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Immigrants Make America Great

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“I remember standing in the hallways of that same CNN where Lou Dobbs worked, and meeting the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust. This person, who is the most unlike me, was the one who taught me to question the use of the term ‘illegal immigrant.’ Those who accuse me of having an agenda might believe that I chose as a journalist to question that because of some radical Latino, Chicano Studies professor in college. But in fact, it didn’t happen that way. It was Elie Wiesel who said to me, do not use that term ‘illegal’ to refer to immigrants. Why, I asked? And Elie Wiesel said, because there’s no such thing as an illegal human being. You may have broken an immigration law, in this case, actually, a misdemeanor. But that does not make you an illegal person. That’s as if you’ve ever been stopped for speeding and given a ticket—does that make you an illegal driver forever? Right. Wiesel said there’s no such thing as an illegal human being, and it’s a dangerous term to use. Why, I asked? He said, the Nazis declared the Jews to be an illegal people. That was the beginning of the Holocaust.”

- Maria Hinojosa

My calendar reminded me recently that my passport is due to expire in April. I set the reminder more than seven months early because it turns out that **some countries require that “your passport be valid at least six months beyond the dates of your trip.”** So I took a few minutes last week to visit the public library downtown, take a new passport photo, and complete the renewal application. Presumably, the U.S. State Department will issue me a new passport within a few weeks. And if there are times in the coming decade when I need to travel internationally, that passport will certify that I am a citizen of the United States, not only for entering another country, but also for crossing back over the U.S. border to return home.

According to the official literature, **“With Your U.S. Passport, the World Is Yours!”**

The intention is not to be ironic, but I couldn't help think #Imperialism. That being said, it is true that if you can afford the airfare—and perhaps a small visa fee—then almost any U.S. citizen can leave this country to travel almost anywhere in the world. But most of our fellow human beings on this planet cannot travel so easily. As the Salem State University history professor Aviva Chomsky has written about in her powerful book Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal (Beacon Press, 2014), it is helpful to remember that:

For most of the world's population, freedom to travel is a distant dream. They can't leave the country of their birth...because no other country will let them in. Least of all, the United States. Today, whole countries—almost all of them in the [so-called] First World—shut themselves off to travelers, while assuming that their own citizens have the right to travel anywhere they choose.
(40)

Why do we allow freedom of travel for *some* but not for *all*?

Far too frequently, the ethics of immigration are oversimplified: “Why don't ‘they’ get in line and come to this country like my ancestors did?” **Such questions ignore both how much immigration requirements have changed over time, and the ugly history of racial bias in our country's immigration laws.**

When my ancestors came to this country from Scotland and England, U.S. borders were relatively open, especially if you were considered “white.” Or consider that **our government “excluded a mere 1% of the 25 million immigrants who landed at Ellis Island before World War I.”** Most of that 1% were excluded for health reasons. The exception to those statistics is the major discrimination at that time against Chinese immigrants (45).

Also, **before 1924, there were immigration statutes of limitations of one to five years, meaning that people who came here without official approval “did not live forever with the specter of deportation.”** However, less than a century ago, in 1924, a new immigration law both created a quota system and eliminated the statutes of limitations, making the threat of deportation permanent (45). That is only one among many examples of how the situation in which some people's ancestors entered this county was different from what is currently possible today.

An even more honest accounting of immigration would require us to turn back the clock

even further. If a European-American feels entitled to chant “Go back to Mexico!” or “Go back to Africa!” then an American Indian could just as easily hold up a mirror to that protester and say, “Go back to Europe!” As a classic political cartoon suggests, **if “It’s time to reclaim America from the illegal immigrants!” then many American Indians**

Cultivating more nuanced understandings of immigration is crucial at this moment in our country’s history as various politicians debate building a wall on the Mexican-American border, and argue about the future of the approximately 800,000 people who entered this country as minors. Their fate turns on passing legislation along the lines of the DREAM Act (“Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors”). The other acronym for legislation related to this group is DACA, which stands for “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.”

The good news is that **most of the American public is in favor of 'standing on the side of love' for immigration justice**: “67% of Americans favor allowing immigrants brought to the U.S. illegally as children to gain legal resident status if they join the military or go to college.... Since 2011, support for this policy has increased significantly, from 57%.” Tragically the popular consensus around sensible immigration reform (which was supported by both President George W. Bush and President Obama) has not yet created sufficient political will to pass the desperately needed congressional legislation.

The fear-mongering around immigration becomes even more tragic when you recall how much immigrants have contributed to this country. Many conservatives and liberals share this perspective. The recent example I have seen is from conservative columnist Bret Stephens, who recently highlighted the fact that, **“Americans have won 40 percent of all Nobel Prizes ever awarded — and [recent] immigrants accounted for 35 percent of those winners.... Google. Comcast. eBay. Kraft. Pfizer. AT&T. They all had immigrants as founders.”** As Lin-Manuel Miranda says in *Hamilton*, “Immigrants (We Get The Job Done).”

And when I think about the long-term struggle for immigration justice in this country, I am reminded of Dr. Daisy Machado, one of my best professors in seminary, who taught history from a Latina Feminist perspective. I will never forget her asking us to first imagine the Earth as we have seen it in pictures taken from space. Can you see it in your mind’s eye—the breathtakingly beautiful blue-green marble on which we find ourselves floating through the inky

blackness of space? Then, picture a globe or almost any map you've ever seen. **What's the difference? Maps and globes almost always have human-created lines dividing up the natural world of our planet—often with various colors and labels reflecting which groups of humans claim given territories.**

Beyond that comparison, what she said next resonated with me the most. She said: **“Borders are wounds.”** I've never forgotten that: a border is a *wound*—“an injury, a tear, a cut, a trauma”—that we have chosen (for various historically-contingent reasons) to inflict on ourselves as a society and as a species—or that others have inflicted upon us.

Dr. Machado came to see borders this way as a Latina feminist historian living in Texas. Borders have capriciously been moved back and forth over the lands and homes of families with ancestors living in the lands now known as Texas and Mexico—for generations. First, there were the indigenous inhabitants, who suddenly found themselves declared part of the “Kingdom of New Spain,” followed by long periods of significant political instability. Texas even declared independence for a few years at one point. Then a few years later, the U.S. annexed Texas as part of its proclaimed ideology of Manifest Destiny. Meanwhile, **most families simply kept trying to live their lives, even as border wounds kept getting carved out—above them, below them, around them, and sometimes, through them.**

Recalling the more cosmic and global view of our planet from space can remind us that we humans created our current borders for historically contingent reasons. And if we choose to do so, we can “tear down these walls,” and build the more humane and compassionate world that we dream about. There is so much I love about this country. But may we also, within our sphere of influence, work to live into our UU 6th Principle: **“The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice”—not merely for some, but “for all.”**