

**Mattatuck Unitarian Universalist Society**  
**Service for July 25, 2010**  
**Service and Talk by Ed Edelson**

**Chalice Lighting:**

*"First they came ..."* is a famous statement attributed to Pastor [Martin Niemöller](#) (1892–1984) about the inactivity of German [intellectuals](#) following the [Nazi](#) rise to power and the purging of their chosen targets, group after group. The text expresses, in a condensed form, the understanding of history presented by Niemöller in a January 6, 1946 speech before representatives of the Confessing Church in Frankfurt.<sup>[1]</sup>

"THEY CAME FIRST for the Communists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

THEN THEY CAME for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

THEN THEY CAME for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

THEN THEY CAME for me  
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

**Source: Wikipedia**

## **Immigration – How do the UU Seven Principles Help us Frame the Issues**

Immigration is a very complicated issue that challenges us as Unitarian Universalists to apply our principles to our deeds. It is complicated because there are important arguments on ALL sides of the legal, economic, political, sociological and historical issues.

As an engineer, I am sensitive to the difference between an issue and a problem. Engineers solve problems, and if the problem at hand cannot be solved, then we redefine to something that can be solved. Issues cannot be redefined, although they can be defined better, and by definition have many competing outcomes that may all be valid.

So today, I would like to explore with you many of the aspects that can make this such a difficult issue to resolve by looking at it through the lens of our seven principles recognizing that there are many other parts to this discussion that will not be covered. This is no way a complete assessment but a focus on the moral and ethical aspects. And I will leave you with more questions than answers.

### 1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

- (a) Many of us who are first or second or third generation Americans know of the difficulty of being an immigrant – whether legal or not; it is often a hard life where you are made to feel different. You are the THE OTHER. My 4 grandparents were all first generation Jewish Russian immigrants. And from an early age, I knew that my father and mother felt more comfortable around eastern European Jews because of presumed prejudices by others – something that they did not want to endure.
- (b) It would be nice if religions had always played a role in welcoming the immigrant, but many mainstream religions in this and other countries have a checkered history at best of encouraging fear/hatred of the new immigrant whether it was the Catholics, Irish, Italians, Jews, or Muslims.
- (c) As the UUA and SOSL says: As people of faith, we are called to stand with the vulnerable and the oppressed. We are called to welcome the stranger.
- (d) This is hard work. I think a good argument can be made that genetically we are prone to want to define people as either part of our tribe or not as a form of protection in eons gone by. We are very quick to identify people who are different from us. When I did volunteer work on a small island in Kenya, there was a young local girl of about 5 years of age who had never seen white people. Her comment a few days after we arrived was that all the white volunteers looked alike – and trust me, you would have seen vast differences. But all she saw was the dominant features that were different from her people. So in trying to overcome our instinct to identify and be separate from THE OTHER, we are possibly fighting eons of genetic breeding that has allowed us to come so far. But that does not make it right or just.
- (e) Inherent worth and dignity are not part of the US Constitution (as far as I know) but it is part of UN Declaration on Human Rights [#UN Human Rights](#)

### **i. PREAMBLE of the UN Declaration of Human Rights - 1948**

- ii. Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

iii. Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

(f) This makes no distinction if you are an immigrant or illegal immigrant. It is a lofty goal. Should that be our own personal goal and vision for society?

## 2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

(a) Howard Fineman in his book The Thirteen American Arguments says “That only “a nation of immigrants could argue so earnestly and endlessly (and sometimes violently ) about who can become one of its own. But are our immigration laws just?

(b) Once the US and other countries decided that they had to limit immigration with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 followed by the Immigration Act of 1924, which created a legal regime to do that, we were going to find it hard to create a system that meets these three very difficult tests of justice equity and compassion. Keep in mind that before these acts, you could not be an illegal immigrant as long as you registered; everyone was welcome as the poem says at the Statue of Liberty. We needed immigrants.

(c) So why do we limit immigrants through immigration law thus creating the groups of legal and illegal immigrants? It is to assist those who are already citizens and residents and not the immigrants. So by definition it does not take the immigrants interest into account.

