

A Liberal Religious Perspective on Immigration  
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The issue of immigration is a major topic in the Bible. Consider, for example, the story in Genesis of the migration of the Jews to Egypt. The family of Jacob moved to Egypt to escape the desperate conditions brought about by a drought and famine. Jacob's son, Joseph, was in a politically influential position to give assistance. In Chapter 47 it is written:

*47:1 Then Joseph went in and told Pharaoh, and said, "My father and my brothers, with their flocks, their herds, and all that they own, have come out of the land of Canaan; and, behold, they are in the land of Goshen."*

*47:2 From among his brothers he took five men, and presented them to Pharaoh.*

*47:3 Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" They said to Pharaoh, "Your servants are shepherds, both we, and our fathers."*

*47:4 They said to Pharaoh, "We have come to live as foreigners in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks. For the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now therefore, please let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen."*

*47:5 Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, saying, "Your father and your brothers have come to you.*

*47:6 "The land of Egypt is before you. Make your father and your brothers dwell in the best of the land. Let them dwell in the land of Goshen. If you know any able men among them, then put them in charge of my cattle."*

As you know in the long run this did not work out for the Jews. Pharaoh did not want to make the Jews citizens with the same rights as Egyptians. At the same time, Pharaoh did not want to lose the cheap labor that the Jews were providing. It is not unlike the dilemma that faces politicians in the United States as they struggle to make immigration laws. In the case of the Jews they eventually got fed up with being exploited by the Egyptians and left. Teachings in the Bible about hospitality to strangers are rooted in this experience. As it says in Exodus: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

The last fifteen years at our Service Auction I have offered to the highest bidder the right to pick a sermon topic, along with being my guest at a local restaurant to discuss the topic over lunch. Last year Cal Perkins bought this item and we had a delightful lunch at a local restaurant.

The topic Cal asked me to speak on is immigration, in particular illegal immigration. Of course, every one of us has immigration stories, and if we are lucky, those stories have been passed down to us in our family histories.

In my own case, my ancestors on my mother's side arrived in New York City on a ship from Germany in 1884. One of my ancestors wrote:

*When we . . . met our traveling companions . . . we discovered that some of the children had small pox, although on the way to recovery. They had been bundled up so that the authorities did not observe it. So our little daughter, Marie, fourteen months old, was exposed to small pox. We had a week's wait at Bremen [Germany] but the first night at sea our baby became ill. We were taken to the ship hospital and none of our people were allowed to see us. Mother came with us into quarantine, and she and my husband took care of the little patient, as neither of them [was] troubled with seasickness. The hospital was upstairs at the very end of the ship where there is the most rolling and swaying; and I was dreadfully ill with seasickness until we entered New York Harbor on the ninth day of October. Then I took my baby into my arms, but she was already dying, and a short time later she passed away. That was a bitter cup for us young parents. . . . We were taken ashore in a small boat with the little body where we were isolated for three days. We were located on a small island in the harbor opposite the large Brooklyn Bridge. There we were, separated from all the world in a strange land, our travel companions being permitted to go on after being once more vaccinated. We couldn't understand one word of the English language, but we had very good care. After three days we were put together with the little casket, on board a ship. We disembarked at the Immigrant House, while the ship, bearing the body of our little darling, went on. We were told that they buried her on an island where such who died of communicable diseases were laid to rest. Such was our reception in the New World.*

This is part of my family story, but many of you have similar stories of coming to America. In my experience, we make sense of our lives by the stories we ourselves tell. While there are many statistics on immigration, I think it is the way we recall our stories, and which story we choose to remember, that to a large degree determines our views on immigration policy.

Consider this story. A little before one a.m. on September 10, 2001, a Maryland state trooper pulled over a car doing 90 miles an hour on Interstate 95 near the Delaware border. The officer asked the driver for his license and registration, and returned to his patrol car to run a radio check for any outstanding warrants. Finding none, he walked back to the car and handed the driver a ticket with a \$270 fine for speeding. A little over 24 hours later the driver of the car turned out to be the terrorist pilot on United flight 93 which crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. At the time he was pulled over, this terrorist from Saudi Arabia had overstayed his tourist visa by more than a year and was in violation of his immigration status because he had enrolled in flight training in Florida without a student visa. (*The Closing of the American Border* by Edward Alden, 2008, p 108-9)

To officials at the Justice Department, this story showed that the lax enforcement of United States immigration laws was instrumental in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people. As a result, mostly using laws that were already on the books, after 9/11 anti-terrorism enforcement and immigration enforcement became virtually the same. The number of border patrol agents grew from 3,000 to

more than 9,000. More than 6,000 National Guard members were sent to the US-Mexico border to supplement the Border Patrol.

