

Finding Sanctuary

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First Unitarian Church of Toledo

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Efret and Louisa Cole came to America in 1852. Katrina Schacher and her beloved George Marshall passed through Ellis Island in 1902. They came to America in search of a better life for themselves, their future children and all the generations that would follow them. When they stepped ashore there were a multitude of unknowns facing them. One that loomed largest was how they were going to make a new life in America. Even well planned, it was a huge leap of faith. They didn't know the specifics of the life before them. They didn't know that the stock market would crash, dramatically changing their financial situation, or that other problems would follow them. Some of what they encountered were problems that crossing an ocean would not change. But they learned that in time. They did not know the multitude of joys they would experience as well. They took a leap of faith, and came to America in search of a better life.

Efret and Louisa Cole were my maternal great-great grandparents. Katrina Schacher and George Marshall were my paternal great-grandparents. My connection to them is mostly through story and photograph, but their blood does flow in my veins. There had been others who also passed through the inspection gates successfully: Pembers, Lovelands, McMullens, Stevensons, Deusendorphers, and Lutzers. They came from England, Germany, France and Ireland. I'm truly a *Heinz 57* sort of girl, and proud of it. One day, if I have the time to do the research, I may uncover all the reasons they came, but for right now, I am satisfied knowing they did come, and that their families merged in the ways they did. In the meantime, it was great fun to find my great-grandfather Marshall's citizenship papers two week's ago as we were cleaning out some attic boxes.

Like many others who came before and who have followed since, all those Lovelands, Pembers, Schachers, Dickinsons, Marshalls and Lutzers' were seeking a new home. They sought sanctuary. Most of them found what they were looking for so long ago. They were immigrants. I am the descendent of immigrants. It is something of which I am keenly aware.

For the last number of years the topic of immigration has been front and center in the media and in the minds of many people in this country. It has become somewhat of an "us" and "them" debate. But in truth, it isn't a debate about "us" and "them." There is no real "us" or "them." The immigration debate isn't a debate about "those people" and what "they do." It's the story of every American to one degree or another. It's a story that almost every one of us can claim.

While working with an immigrant population of migrant farm and vineyard workers on Long Island, it finally occurred to me that unless we are people of the First Nations – Iroquois, Sioux, Blackfoot, Cherokee, all of us, came to this land on a boat or plane of some kind. We may have come here ourselves, or we may be here today because our parents, or grandparents or great-grandparents

came. It may have been out of choice or because of need, or it could be that we are here because an outsider brought our distant relatives against their will in shackles.

Clearly the United States government has decided that citizenship can be acquired through a process of naturalization or by birth, but the story throughout history is one of repeated waves of immigration, of people coming to America again and again, beginning anew for many different reasons.

It's easy to forget the humanity of the situation, from the outside allowing it to become one of dollars, politics and commerce – using the image of solid walls and borders to keep “the others” out. Too often we allow our desire for cheap strawberries and lettuce to blind us to the faces of the men and women involved, allowing us to forget the stories of the children that drive the parents to do what they need to do.

I have come to believe that the majority of the immigrants who are here, legally and illegally, are here for legitimate reasons – much in the same way that their predecessors from Europe and Asia were. Like those who came before, the current immigrants want a better life for themselves and their children. They are seeking sanctuary for themselves and all the generations to follow.

Eileen Simpson, in Orphans: Real and Imaginary (1990), writes:

For over three hundred years, refugees from political oppression, religious persecution, famine, poverty and a rigid class system which limited educational and economic opportunities have been leaving their native villages and cities and coming to the United States in search of Freedom and a better life.

I think that pretty much sums it up. It comes down to the basic question of how far would you go to feed your children if they were hungry? Would you work 12 hour days, every day of the year in blistering heat and frigid cold? Would you take things that did not belong to you? Would you travel half-way around the world to begin a new life in a foreign country where you didn't know a word of the common language?

It is a tough question, and not always hypothetical. I wonder how many of us have been hungry, and yet have gone without a meal so that our children could eat....? I wonder how many of us have ever been in a position where we have gone without simple basics so that our children could have what they needed? Parents do things like that for their children. We do the hard things; we make the hard decisions that other people outside the family may not understand. We sometimes make decisions of which other people disapprove, but as parents we make the best decisions we can for our own. Only we know what is best for our family.

