



## Immigration

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This past year the state of Arizona passed an immigration law known as SB 1070. Arizona, which sits across the border from Mexico, has struggled to control undocumented immigration for years, and displeased with federal efforts, and concerned about security, passed SB 1070 which gives broad permission for local police to detain and arrest anyone who appears to be an undocumented immigrant. In early August a federal judge placed an injunction on several parts of SB 1070, but parts of it have still gone into effect.

Many people, myself included, find the law racist, discriminatory, and an intrusion into personal liberties guaranteed to residents of this country. SB 1070 encourages racial profiling. You might be surprised to learn, as was I, that until 1924 the United States was open to legal immigration for all people who were healthy. That is the good news. Here's the bad news. There have always been periodic laws to exclude various racial groups distrusted and seen as too different, generally "non-white (WASP)," for example the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The history of immigration in America tells us that new immigrant groups are routinely harassed, segregated, distrusted, marked as lazy, criminal, or immoral, and struggle to find work, often living in poverty, subject to American laws that are prejudiced against them.

In 1962 immigration laws in America were changed to be more family friendly. Quota systems were abolished so that more family members could enter at one time or in the future. Even this change, did not permanently solve immigration issues. In the 1980's President Ronald Reagan (of all people) gave amnesty to American residents who entered without documents. On September 10, 2001 Congress was poised to positively address immigration issues, and then the planes hit the Twin Towers the next day. Since then dialogue on immigration has become irrationally twisted into concerns about security. Concerns about security morph quickly into racism so that SB 1070 gives local police the right to detain people who appear to be undocumented immigrants. Who appears to be an immigrant? Someone of color. But someone of color could of course be a legal resident. This is discrimination.

As Unitarian Universalists, our Association struggled with immigration issue, particularly SB 1070 at our General Assembly last June in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Years ago (before SB 1070) plans had been made to host GA 2012 in Phoenix, Arizona. Delegates were split on the issue now – should we cancel GA and boycott Arizona or should be attend in order to do advocacy and witness, with a

special promise to one another to support and protect our members and friends who attend GA and “appear” to be undocumented immigrants (that means look Latin American – it is so racist it is hard to say).

Eventually delegates chose the later option, to attend for the purpose of witness and advocacy. This will not be business as usual. After listening to local advocacy groups who wanted UUs to attend (knowing of our great potential to do advocacy work), delegates, myself included, voted to attend. The Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray, minister of the UU Congregation of Phoenix said “We want people to come to Phoenix in 2012 not in an attitude of conventioning, but with a commitment to service and learning.” She explained that “GA programs could include voter registration, trips to the border, and meetings with residents and immigrants in their own communities.”<sup>1</sup> The latest issue of UU World has a long article on immigration and the decision to attend GA in Phoenix in 2012. Frankly, I look forward to attending. We will live our values and I am proud of the decision of the delegates. We respectfully listened and came to the best decision that respects the inherent worth and dignity of all persons and justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

Since GA several Unitarian Universalists, including the President of our Association, Reverend Peter Morales, have been arrested for protesting SB 1070. The UUA Standing on the Side of Love campaign has been active on immigrant and LGBTQI issues in the past year and will continue in its work. Please go to their web site and learn more.

Because of the controversy and conversation at GA I had my conscience pricked. I didn’t know much about the lives of undocumented immigrants. I did not know if there were many here in the Cincinnati area, so I contacted Don Sherman an immigration and labor lawyer who founded the Cincinnati Interfaith Worker’s Center (CIWC) in 2005. Sherman arranged for me to meet with three of his clients, Yesenia, Miguel, and Margarita, all undocumented immigrants.

Here were my first impressions; Yesenia, Miguel, and Margarita were relentlessly friendly and patient. I do not speak Spanish, so Don translated for us, and I quickly became embarrassed that everything was slowed down for me, and the three of them spent long periods of time not understanding me. I felt rude, so I apologized. They were gracious.

