

Immigration Readings

Opening Words

The Other

by Edmund Davis-Quinn

You ain't from here
I don't like you

You ain't from here
I don't trust you

You ain't from here
I am not going to get to know you

You help me
I start to trust you

You feed me
You listen

We talk
We cry
We laugh
We hug

I am so happy you got to know me
You are my friend.

Welcome to the Belly of the Beast

by Meret Bainbridge

I arrived as an immigrant from Germany to the United States in March 1988 at JFK airport, carrying a thick sealed package of papers from the US Consulate in Frankfurt that I was not to open myself under any circumstances. I could only guess that it must contain my entire previous life history. In the application process I had to disclose every place of residence since birth, every job I had ever held no matter how small, and every organization I had ever belonged to, in particular ones that were communist or anti-American.

As I had an active past in the 1980ies peace movement, I had a degree of paranoia. But the process was smooth, business-like: I was fingerprinted, my mug shot was taken, and I received my temporary green card.

When I finally arrived at my new home very late that night, one of my few American friends greeted me with the words "Welcome to the Belly of the Beast".

Here I was, in the country whose politics I hated, in the middle, on the inside.

Every immigrant has their own story, their own reasons why they chose to leave one country to live in another. Mine were largely personal: I had fallen in love with a guy I barely knew from four months of traveling through Europe. I had recently been fired from a job because I was too radical. The American boyfriend kept sending me updates on the group of people he was involved with: they dreamt of building an intentional community, an eco-village, a model for a new society.

On a whim I decided to get away from my old life in stuffy Germany and join these pioneers hoping to fulfill their dream. Like so many.

Well - the eco-village never manifested, the non-profit went bankrupt, and we broke up after two years – what do you expect when you marry someone you've never dated in real life? Still, I had begun to establish a life here, so despite our separation we decided to jump through the next hoop, which is the "Removal of the Temporary Alien Status" after two years. In this interview federal agents may pry into such personal realms as the color of your spouse's toothbrush or who sleeps on what side of the bed, in order to establish that your marriage isn't faked for the purpose of falsely obtaining legal alien status.

The process is maddening. Maddening, because the descendants of white immigrants who took this land away from Native people now make the rules of who's in and who's out. I felt that if I needed to ask anyone's permission to be here, it would have to be the Native people, and the spirits of the place, the land itself.

Building a life for myself here has been far from easy. I had no credit history, no work history, no references. I spent several years working odd jobs and eventually went back to college in my thirties. I remarried and had my children late in life. I estimate that the immigration has cost me at least ten years of my life, trying to catch up with my peers. – Yes, there were many times of doubts and regrets.

Still – this is coming from the perspective of a privileged immigrant. I am white, Northern European middle-class, and educated. My parents have supported me financially through tough times. I have resources. I am not being profiled against, ever. I am the kind of immigrant who is welcome here.

I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like to arrive here as a refugee from a war-torn country, having lost everything, having survived torture, without language skills and education, and with no choice to ever go back. I feel guilty for my whining when I compare myself to these recent immigrants from Africa.

And yet in an odd way I am jealous of them: I am jealous because they have

family here, they have a community, they do a better job maintaining their culture and raising their children bilingually than I have done.

How much do I assimilate myself into American culture? How much of my cultural identity do I retain? How much can I keep in contact with the loved ones I left behind? What if – what if I had stayed, what other life could I have lived? Where do I belong? Questions all immigrants ask themselves.

There is a hole deep inside, a loneliness, a disconnection from one's past, a broken thread to one's ancestors – homesickness, a deep longing to belong.

But on the other hand: What would I have missed if I had not gone on this incredible adventure of crossing an ocean to break out of old molds and reinvent myself? Would I be as fluently bilingual, as savvy, as self-confident, as culturally sensitive and compassionate to people who are other? Would I have found a community of kindred spirits such as this - where I feel right at home? Here, in the belly of the beast!

What could I have missed.

Abalo's Story by Amy Grant

I would like to take a few moments to introduce you to my special friend, Abalo, a 19 year Sudanese young woman. Abalo emigrated with her family to the United States as a refugee in 2008. I first met Abalo, who was not quite 17 at the time, shortly after her arrival in the U.S., when I was paired with her through a volunteer program to serve as an American friend and mentor. Although the idea was for me to familiarize Abalo and her family with American culture and life in Portland, it very soon became apparent that her needs were much more basic and I worked to help her and her family prepare for their new life in Maine.

Abalo has endured numerous hardships in her life. Her parents left war-torn Sudan just before she was born and moved to a community of Sudanese refugees in Northern Uganda. When Abalo was very young her mother died from a war-related illness. She does not talk much about her early years but has mentioned to me that as a young child among many siblings and step-siblings it was important to be close to home at dinner time to ensure that you got to the food before it ran out.

