immigration – there were virtually no laws to break. The new nation needed workers, and immigration was 'encouraged and virtually unfettered.' There was no border surveillance"² or anything of the kind. The chances are, my European ancestors did not have to get visas before entering the country. They just had to get here (no easy task, to be fair), get inspected, and probably that was it.

Until the 20th century, there was very little bureaucracy around immigration. As Bennion tells us, "Prior to the 1920s.... Those persons barred from immigrating included [many] Asians ... paupers, polygamists, persons with '...contagious disease,' persons likely to become a public charge, anarchists and radicals.' Also barred were "the 'feebleminded' and 'insane,' and the illiterate. The vast majority of people who arrived at a port of entry were allowed to enter. Of course, some people lied about their health and political beliefs and [therefore] entered 'illegally.' [But] The Immigration Service excluded only 1 percent of the 25 million immigrants from Europe who arrived at Ellis Island between 1880 and World War I."³ Just 1 percent!

The truth is that (again, as Bennion tells us) "The Immigration Act of 1924 created a quota system that was based on race and nationality and heavily favored Western European immigrants, while closing the door to [so-called] 'undesirables'" from other lands. And with every new rule and restriction, more "illegal immigrants" were created.⁴ Another truth is that things changed dramatically after 1965. The good news is, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed many of the racist provisions of the earlier laws. And consequently, since 1965, there has been a new wave of immigration from Asia, Central America, South America, and Africa. The bad news? For the past twenty years, immigration rules have become more restrictive again in various ways. The bottom line truth? It's much, much harder to come to this country legally today than it was in the days of Ellis Island and other fabled ports of (largely) European entry. The truth is, it used to be that folks could come here from Europe looking for opportunity, and though they faced hardships, being threatened with deportation was seldom one of those hardships.

Today, the truth is, we have an immigration system that is quite complicated compared to the days of yore; some have compared today's complicated immigration laws to the complexity of the tax code. Much of it depends on how closely one is related to someone who is here legally – best of all, to someone who is a U.S. citizen. So in the past, say in the 1800s, someone could

¹ During the live preaching of this sermon, I said 1800s. I later learned that in fact my ancestors came during the 1700s as well. This doesn't change the basic point: there were almost no rules for my ancestors to come into this country. And it proves the point that I'm unaware of my own genealogy!

² Dave Bennion, "The Myth of the Legal Immigrant Ancestor", an article on [change.org](http://immigration.change.org/blog/view/the_myth_of_the_legal_immigrant_ancestor), December 11, 2008, http://immigration.change.org/blog/view/the_myth_of_the_legal_immigrant_ancestor

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

come here for the economic opportunity, plain and simple. But now? Unless you have a family member who is legally in the U.S. already – someone who can sponsor a visa for you – there are few paths for you to come to the U.S., at least legally.⁵ And even if you do have a sponsor, there is a wait involved. If the relative is distant or considered peripheral – and according to our system, a sibling is peripheral – then the wait can be exorbitant. Sometimes the wait can be up to 20 years, if you want to do things legally.⁶ 20 years! Babies become adults in 20 years. Many people die in the course of 20 years. When we're talking about human lives and keeping families together, 20 years is unreasonably long. Doesn't it seem that the "family values" our country's leaders extol should extend to immigrant families too?⁷

But let's get back to just a few more facts. Immigrants – including those here illegally – put a lot of crucial money into the social security system. Seth Hoy's article is illustrative: according to "The [Social Security Administration's] chief actuary... if it wasn't for [millions of] undocumented immigrants paying into the system—the majority of whom, mind you, will never collect [social security] benefits—the SSA wouldn't have been able to cover payouts in 2009"⁸. This country is very dependent on immigrants – including unauthorized immigrants – economically. That's the truth.