As Don translated a whole world, unknown to me, opened its doors. Yesenia and Margarita own a cleaning business. Miguel worked cleaning windows in high places until he fell and was injured. All three of them believe they do work Americans do not want to do. Don Sherman, and later another immigration lawyer I spoke with, Lea Webb, all said the same things. Undocumented immigrants work in cleaning, food preparation and construction. Don Sherman told me to look in the kitchen of restaurants. I did, the next time I was at an upper class restaurant. At the counter, white people. In the kitchen, many people who looked Mexican. Undocumented immigrants feed us well every day.

All three of them came for economic opportunities. Margarita came in 2001 before 9/11. Miguel came for the first time in 2000. He later left and returned in 2006. He paid a coyote \$1,500 to take him over the border. Before crossing he was robbed of all his possessions and money. The coyote had been pre-paid so he brought him across. Miguel walked for six days. He had enough water, but food for only three days. Yesenia, a woman, crossed the desert alone at age 19, in her words “to

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<sup>1</sup> UU World, 38.

survive.” All of them went to live with a family member when they arrived and struggled to find work.

I asked them why they left Mexico, and here is what I learned. Two decisions by the Mexican government changed life for Mexicans in the 1990’s. First, the NAFTA agreement forced 2-6 million Mexicans off their land due to low corn prices that outsold Mexican corn prices. Second, the Mexican President privatized the banks which changed the value of money. Suddenly the cow you bought for \$24 was only worth \$12. Today 40% of Mexicans lived below the poverty level. Miguel and Yesenia used to live on a farm. The value of their goods depreciated, taxes increased, their crops were outsold and they could not hold on.

Miguel told me that minimum wage in Mexico is \$5-\$10 a day, and the cost of gasoline eats most of the wage. After leaving America once and returning to Mexico, he hoped once again to be able to make it in Mexico, but he could not. Don Sherman told me that he knows of a Mexican doctor who came to visit her sister in Cincinnati. This doctor made more money cleaning hotel rooms in Cincinnati than she does as a doctor in Mexico. Across our borders are millions of desperate people just hoping for a decent livelihood.

I asked the three of them what they want Americans to know. They replied 1) They are not criminals. They only came to work. 2) They are not all the same. I asked them their dreams. 1) Amnesty so they can see their families and 2) To know American rules better.

All three of them have been in America about ten years, yet their English is not strong. As I listened to them I understood why. Since they came without documents they must hide. They have to be very careful when using public services. They are afraid to use banks, and are then more likely to be robbed. They do not call the police if victims of crime. They are afraid to leave their homes at all time because they might be picked up, especially when driving. Yesenia has a son born here. If she were deported, who would raise her son? If she brought him to Mexico, where he has never been, he would live in poverty and be unfamiliar with the people and culture.

It is dangerous for them to drive, particularly in Norwood, Springdale and Sharonville where the police proactively pick people up who appear (racial profiling) “undocumented.” Last year the state of Ohio made it mandatory for individuals to have either a social security number or license number or their vehicle registration would expire. Soon, many undocumented immigrants will be driving without registration, because they have been forced by law. In Butler County has given police the power to act as immigration officials. One Butler County police officer, Sheriff Jones, is attempting to pass an Arizona type bill in Ohio.

For many of us, myself included, this sounds unjust, un-American (in the best sense of American rather than the worst). Others would say, well, they came without documents so they asked for this. For those I ask you to consider what we have received from undocumented immigrants that we have never paid and never could fully compensate.

When I spoke with immigration attorney, Lea Webb, she clued me into the wage exploitation and profit that Americans receive from undocumented immigrants. She refers to undocumented immigrants as “people upon whom the wealth of this country is built.” She explained to me that during the boom years that preceded our current recession many homes, business plazas, and malls were built, like Rookwood Pavilion on the Norwood/Hyde Park border. Although construction

now has unemployment rates nearing 20%, several years ago construction was desperate for employees. May undocumented immigrants worked there. While doing so they made \$10 an hour with no benefits and no overtime, up to 80 hours a week. According to her some of this labor rose to the level of slavery and human trafficking.”

She said to me “The profit came off the backs of undocumented workers. Think of the rents they make today.” She told me she feels sick every time she shops at Rookwood, knowing the true human cost of its creation. The CIWC was founded in 2005 to help immigrant and low wage day-laborers and trash sorters at Rumpke who were making below the minimum wage before CIWC stepped in. Undocumented immigrants also take care of our trash so it does not smell in our homes and litter our streets.