(d) The laws are designed to not only differentiate the immigrant from citizens but to also differentiate between the immigrants. And so the 1924 act discriminated against those from Southern and Eastern Europe as it was felt there were too many coming from that region

(e) Today we differentiate by things like education and skills. If you have the right skills, you can become an immigrant; if not you are off the list. This might make sense economically for our country. But is this just? Is this compassionate?

## 3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

(a) I always get tripped up on the word spiritual, but the more I grapple with it, I think it means our understanding of our connectedness – either with other human beings, the natural world or with the whole universe

(b) Do we really take the time to understand the world of the immigrant? Or are we willing to listen without response to those who demonize the immigrant.

(c) This is especially true in Arizona as we hear more and more statements about Mexican immigrants as unleashing a wave of violence in the border states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The Arizona law is called the Support our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhood Act. Who could be against that!

(d) Yet the statistics say otherwise – crime rates are down. That does not mean they have been eliminated and crime does not happen. According to the FBI stats, violent crime has dropped by 30% in the past two decades despite growing violence in Mexico. Border Patrol apprehension of illegal immigrants is up 60% since 2000. (FBI statistics from New Yorker article of the July 17<sup>th</sup> issue.)

(e) But I think the questions we should be focused upon is why do people want to leave their country and come here – either legally or illegally. This is what is necessary for acceptance and to stand against those who demonize by implying that the immigrants,

especially illegal immigrants are creating a wave of violence. But I have not heard that being discussed lately.

- (f) When it is discussed, we come to some very uncomfortable truths about employment. Here in the US it is about terrible working conditions and low paying jobs that can only be filled by illegals. But is that right? And why don't we focus on the employer.
- (g) In Mexico, their farms cannot compete against the US agriculture industry. So we end up sending food to Mexico and driving workers off the Mexican farm. This would be economically acceptable except for the huge subsidies we give the US industrial farmers that make them able to beat the foreign competition and thus reducing employment opportunities in Mexico.
- (h) Maybe it is the jobs that need to change – Meatpacking used to be a good-paying job with reasonable conditions – it was a major source of middle class employment in the mid-west. IT was not this way before the exposes of the early 1900's by folks like Upton Sinclair. But after that conditions improved.
- (i) Unfortunately in recent years the business model has changed and now the conditions are reported as intolerable and the pay low, and so it is difficult to get citizens to want to work under these conditions at these wages. We here in Woodbury benefit from those labor conditions with cheap beef and pork and chicken. And the loser is the immigrant worker – whether documented or not – who does the work.

#### 4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

- (a) It has been said that the three most important enemies facing any society is ignorance, poverty and disease. Yet when we look at what societies invest in, you would assume it is those “other” people who are out to take over your society.
- (b) There are many difficult questions about immigration and the numerous problems created by a multi-ethnic society. I recall talking to a school administrator in South Florida about the deplorable state of the public schools in and around Miami. He pointed out that although there is truth to that, the challenge that system faced by the sudden influx of tens of thousands of students from Cuba and later Haiti was unprecedented by both the numbers of students and the language challenges. That the school system did as well as it did was pretty amazing when you consider the task presented to them almost over night. It is the old story of the glass half full or half empty.
- (c) This past week we experienced what I think will be called the Sherrod affect – where a blogger starts a rumor about a person based on incomplete or distorted information and leads to a rush to judgement. And when things are complex it is often tempting to want a simple answer – like blaming THE OTHER. WE have to work extra hard to make sure we take sufficient time to check the facts. But here we do have history on our side – because of the cyclical behavior at demonizing the immigrant only to find that they are a tremendous source of new ideas and expansion of our culture.
- (d) I sent my older brother the Neimoller quote I used when lighting the chalice when telling him I was going to use it in the service. He wrote back that it is not appropriate given what happened in Germany in the 1930's and 1940's. I respect my brother, but I think he is very wrong on this – this is exactly what Neimoller was talking about with regard to people not recognizing the patterns of societies looking for scapegoats. We are a nation of 300 million people and yet the 11 million illegal immigrants who are mostly working our fields and food processing plants are able to tear our society apart according to pundits like Lou Dobbs. Does that even begin to make sense?