Before 9/11 illegal immigrants were released and told to return for their hearing date. Today illegal aliens are held in federal detention camps until their hearings. About 31,000 non-citizens, including children, are held in immigration detention on any given day. There are over 200 detention centers, jails, and prisons nationwide. It costs about \$90 a day to hold a person in one of these prisons.

This tightening of our immigration laws after 9/11 reached a climax in December 2005 when the House of Representatives passed a bill that would have redefine illegal immigrants as felons. Hispanic Americans rose up in protest. Compelling personal stories again played a role in the negative reaction to this proposed law. The liberal Christian magazine *Sojourners* published this story:

*My name is Eduardo Gonzalez. I am enlisted in the United States Navy and my rank is Petty Officer Second Class, air warfare. I enlisted in the Navy in 2003. I met my wife, Mildred Gonzalez, in November 2001. On May 28, 2004, we decided to get married. Mildred's mother had come to the United States from Guatemala in 1989 without documents when Mildred was only five years old. Mildred's mother applied for asylum in September of 2000 and included Mildred on her application. Her mother was eventually granted legal status in July 2004. Because Mildred was included on her mother's application, Mildred also should have been granted lawful status in July of 2004. However, we were unaware of the repercussions of our decision to get married six weeks earlier—our marriage cancelled Mildred's ability to obtain status through her mother because she was no longer an unmarried daughter under 21 years old. At the time we got married, we did not know that Mildred and her mother would have an appointment with immigration in July of 2004. After all, they had already been waiting for four years for an appointment at that time. Mildred attended the immigration appointment with her mother and brother. Mildred was denied her request to obtain legal status, solely due to her change in marital status. At the time of her immigration interview, I was deployed and only being able to communicate once in a while. I found out that she didn't get approved. Mildred's case was then sent to an immigration court for removal proceedings . . . If Mildred's legal status does not change, she will have 60 days to voluntarily depart the United States or she will be deported. She has not been to Guatemala since she was five years old; she is not familiar with the culture, language, or society. She has no family there and I feel this would be very difficult for us. . . . Mildred has spent 18 years of her life in this country, and to us and our child, the United States is her home. Our son, Eduardo Gonzalez, was born on December 9, 2005, two weeks after I was deployed to Kuwait on my second tour. . . . I am about to go on deployment once again, knowing that my wife might not be here when I return, and not knowing where my son might end up if Mildred has to leave before I return. . . . As a citizen of the United States of*

*America, it makes me wonder, "If I can die for my country, then why am I not allowed to just be with my family?"*

We make sense of the world by the stories we tell ourselves, and there are many stories like Eduardo Gonzalez's. On May 1, 2006, six hundred thousand protesters marched in Los Angeles. Four hundred thousand marched in Chicago, and large demonstrations were held in New York and Dallas. As a result the House bill that would have made illegal immigrants felons, failed in the Senate. However, the building of a 700 mile fence along the 2,000 mile border between Mexico and the United States was approved in October 2006, and construction is well along. Of course, I wonder; if the border is 2,000 miles and the fence is 700 miles, will not the people trying to come to America go around the fence?

In 2007 President George Bush proposed the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, which would have eventually given amnesty to a large majority of illegal entrants in the country, significantly increased legal immigration. The act had bipartisan support. However, just as Hispanics protested in 2006, other Americans protested in 2007.