Wage theft is one of the major areas of concern from CIWC. On the job undocumented immigrants are at risk for harassment, safety violations, and wage theft – that is not paying someone who has performed work and was promised money. Listening to Miguel, Yesenia, Margarita, Lea, and Don, I have become convinced that we take advantage of undocumented immigrants for our own financial profit with discriminating against them and harming them. There is an underground system of almost slave labor. And even the undocumented immigrants came themselves, America should not be supporting fraud, robbery, violence, and racism for any resident, legal or not.

Often undocumented immigrants are punished and companies that employ and exploit them are left untouched. Don, Yesenia, Margarita, and Miguel told me about the 2008 raid on Koch Food in Fairfield (that Butler County link again). The plant was raided and 160 people were detained. Koch Food received no punishment. In fact the first shift was raided, but Koch Food began calling second shift employees to come to work, assuring them they would not be raided again. What is going on? The undocumented immigrants do the work and suffer the abuse and companies receive the profit.

On the other hand, Lea Webb tells me that her typical case is a small business owner who calls her, finally realizing a good, longtime employee is an undocumented immigrant. They call asking what they can do to help that employee become legal and she tells them the truth, nothing. Nothing. They can call their congressperson.

Here is where the best of our Calvinistic heritage meets immigration policy. If someone enters America without documents, they are forbidden to apply for almost anything. Can't apply for a work visa or citizenship. If someone came to America as undocumented and left, he/she can not apply for legal entry to America for 3 or 10 years. If someone came to America without documents, returned, and re-entered, this person can never apply. Ever. This is the situation Miguel faces today. Even if he wanted to apply, he couldn't. As Lea explained to me, there are thousands of workers who come to work in construction every year from March to November and then go home. Construction companies want them for the low wage. They can never apply for documents to legally come to America. They may have families here.

It is even worse for people who were brought to America without documents when they were infants or children. They are not American citizens, yet they speak English, perhaps no other language, and can not apply for citizenship. Don Sherman estimated that 65,000 undocumented children graduate from American high schools every year. They can not get a legal drivers license, or social security number. Most of them, no matter how bright, can't find a way to get to college.

Sixty-five thousand young adults a year at a dead end, and yes, they can, and have been deported if found.

Finally, even if you marry an American citizen, if you came to America without documents you cannot apply for citizenship and do not become a citizen. This was a law that was about to be changed on September 10, 2001, but it has remained on the books since that day, with no one interested in discussing it any time soon. (My sister)

Lea notes that all of these laws can be removed or amended. She told me that she hates when people say there is nothing you can do. She explained that these laws make it harder for undocumented immigrants, Americans, and business owners and employers to know what to do. Could we perhaps have a penalty, say a fine, for someone who entered the country without documents, but has a job and wants to become a citizen? And then let that person apply without prejudice or persecution? I also want to let you know that Lea says "Undocumented immigrants are overwhelmingly law abiding." That is her experience in the field, contrary to what incensed race-baiting politicians and pundits say.

Here are some things you can do if you want to make a difference. Call your congressperson. Lea says they don't believe we care. Let them know you care. On Monday, October 25 at 7PM St. John's is hosting a skit entitled "Immigration: What Happens to the Family?" You can send a donation to the Cincinnati Interfaith Worker's Center at 40 East McMicken Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio, 45202. The next time you go out to eat, check out the kitchen. Consider who fed you. The next time you go skiing, observe who really runs the place, and consider who gets the money from their efforts. Go to the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love Campaign" website and learn more and get involved. Or, just stay after services for a forum in the Ellen Hall Room. Miguel, Yesenia, and Margarita are here with us today and are happy to talk to you and answer your questions. I advertised that immigrants would be here to talk with us, but did not advertise that they are undocumented, because I want to protect them.

I hope you spend at least a few minutes in the forum. Sitting at a table with Yesenia, Margarita, and Miguel changed me forever. They are human beings, suffering with few choices, poverty, and discrimination. They are human beings with families on the line. They are human beings who make my life more enjoyable in America. They are human beings from a rich and interesting culture with so much to share with us, who must remain in hiding like second class citizens. They are human beings and our laws do wrong by them in word and deed.