When Abalo was 16 she left her young husband, to come to America to receive an education and make a better life for herself. She often recounts to me her first impressions of Maine. "It was very cold" she says, "and dark. I remember asking my sister if it was like this all the time..." I can hardly imagine the shock of touching down in Portland, Maine in mid-February after knowing no other life than the heat of Uganda. In the conversation, she never mentions that she

arrived nine-months pregnant after leaving the young man she loved behind.

Before coming to the U.S., Abalo believed that America would be a much better place than where she grew up. She did not foresee the challenges she has faced to make a life for herself and her son here in America. When she arrived, she spoke very little English--and read and wrote even less--but was expected to make telephone calls to schedule health care and social service appointments to care for her and her son. Abalo has spent countless hours at DHS and Portland Housing seeking childcare, food allowance and housing so she can attend high school. When her living situation with family did not work out, Abalo lived in a shelter with her son so that she could gain assistance in acquiring housing. When she moved to her new apartment, she asked for my help in setting up phone service. I falsely believed that I could call and have her phone working the same day I called but setting up her service was infinitely more difficult than it would have been to set up for myself. It was over a month before phone service was established. That was a wakeup call to me about life as a refugee.

From time to time, I help Abalo with the mundane aspects of life--washing her laundry, providing transportation to appointments, helping her with school projects. Although she has struggled to learn to read and write in English--she never wrote or read her native language--she walks or takes the city bus to school every day, even in the heart of winter, even with no warm coat or boots to get there. She hopes to attend college and strives to someday serve as a nurse.

Despite the fact that Abalo is a full-time student and a single parent, she desperately wants to join the American workforce to support her family. She is not unlike nearly all of the other Sudanese refugees I have met through her. And, working in America is no easy transition--from hard but flexible work farming in the fields of Uganda to the more structured American work schedule where there is no flexibility even for illness. The education and language barriers seem nearly insurmountable for refugees especially when they are competing with Americans during this economic downturn, yet I am constantly amazed by the positive attitude of the refugees I encounter.

I no longer consider my relationship with Abalo a volunteer experience. Our relationship has enriched my life tremendously. She teaches me to be more patient and to take a more laid-back approach to life. When we met, I thought helping Abalo meant rescuing her from a lack of "things" and solving every problem that came her way but I have learned over time that simply listening to her has been the most beneficial aspect to our relationship. I have also learned tremendously about the Sudanese community. There are no walls, like those that exist in our culture. People visit each other freely, wandering in and out of each other's lives to simply be together and enjoy each other's company as if all part of the same family. They also wholeheartedly welcome others into their community, inviting me to attend baptisms, dance parties and "Welcome to

America" parties. Abalo recently recounted to me that she was asked in her ELL class if she had any friends who are American. She responded that my family and I are not only friends but like family. And I am so proud to say that we are.

Immigration

by Marge Kleibacker

They were the first to people to migrate to America in mass. They came with their ideas, their tears, their hopes, and their dreams. They walked and boated from Asia, to live and raise their families.

Millenniums later we were second people to people to come to America in mass. We came with our ideas, our tears, our hopes, and our dreams. We sailed from Western Europe in small wind tossed ships, to live and raise our families. Our coming was a disaster to the people living here.

Many more people came from Eastern Europe, bringing their ideas, their tears, their hopes, and their dreams. We accustomed ourselves to living with people of different appearances, different customs and different languages. We helped them adjust and become us. We both thrived and lived and raised our families. Then all those who were different were legally included as us.

Now as many others are coming to America in jets from every part of the world. They may appear to be different in appearances, customs and languages, but they have dignity and worth. Like us, they laugh, cry, hope, and dream. They have ideas and skills that can enrich us. Some of us have helped them adjust. I hope we will continue to help them so that, they will become we. Let's strive to live and raise our families in unity.

Within and Without

by Rick Kimball

People are wary of other – other nation, other race, other orientation, other thought. How good it is to be in a church that welcomes other, that celebrates diversity, that supports immigrants.

But before we can fully join in reaching out to others, we must first reach to the other within, the other in us, the other that fears and distrusts. We all can find that other attitude in us if we look hard enough. We have learned it through the years.

I grew up in Orono, which in the 1940s and '50s was probably as open and accepting of diversity as any small town in Maine. Yet we still had our divisions, we created our own others. There were literally two sides of the track. There were two religions – protestant and catholic. There were Webster Island and the mainland. There were University of Maine employees and other employees. There were the bus kids and the non-bus kids.

