

They Take Our Jobs!

Reflections on Immigration

Adapted from Rev. James Leach, Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte, NC

Chaplain Robert Keim

09-03-2018

“Few of their children in the country learn English. Unless the stream of their importation could be turned, they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language and even our government will become precarious!”

Heard something like this lately? Well, actually, this complaint was actually made by Benjamin Franklin in the 1750s. Yes, that Benjamin Franklin, the one some claim as a Unitarian at heart!

He went on: *“Those who come hither are generally of the most ignorant, stupid sort of their own nation,”* and cited a fellow protectionist who charged, *“...they are not esteemed men till they have shown their manhood in beating their mothers.”* Not wives, mothers!

While this may sound like the rantings of right-wing radio, it was the 18th century influx of Germans into Pennsylvania that prompted Ben to fly his kite right into the midst of the debate about immigration.

A few years later, he ominously warned: *“If they are not excluded from the United States by the Constitution, within less than a hundred years they will stream into this country in such numbers that they will rule and destroy us...”* This time, the “they” about whom he was so concerned were Jews, whose entry into this country he soundly opposed.

Now, more than two-and-a-half centuries later, we’re still struggling with this issue. The claims and warnings made about the injurious effects of immigration are, at times, equally repugnant and dubious. Beacon Press, our own denomination’s publishing house, recently released a book called [They Take Our Jobs! \(And 20 Other Myths About Immigration\)](#). This time, the word “myth” is not being used to mean “one of humankind’s founding, grounding stories,” but rather, “inaccurate claims based on misinformation.”

Because of the complexity of this issue and the limitation of our time, I’ll briefly visit only the first of these so-called “myths.” Author Avia Chomsky – American author, historian, activist, and daughter of linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky writes, *“Immigration takes American jobs’ is one of the most common arguments brandished to justify the need for a restrictive immigration policy.”* No doubt, we’ve all heard that claim.

But, Chomsky continues: *“The first fallacy lies in the very concept of ‘American’ jobs. In fact, today’s economy is so globally integrated that the idea of jobs having a national identity is practically useless.”* She points out the history of U.S. industry seeking to reduce costs by employing *“the poorest, most vulnerable people.”* As unions and labor laws in this nation made it possible for workers to participate in the benefit of industrialization, companies began to seek cheaper labor elsewhere. Often aided by

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our own government, companies have been financially rewarded for their participation in what some analysts call the “race to the bottom,” the concerted effort to find the cheapest, most dispensable workers around the world.

Leach writes that he was on a Corporate Responsibility Committee for a major Catholic healthcare system, and in that role participated in a border witness trip to that astounding area in Mexico just south of Texas. Venturing back into a huge shanty town filled with workers in the so-called *maquiladora* industries, he stopped and talked with a woman who produced a pay stub. She made less than \$1 an hour assembling dashboards for a U.S. automaker. Her husband was employed by a U.S. electronics company. Lured to the border by promises of good jobs, their wages instead kept them confined to a sprawling shanty with ramshackle dwelling, little running water or electricity, and children playing in dusty streets filled with stench.

You see, we live in and benefit from a global economy. The things we wear, drive, eat and use are cheaper because some, like this young couple, provide an inexpensive source of labor. These workers now compete in a global economy, one that depends on low-cost labor to thrive. So, as Chomsky notes, the notion of jobs having a national identity is increasingly anachronistic.

She goes on to cite studies that demonstrate a much more complex relationship between immigration and job loss or gain than seems apparent. One of these concludes: “...no consistent pattern emerges to show that native-born workers suffered or benefited from increased numbers of foreign-born workers.” Whether or not this is the case, it is considerably more apparent that the profitability of companies is enhanced when they are free to seek cheap labor anywhere in the world.

That is one of my questions in the debate about immigration. Can you make a moral case – a moral case – for mobile capital and an immobile workforce? That is, how does one morally defend a system that says, ***if you already have the resources, you are free to make money anywhere in the world. However, if you’re ‘just’ a worker, you are confined to your own national borders!***

We do live in a global economy. But, do we think globally? Do we act globally? Are our ethics global?

We are the ones recognizing and professing “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” Where immigration is concerned, to whom does the “we” in that statement refer? Who are we?

I am not reticent to acknowledge my patriotism. I love this country. I regularly celebrate what is so wonderful about it. I’m one of those people who actually stops and sings the national anthem at sporting events. It’s a little expression of gratitude for all of the benefits I enjoy as a U.S. citizen.

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But, my faith reminds me, my ultimate allegiance is not to this country. My ultimate self-definition is not as a U.S. citizen.

When I say “We,” I am constantly challenged to think in larger categories. Not “We,” meaning men. Not “We,” meaning white people. Not “We,” meaning straight people. Not “We,” meaning well-educated liberals. And not “We,” meaning citizens of this country.

As we reflect on complex issues such as immigration, as we overhear the voices of immigrants working across this country, our faith constantly beckons us beyond all narrow definitions of “we.” It challenges us to expand our scope, to recognize that the real implications of a professed belief in an “interdependent web” may be less about a peaceful stroll through nature and more about the incredible personal dilemmas fostered by our participation in a global economy based on worker exploitation.

Maybe that’s how we can contribute to the still-raging debate about immigration. Not from a self-interested standpoint asking “what’s in it for me.” Not from a nationalist viewpoint seeing it as an “us” vs. “them” battle. But from the worldview of the interdependent web, recognizing that, in the end, there are truly no “they.” There are only “we’s.”

As we Unitarian Universalists deal with this issue, our Unitarian Universalist Association and Unitarian Universalist Service Committee have developed tools which can help us better understand this work. In doing so, they have come together to launch the **Love Resists** program. This joint campaign seeks to *activate people of faith and conscience to resist the criminalization of our neighbors and communities and create a safer, more just, welcoming, and sustainable world.* As it states in the *Declaration of Conscience*:

At this extraordinary time in our nation’s history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion, to truth and core values of American society.

In the face of looming threats to immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and the LGBTQ community, coupled with the rise of hate speech, harassment and hate crimes, we affirm our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In opposition to any steps to undermine the right of every citizen to vote or to turn back advances in access to health care and reproductive rights, we affirm our commitment to justice and compassion in human relations.

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And against actions to weaken or eliminate initiatives to address the threat of climate change – actions that would threaten not only our country but the entire planet – we affirm our unyielding commitment to protect the interdependent web of all existence.

We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.

As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

We welcome and invite all to join in this commitment for justice.

The time is now.

This work does not offer easy, obvious answers. But it does suggest a starting point for a conversation. It's one Joseph Campbell commended. Using myth as one of the founding, grounding stories of humankind, he urged: *"...the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet – not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it."*

And this, our faith, in hope and commitment, prays. May it be so.