5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- (a) The Arizona law was passed by the democratic process and so if this law is enacted on July 29<sup>th</sup>, we must respect the will of the people of that state. The Federal government is clearly concerned that this is unconstitutional and that dispute is being handled through our courts as well it should.
  - (b) But what does “right of conscience” mean for us?
  - (c) The decision about who is an American and who is a citizen has been with us since the Constitution. The American Indians were treated as foreigners, ironically in their own land. Our Congress legally declared war against them. The American Negro, many who had been in this country longer than many people living in the colonies, were counted as 3/5ths of a resident in the Constitution for purposes of apportionment of representation and it was many years after that before they were treated as citizens who could vote.
  - (d) Many UU's have spoken up about these laws over the last 200 years not because they were created in an undemocratic manner but because they offended our conscience about what is ethically right.
  - (e) I believe that Arizona SB 1070 falls within that category as well as all the other laws recently passed to get at the illegal immigrant and not the employers who hire them to work in despicable working environments.
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- (a) It is often said that in the United States we are all immigrants or descended from immigrants.
  - (b) From what I can tell, it is true everywhere. Once you move back in time, we see the migrations of people across continents is the norm.
  - (c) WE only become immigrants when we identify borders and say that those within our border are “our people” and those outside our border are foreigners. Often they become the “Other” - misunderstood and stereotyped and often to be conquered.
  - (d) This started with families and tribes who looked at other tribes as being different. But over time, these tribes coalesced around cities to become city-states. And they eventually formed larger entities until we had the age of nationalism. This has brought even larger groups together sometimes peacefully but often brutally.
  - (e) But if our goal is world community, then there are really no immigrants. WE are all part of one community.
  - (f) We are at a cusp or pivot point where we can see the need to leave nationalism and along with it many regional/tribal religions behind and move to a more global viewpoint. But this is not easy although it is our goal.
  - (g) Does immigration issue present us with a challenge to effectuate this goal? How do we do it in light of the other aspects of this complex subject?
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
- (a) This is a tricky one for me. As I look at the world's environment, there are two major challenges behind all discussions about the state of our environment – population density and per capita consumption of resources. Immigration, both legal and illegal, increase both of these within the continental United States.
  - (b) We need to recognize that our lands have a limited capacity to sustain populations. When

we look at population growth projections immigration is a key factor.

- (c) One Census bureau study a decade ago found that: Immigration emerges as a prominent component in the calculation: 60% of the population increase in the United States between 1994 and 2050 will be attributable to immigration and the descendants of immigrants. Other studies have concluded even higher percentages.
- (d) But at the same time, we know that one key to our economic success as a nation has been our immigrants. So how do we balance this?
- (e) I think, however, it goes back to looking at why do people leave their homes. As long as there is so much disparity in the world consumption of resources and quality of life, we cannot expect that people will not want to come here. Only by looking at the need to improve opportunity throughout the world can we come to a point of stability with regard to immigration.
- (f) And here is an irony. There are many ways to look at what we do as a nation with regard to foreign aid. To hear some activists, you would think we spend an inordinate amount on foreign aid, all of which they feel is wasted. Others of a more progressive mind-set complain of our low levels on a per capita basis compared to other nations. But the interesting thing is if you look at foreign aid as money sent from the US to other countries to help people in those countries survive, the major source of those donations are our immigrants – legal or illegal – who come here to provide financial resources for families back home. These numbers swamp our Foreign Aid by the Federal government. So maybe the modern immigrant who is not coming to stay as much as to work in order to support families back home is a way towards a more equitable and just world.

In closing, let me leave you with the four statements from the UUA's Standing on the Side of Love initiative regarding immigration:

- **IMMIGRATION – From Standing on the Side of Love**
- Our immigration system is taking children from their parents and tearing our nation apart. Any system which breaks up families is, itself, broken.
- Hospitality is central to spiritual life. The inhospitality and cruelty shown to immigrants today weakens our nation's soul.
- As people of faith, we are called to stand with the vulnerable and the oppressed. We are called to welcome the stranger.
- As neighbors, we must offer refuge to weary travelers, not declare that there is no room at the inn.

And with that, I would like to hear your reflection and response.