Once, when a high school singing group performed on stage, the lighting was such that a boy at the end of the row appeared dark-skinned. "Don't say anything," my liberal mother said. "His family would be horrified." I heard the message, unintended though it certainly was from my good and caring mother. How would Orono have responded to a wave of immigration?

One day as a freshman, I encountered an upper class athlete on a school stairway. "Kimball, you homo!" he said, with such venom that I felt I had been struck. I barely knew what a homosexual was, but I knew what hatred was, and I remember its force fifty-five years later. Not much of an athlete myself, something of an intellectual, I was other to that older boy. What might he have done had I been a black Muslim immigrant?

All in this room could tell similar stories. Our encounters with intolerance are one reason we find ourselves together singing hymns of acceptance, trying to live our principles, toiling for social justice, opening our doors as wide as we dare to others. Yet even as we condemn some for their attitude toward immigrants, we must be wary of that other voice within, the voice of distrust and dismissal. A friend of this church, an accepting, liberal woman, recently learned that a mutual acquaintance was a Republican. "He can't be," she said. "He's been in my house." And she was only half joking. Show us a conservative Christian politician and watch us cringe. Who among us would invite the rest of us to a tea party these days?

Yet some immigrants may be fundamental Christians. Some may have conservative political leanings.

The good news is that most of us are wary of the other in us. The better news is that we as individuals and group resist that other as hard as we can. The best news is that our members and friends, our churches, our denomination are compiling strong records in the complex, divisive struggle for immigrant justice, one of our nation's and our eras most complex and difficult issues, our current greatest challenge for those who reach out to help others.

Certain individuals in our own church community help lead the way in the immigrant cause. We have heard from Amy Grant. Additional fine examples are listed on an insert in your order of service. I'll give you a moment to glance through that now. . . How do you already fit in? . . . How might you eventually fit in? Certainly more people might be listed, we know, and we apologize for any omissions.

Our UU denomination experienced a defining moment in June, at our annual national meeting, the general assembly in Minneapolis. There we decided to focus the UUA on immigration for the next four years. There we decided to hold the 2012 GA in Phoenix as planned, and to use it for fighting injustice and

supporting immigrant rights.

How will our denomination act? What will our own contributions be? We are called to help answer those questions. We are called to deny the other in us, the voice of doubt and distrust. We are called to support the other outside us, the immigrants now merging and living with us in Portland, in Maine, and all across America.

Let us listen to that call now, as diverse voices speak to it:

Hearing the call [Two voices sharing the following]

Compiled by Rick Kimball

Voice 1: From our UU Principles:

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, acceptance of one another . . . We affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Voice 2: From Norman Cousins, as found in our UU hymnal:

I am a single cell in a body of four billion cells. The body is humankind. I am a single cell. My needs are individual but they are not unique. I am interlocked with other human beings in the consequences of our actions, thoughts, and feelings. I will work for human unity and human peace; for a moral order in harmony with the order of the universe. Together we share the quest for a society of the whole equal to our needs.

Voice 1: From The Rev. Wendy von Zirpolo, minister of the UU Church of Marblehead, Mass., describing her experience in a Phoenix jail after being arrested with 28 other UUs and many other people during a July demonstration against Arizona's new law:

It was an unintended consequence of their strategy to disrupt our sleep by moving us around. Each time, we would share names and origins. We sang together, held those who needed to cry, demanded medical attention for our sisters in need, and most importantly, listened to each others stories. We made community.

Voice 2: From Rev. Peter Morales, current president of the UUA, who would himself be arrested at the July march, speaking before the General Assembly decided to keep the 2012 General Assembly in Phoenix:

I believe we are called to go to Phoenix and create a GA like no previous GA. I want us to experience much more than the convention center. I want us to

experience the reality of life for immigrants. I want us to learn and to bear witness. I dream of a GA where we reflect theologically upon what it means to be a faith that can cross the borders of race, class, and culture. I would have us explore together how we make connections with marginalized people in each and every community, in each and every congregation. I imagine a GA that begins a long overdue transformation of our movement.

Voice 1: From Jim Graham of Chandler, Arizona, who attended this year's GA:

The love and respect I see in action here tells me I chose the right faith. . . . In 2012, I hope we can have a transformative experience.

Voice 2: We could continue for hours with informative and inspiring words from UUs and others about immigration, but we will not. If you wish to know more about the UUA's stand on immigration, go to the UUA website and put "immigration" into the search engine." Or rifle back through the current and previous issues of the UUA world. Or come to an Allen Avenue Social Action Committee meeting and volunteer to help out with the cause. We close now with a quick summary statement made by UUA Moderator Gini Courter, after moderating the log and difficult Minneapolis debate:

Sometimes you get to help with something cool, you know?