Here is a story told in a sermon by a member of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Petaluma, California by Meredith Guest. Ms. Guest is a school bus driver. In her sermon, she worried about whether she would be able to keep her school bus driving job if amnesty is given to illegal immigrants. Listen to her story:

*My operating assumption is that as religious liberals we are inclined to be supportive and sympathetic to the immigrants and much less concerned that they are here in violation of immigration laws, that they are here illegally. I'm also aware that, being mostly members of the professional class, should Congress pass a law legalizing the 12-14 million immigrants currently in this country illegally, you members of the professional class will have little reason to fear for your jobs. In fact, you have quite a bit to gain.*

*For much of the working class, however, it's quite a different story. For instance, there is a chronic shortage of bus drivers. Don't ask me why. Going to bed at hours usually reserved for preschoolers just so you can get up at 4:30 in the cold and dark to navigate a 40 foot vehicle through rain, fog and wind over some of the worst roads this side of the Rockies, dodging idiotic drivers while managing some 60 hormone crazed children -- with your back turned! I mean, what's not to like? Still, at \$20 an hour with great benefits and lots of opportunities for easy overtime, I'm guessing quite a few of those newly legalized 12-14 million workers might think that's not such a bad deal, especially since back in Mexico they were lucky if they made \$10 a day with the only benefits being a few shots of tequila at the end of a 12 hour day to help kill the aches and pains. And besides that, they speak Spanish, which, on most of the routes is the language of choice, since most of the Anglo kids are chauffeured to school, or else, have their own cars.*

*So, from the point of view of a bus driver, what's going to happen if millions of workers, who presently are ineligible for my job by virtue of the fact that they lack the documentation required to work legally in this country, are suddenly legalized? Think they're going to want to hang onto those \$4 an hour jobs bussing tables, or \$6 an hour jobs cleaning bathrooms at the Motel 6? No, they're going to look at my \$16-20 an hour job that includes full benefits and say, hey, even with all those bratty kids that looks like a really good job. Then, the next time negotiations come up between the bus drivers and the school district -- except now capable Hispanic men and women are lined up for the jobs -- do you think that's not going to affect the ability of the workers to negotiate wages and benefits? And if that's true for bus drivers, it's even more so true for custodians, grounds keepers, kitchen staff and even the maintenance guys.*

There are many stories like Meredith Guest's. In 2007, thousands of people sent e-mails, wrote letters, and made phone calls to Congress protesting the idea of amnesty. Indeed, for a short time in June of 2007 the Congressional telephone systems shut down because of the number of phone calls Congress was receiving. As a result, the reform bill failed to pass.

We make sense of the world by the stories we tell ourselves. The way we recall our stories, and which story we choose to remember to a large degree determines our views on immigration policy. Which story is most important to you?

There is the story of the terrorist who was stopped and given a speeding ticket the day before he took control of United flight 93. If that is the most important story to you, you are likely to support strict enforcement of immigration laws, including the construction of the wall along our border with Mexico.

There is the story of Mildred and Eduardo Gonzalez. Under our present laws Mildred will be forced to return to Guatemala. If that is the most important story to you, you are likely to support the reform of our immigration laws, giving amnesty to the millions of illegal aliens who now live in our country.

And there is a story of Meredith Guest, who fears that amnesty will make it more difficult for her to find work, make it more difficult for her to negotiate for a decent wage and decent benefits. If that is the most important story to you, you are likely to oppose amnesty.

Each of these stories is true. They each represent valid points of view. We each must ask ourselves which point of view is more valid to us: the terrorist, the Navy petty officer, the bus driver.

Personally, of the three stories, I am moved by the story of Mildred and Eduardo Gonzalez, and of their desire to be part of our country. We make sense of our lives by the stories we tell ourselves. In the end, I choose the idealistic story of inclusion over the story of terrorism, or the story of unemployment.

Of course, with the unemployment rate increasing, it will be difficult to hold on to this idealism. Before he was elected, President Obama promised to work on immigration reform during his first year in office. In the first days of his presidency, he has not yet mentioned immigration in any official speeches.

I do not know when we will see such reform. However, I continue to agree with the idealism of the new President of the United States, who said in a speech in June of 2008:

*For all the noise and anger that too often surrounds the immigration debate, America has nothing to fear from today's immigrants. They have come here for the same reason that families have always come here--for the hope that in America, they could build a better life for themselves and their families. Like the waves of immigrants that came before them and the Hispanic Americans whose families have been here for generations, the recent arrival of Latino immigrants will only enrich our country. (Obama speech at NALEO Jun 28, 2008)*