Another truth is that our system creates illegal immigration. Let me explain. It's not just the Social Security system that depends on money from undocumented immigrant laborers. Many businesses create the demand for these laborers. It's simple profit. U.S. businesses can make more profit the less they have to pay people in wages. And by hiring – and essentially seeking out – undocumented workers, these businesses can get away with paying a wage that is lower than the legal minimum wage and make more profit. As one commentator recently stated, "We have two signs on the Mexican border: [one sign says] 'Keep Out' and [the other sign says] 'Help Wanted.'"⁹ Another way that our system creates illegal immigration is our military and paramilitary activity in other countries, including the Middle East and Latin America. The Rev. Peter Morales, President of the UUA, puts it this way:

"People are being pushed from their homes and pulled by opportunities in the United States. America is involved in both the push and the pull. First, the push... the US has helped to set in motion the forces that drive people to risk their lives to come to America. In the case of Guatemala [to give one example] our CIA overturned a democratically elected government in the 1950's. The massacres of the 1980's were carried out by a military government [the U.S.] supported, by US-trained officers and by military units using American weapons. More recently, our economic policies have helped contribute to massive unemployment and dislocation in ...

⁵ There are some special visas for tourists, students... some special asylum/refugee cases as well.

⁶ See "Why Becoming a Legal Immigrant Is Next to Impossible" by Mari Herreras on AlterNet, September 5, 2010 http://www.alternet.org/story/148088/why_becoming_a_legal_immigrant_is_next_to_impossible?page=entire

⁷ Also, same sex marriage is not recognized federally, taking away a path to legal residence for same sex couples and their families.

⁸ Seth Hoy, "Undocumented Immigrants Giving Social Security, Baby Boomers a Big Boost", September 8, 2010, found at <http://immigrationimpact.com/2010/09/08/undocumented-immigrants-giving-social-security-baby-boomers-a-big-boost/>

⁹ Ruben Navarrette Jr. quoted by Stephen Kenney in "Immigration through the Ages", January 3, 2009. found at http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/01/03/immigration_through_the_ages/

Central America. The vast majority of immigrants from the south are not criminals, they are economic and political refugees. And then there is the pull. American employers have been more than happy to hire Mexicans and Central Americans to” do low-wage labor.¹⁰ So says Peter Morales.

Try to hold the light of those truths in your mind as we move to part two of our mission at the UUCiA: sharing “the warmth of love”. The UUCiA is a Welcoming Congregation. Now, that has a particular meaning; a “welcoming congregation” in UU parlance is a congregation that strives to be welcoming to bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people. But we try to be a welcoming congregation in the fuller sense as well; we strive to be welcoming to anyone who comes here, from any background. We strive to welcome the stranger. This is central to our mission of sharing “the warmth of love”. And it’s central to our religious heritage, too. To give just one example from the Hebrew Scriptures, I want to quote from the book of Leviticus (not always my favorite source, mind you, but this is lovely): “The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹¹ The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are in many ways the story of wandering, migrant people – including Jesus, Joseph and Mary, lest we forget. And hospitality and kindness to strangers is one of the primary virtues held up in these scriptures as well. We come from this tradition of what some have called radical hospitality, or prophetic hospitality. And every Sunday, what is the one group of people that we single out here at the UUCiA for a special welcome? It’s the newcomers among us. Why wouldn’t we want to extend that same special welcome to newcomers to our country, too? We come from a tradition of aiding the vulnerable, and it’s hard to think of a more powerless, vulnerable group than recent immigrants to this country, especially those who are undocumented.

There has not been much love for recent immigrants in this country, particularly since the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks that day were carried out by immigrants. Some of those terrorists were here legally with student or tourist visas; others were in an illegal status. The terrorists who carried out the attacks were also Muslims, and our Muslim sisters and brothers have faced escalating contempt and hatred in this country since 9-11 too.

And this brings us to the topic of fear. Our country, since 9-11, has been filled with fear. There is no question that the attacks of 9-11 were tragic and horrifying; and yes, I remember exactly where I was that morning... and yes, I remember feeling vulnerable and afraid in the aftermath. And I am not a New Yorker and did not personally know any of the victims. But I felt fear; I remember getting a shudder – almost like temporary PTSD – when I heard the first plane fly over my house after that period of no-flying. It was a traumatic national experience.

But staying in a place of fear is not healthful for our country. Fear is never the place from which you want to operate. I know that when I’m feeling fear, my ugliest side comes out. It is my reptile brain taking over, making me lash out in some ugly ways. When the U.S. operates from fear, it is also ugly. I think immediately about the Japanese-American Internment Camps in the

¹⁰ Peter Morales, op ed in the *Washington Post*, July 29, 2010, found at http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/07/what_people_of_faith_and_conscience_must_do_about_immigration_reform.html

¹¹ Leviticus 19:33-34.