Closing Words

by Emma Lazarus as found on the Statue of Liberty

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, the
tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Insert listing A2U2-ers assisting immigrants and their causes:

Pat Parker volunteers at Portland Adult Education teaching medical English and other subjects to immigrants two or three days a week. This may help them with such basic activities as visiting the doctor, or toward the more ambitious goal of finding a job in health care. Pat reports that she had to write her own textbook because there wasn't one. "One of the things we ESL teachers do is adopt families in the process," she says. "We might help them find the furniture they need. That's just what we do."

Paul Revier works under a federal grant as a therapist at Community Counseling, assisting the victims of torture. Many are asylum seekers granted temporary legal status in this country, and many are from Africa. The work could be devastating "if you are triggered by other peoples' stories," he says. But it is "not about pity." It's about "hearing their terrible, terrible stories, about helping them tell those stories and work their way through them, and about helping them

cope with being in the United States.”

Delene and Jim Perley give much time to the Preble Street Soup Kitchen and Project FEED, both of them open to the full Greater Portland community, including many immigrants. The Perleys serve together with many other friends and members of Allen Avenue at these venues. Delene has been working closely with an Iraqi refugee family of five as they have made the adjustment to Portland, learning English, finding their way around the city, obtaining household goods, getting health and dental care, bringing a new baby into the world, and more.

Megan Boothby also works as a clinician at Community Counseling, assisting victims of torture. “People are incredibly resilient,” she says. “I believe in each individual’s power for ‘self-healing,’ but this requires the support and love of others . . . Is it possible for us to be this source of love and support? That can take many forms – from supporting Amnesty International with a single check to volunteering at the Whole Foods English language conversation time to donating used goods to Catholic Charities or the City’s case managers to provide much needed material goods. I am so proud to be part of a church that is already so actively involved and has already changed peoples’ lives!! In a world of so much hate and violence, can we be that spark of good? The spark of hope?”

Polly and Rob Wright and other members of the Social Action Committee reached out to new Iraqi and Burundi refugees arriving in Portland following a meeting with Catholic Charities and the Portland Refugee office. These families arrived with few belongings, and a first step was to bring them furniture, dishes, and other such goods. Says Polly: “It was a privilege for Rob and me to get acquainted with the Mohammed family in this way. We have met to practice English occasionally. We also organized a potluck dinner at Allen Avenue last spring. Twenty Iraqi family members and eighteen members from Allen Avenue joined in a festive meal.”

Marge Kleibacker has volunteered at several different organizations teaching English as a Second Language to immigrants, including many refugees. At present, she teaches English at LearningWorks, and tutors English to four students.

Liz and Leo Barrington worked with an Iraqi refugee on English language skills for about two years, also helping him with appointments and introducing him to aspects of life in Portland that fit with his own interests. They also help at Project FEED, with Liz taking regular shifts at the food pantry and helping with organizational work of the pantry, and both of them picking up food supplies at Oakhurst Dairy and the Good Shepherd warehouse. They conducted a winter clothing drive for immigrants through the church. Both have been involved with the educational outreach and demonstrations of Amnesty International, Centro Latino and other immigrant rights organizations. They took an active part in

Amnesty International's nationwide conference last year, much of which was devoted to a new focus on immigration.

David Beseda volunteers through the church Social Action Committee to assist immigrant families by soliciting furniture from church members and delivering it with his truck. So far he has gathered furniture from about twenty church families and distributed it to about ten immigrant families. Some families have started with “absolutely nothing,” sleeping on a couple of cushions on the floor, or doubling up with other families. David finds the process very satisfying, “and it isn’t all one way. Sometimes when I deliver something I have to sit down and eat a huge meal in return. They won’t let me get away without that. Once I even had to smoke a hooka with a father and three sons.”

Cush Anthony worked with David Beseda helping an Iraqi family of five get settled. The father was a soldier in Iraq and fought against Americans, but before that he also worked as an auto dealer. Since coming here, he's only found some occasional work with the US military, helping with Iraq customs, but he would like to find something more permanent. Cush has helped the son to get a driver’s license, the two daughters to get bicycles, and the whole family to get furniture. Cush is known to the Iraqi family as “Uncle Cush.” He has also assisted some African refugees.

Please note: *This list presents examples of the good work being done by friends and members of Allen Avenue. It is presented in random order, and it is not intended to be exhaustive. We know that others among you also assist immigrants in various way. We salute you for your caring efforts, and hope you, too, will find a way to share your stories with the rest of us. – The Worship Committee*