Sometimes life changes dramatically in unforeseen ways, and we have to make hard decisions that radically change the lives of those around us. As we sit in our beautiful new sanctuary, it is abundantly clear that we are able to be here because of very difficult decisions, ones that will allow us to thrive as a

congregation. On some level, from the outside, the immigration issue may be like that.

Some basic research on the third wave of the Irish immigration in the 1850's, highlights and parallels a bit of the current discussion. In the 1850s it was the Irish who were the low people on the social scale; they were for many years the ones who did the jobs that one else wanted to do. The women filled the sweat shops; they became chambermaids, cooks and nannies.

One quote I found in *The Chicago Post* actually read, (and I'm going to read it as it was printed at the time and not sanitize it.) "Let Negroes be servants, and if not Negroes, let Irishmen fill their place." *The Chicago Post* continued their article: "The Irish fill our prisons, our poor houses.... Scratch a convict or a pauper, and the chances are that you tickle the skin of an Irish Catholic. Putting them on a boat and sending them home would end crime in this country."

As a woman with serious Irish ancestry this way of thinking hits a little too close to home. But as you listened to the quote from the *Chicago Post*, did it sound even the remotest bit familiar to all the hatred that we frequently hear on the evening news?

We may never know what drives a person to come to this country, giving up everything he or she had in their previous life, unless we ask them, individually, and really listen to what brought them to this country. We need to listen to their individual stories.

I once spent the better part of an evening talking with a migrant worker who has a wife and children in Guatemala. He sends the almost all of every paycheck home to his family. He knows that he can make far more money in order to support his family working in the vineyards on Long Island than he can in his homeland. He sends money home, and yet sleeps in a homeless shelter during the cold months as he cannot afford even the most basic housing where he works. His trade-off, the reality he lives with every day, is that he cannot afford to live with them, and he doesn't know when he will see them again. He does know it will be a long time. More than likely it will be years not months before he can see his wife and children. Maybe one day, if he works long enough and hard enough, he will earn enough to bring his wife and children to this country, but in the meantime the dream keeps him going and many others like him. Each and every immigrant, legal or not, has a story. What seems to link many of the stories together is a common theme of seeking sanctuary.

This morning, we gather together for the second time this week in our beautiful new sanctuary. The first time was Wednesday night as we stood in solidarity with our sister churches in Knoxville, Tennessee. We stood with compassion and in honor of members of Westside Community Church and Tennessee Valley UU Church. For while the shooting happened at Tennessee Valley, it was a joint service and those killed were members of Westside.

Many of you here this morning, were here that night as we stood together, lit candles against the darkness of oppression and together sang "We shall Overcome." As sad and horrific the reason why we came together that night, standing together like that seemed a fitting way to start our history of worship in our new space. We too sought sanctuary. We needed to say to the community in Toledo that we stand with our fellow religious liberals. We needed to say through our words and actions, that we stand tall for what we believe in and the work we are called to do in our local community and the world at large. We also needed to say that one act of violence does not define our perspective on the world.

The Unitarian Universalist church in Knoxville has done amazing work this week, and is holding a "rededication" service as we hold our first full worship service in our new space. The rest of their healing and recovering will take time, but as of this morning, Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church is back in their sanctuary space, standing tall, and saying to the world that while they have been through a horrific event just seven short days ago, they are stronger than that, and are able to move forward. As are Unitarian Universalists across the country this morning, they are more keenly aware than ever of the sacredness of life and our commitment to freedom and the preservation of sanctuary.

I do believe that as we stand in support of our sister congregation, and of all people who work against oppression and suppression of freedom, we can take this situation as a reminder of our own responsibility to this new community here on Glendale. We can be reminded of our responsibility to our respective neighborhoods, and when we step back, the world as a whole. That may be one of the great learnings for us. One act of hatred and violence is not going to silence our voice. It has not silenced our predecessors and will stop us now.

Each of us here is here today because of hard decisions made in the past, of risks taken and choices made. May we find we have the grace to move forward, emboldened by their commitment and courage, humbled by the choices made, and willing to take on the challenge before us. Let us embrace this sanctuary that we have together in this building, and find the strength do what needs to be done for the greater good. So may it be.

Closing Words: *This is still a world in which too many of the wrong things happen somewhere. But this is a world in which we now have the means to make a great many of the right things happen everywhere.* -- Margaret Mead--