1940s after Pearl Harbor filled the country with fear. Well, the U.S. has been operating from fear since 9-11, and in some ways it has not been pretty this time around either.

In the spring and early summer, fear in this country seemed centered on illegal immigrants from Mexico. When Arizona SB 1070 was first passed and people started talking about it, those who supported the law emphasized the horrors of drugs and violence at the border and of course scapegoated immigrants. But I watched with horror and fascination as talk of the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” started making the headlines, and in the bat of the eye our fear was transferred from illegal immigrants to Muslims. It turned on a dime. But fear was the common denominator. And 9-11 was the common backdrop for the misplaced fear.

Some have used the term “Fear Industrial Complex” to describe this phenomenon. The term was coined by Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. His basic argument is that the Fear Industrial Complex is made up of politicians and corporations or even activist groups who create fear around certain issues or circumstances, and then reel us in by promising safety from the supposed danger. Glassner says, “Whenever somebody's trying to scare us, the question to ask is ‘Are they benefiting from it, and in what way?’ Is [the danger they’re describing] big, is [the danger] small, or is it just that they stand to benefit by making us scared?”¹²

So look at the fears in our country today. Who benefits? “Follow the fear”, so to speak. So, exactly who benefits from anti-immigrant fears? If you follow the fear, not surprisingly, it leads you to “follow the money”. Who benefits from anti-immigrant fear? One obvious winner is the Prison Industrial Complex. By criminalizing any immigrant who is not authorized to be here under our complicated rules, we create lots of criminals. With every undocumented immigrant, you have created an illegal immigrant – a person that our system treats as a criminal. That’s millions of criminals created by immigration laws alone. It’s good business for the Prison Industrial Complex, which is increasingly privatized. Business is booming. And when they try to use fear to get us to militarize our borders? That would be a win for the Military Industrial Complex.

Some politicians are also gaining thanks to fear. Stoking anti-immigrant fear can get you power in a place that has lots of scared native-born people. In Arizona, scary stories were propagated – such scary stories as the one where they found headless bodies along the Arizona-Mexico border. This ominous story was debunked and later acknowledged by the Governor of Arizona to be “an error”.¹³ An “error”? How do you mistakenly report that you found headless bodies? Oh, never mind, we didn’t really find headless bodies after all. The truth is that according to FBI statistics, violent crime rates in the towns along the U.S.-Mexico border have been dropping consistently.¹⁴

¹² Barry Glassner, as quoted in *The 'Fear Industrial Complex': How the Media, Government and Corporate America Bank on the Business of Fear*, by John Stossel and Natalie D. Jaquez, February 2007, found at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2898636&page=1>

¹³ Liz Halloran, “Facts Can’t Trump Politics In Immigration Debate” on NPR website, September 8, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129707693>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The good news is that there is an antidote to fear, and that antidote is love. That's what the "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign of the UUA is all about. Let's not be guided by fear. Let's be guided by love. "Love will guide us", the spiritual goes. We can stand on the side of love with the victims of the Fear Industrial Complex, with those who are scapegoated so that others might gain. Fear is powerful, but the warmth of love can be even more powerful. And it leads us, in our mission statement as in life, to the energy of action.

And let's close by touching the tip of the iceberg as to what we might do with the energy of our action. First of all, be informed and pay attention – follow that fear! I invite you to take a one-pager of the UUA on comprehensive immigration reform. There are so many useful ways your love can counter fear. You could help out the Refugee Immigration Ministry with your talents, or with donations. You could get involved with the New Sanctuary Movement, an interfaith movement that helps those suffering from unjust immigration laws. You can write or telephone your representatives and senators, asking them to support comprehensive immigration reform. Write or telephone your representatives and senators and ask them to support the bipartisan DREAM Act which would allow undocumented immigrant students to have a path toward earning citizenship. Let us never forget that our immigrant sisters and brothers are, first and foremost, human beings. They are not "aliens"; they are not "illegals". Let us re-humanize them. Let us never forget that immigrant rights are human rights. In the words of this morning's responsive opening words, "How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!"¹⁵ Let us bring down these strange and foolish walls and stand on the side of love with our brothers and sisters. Amen, and blessed be.

¹⁵ A. Powell Davies, reading 662 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).