

## Who are We?

Here in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania the immigration debates have manifested in varied ways. One manifestation is in South Philly where many of us like to grab a cheese steak. Of course in this city there are more places to find an excellent cheese steak than one can eat at without danger to the waistline. But when Kristin and I have out of town guests we like to go down to **Geno's** and **Pat's** to let people eat and feel what Philly is all about.

That is why I was embarrassed for our city when over a year ago the owner of **Geno's Steaks**, Mr. Joseph Vento placed a sign on his business stating "This is America: When Ordering Speak English". Mr. Vento actually became quite a celebrity with his role in the immigration debates. He has been on hundred of radio and television programs around the country discussing his views on cultural assimilation. His own parents came to the US from Sicily and he feels that they themselves should have learned more English. I respect Mr. Vento, but I don't agree with him on many things. Actually I have been highly tempted to go down to Geno's with a diverse group of people, including some clergy wearing our collars and stoles, and to get in line. When each person reaches the order window having him or her say "bistec con queso, y con cebolla, or bistec, con, con". That would be Spanish for cheese steak with cheese and with onion, or cheese steak with, with. It would be nice to have a few video cameras rolling to document the reaction of the employees serving food from the window.

Mr. Vento's public declaration reminds me of a harsher story involving a kind man who spent most of his life in West Texas. Victor is a Unitarian Universalist in El Paso – where I served as minister for a year - and he is European American, engineer.

Victor's ancestors came to Texas many generations ago. But it was in the 1950's when Victor was out in an isolated part of the state working with a road construction crew that besides him was entirely Mexican and Mexican American. After working all day in the hot sun the men were hungry and there was only one restaurant to be found. It had a huge sign painted on it's front saying: Mexican Food. Victor thought, "this is perfect my guys will get a chance to cool down and eat some food that we will all probably enjoy." So they went in and when they sat down the waitress came to the table and directly addressed Victor, who was the only white guy sitting at the table. She said "we don't serve Mexicans here". With the only sign out front reading "Mexican Food" they didn't serve food to Mexicans. It didn't take much to know she was totally serious and soon after all the men got up and left together while trying to figure out what to do.

The stories of these two food establishments – in Philadelphia and West Texas – remind me of the scripture we read this morning. Specifically after wandering through the desert with great thirst the Israelites questioned, doubted and feared whether there would be enough for them to survive. When humans fear that there won't be enough work, or there won't be enough money or food, or that their language won't be respected, or they won't understand what's going on, in these situations human being are susceptible to tightening up with fear, closing down the heart and working to shut others out.

## **II. Immigration/Sanctuary**

This month our small group ministries are discussing immigration. By choosing this topic we are intentionally experimenting with a topic that obviously can include politics, public policy, economics, and so many multi-faceted social issues that it can be

mind-boggling and overwhelming. But I think this is a valuable experiment for a number of reasons. Immigration is currently a very important issue in our country. Obviously we are a nation of many immigrants, and historically these issues have always been pertinent with ebbs and flows. But right now this issue is high tide. Federal, state and local level communities across the country are discussing immigration issues and our religion needs to vigorously participate in the dialogue. We want our Unitarian Universalist values of democracy, justice, freedom and compassion to be present in decision-making. There are certain parts of this discussion where religion, churches, synagogues, and mosques, can play a unique role.

Of course, my own background and experiences inform my framework. I was raised in a church on the West Side of Chicago where during the 1980's we officially declared ourselves as a Sanctuary for Central American refugees. This was a time when our country was supporting death squads and human rights abuses throughout many areas of the hemisphere and the immigration policy in the United States turned away many people whose lives were at risk in their own communities. In one of the buildings at my home church we hosted an undocumented Guatemalan family with two parents and two children. They lived with us for many years. During that time various Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees also came through for shorter stays. Most of this activity was illegal. At that time in our nation's history hundreds of churches, university and community groups across the country educated themselves, and engaged in soul searching discernment in deciding that we had to answer to higher laws than those of the state when they were unjust. In ways similar to our forefathers and mothers who engaged in the

Underground rail road to help slaves to freedom, we had to answer to our God and to our consciences. We had to do what was right.

Many sanctuary groups tapped their walking stick on rocks and the water began to flow for the immigrants in terms of food, clothing, shelter, education and jobs. What also became clear was that we hosts benefited by having faith that we could find enough water, food, love, courage and hope for all. This was a beautiful experience leading us away from a mentality of scarcity to abundance.

It is also true that throughout the history of our country a huge percentage of our ancestors needed something like sanctuary, whether it was legal or not. My relatives came from England and Germany to these shores in the 1700's. Many of them benefited when communities opened their arms in welcome. Where did your families before arriving in America? You can place a pin on the world map we will have in our fellowship hall during coffee hour to show one or two of the countries of your ancestry.

Viewing on this map where all of relatives came from maybe we will understand more about who we are and the of the continual flow every years of tens of thousands of immigrants coming to our shores, landing in our airports and crossing the Rio Grande. Every year hundreds come, stay, leave, and return various times without legal documents. The church should not aim to break the law, but we should be a place of sanctuary and radical hospitality to people in transition. We should make sacrifices to provide spiritual as well as material support to those in need when they are crossing the desert.

### **Free Trade/Free Church**

Besides, Sanctuary I have a second spiritual focus point for Unitarian Universalists in the immigration issues relating to with Free Trade. My own personal

connection to Free Trade started when I was living in Chiapas, Mexico in 1993 and 94 and the Zapatista National Liberation Army launched a revolution in Chiapas. The Zapatistas chose January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1994 to launch their revolution because that was the first day of implementing the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Zapatistas, a group of indigenous, Mayan farmers and day laborers objected to NAFTA because they felt it left poor people behind in development. The Free Trade arrangements were too much trickle down economics and didn't do enough for building schools, roads and health clinics for poor folks. With that context for my education I have said ever since that Free Trade is basically for rich folks and those with capital. What do poor folks trade? Poor folks trade their labor. The goods they have to barter are sweats, muscle and hard work. But NAFTA didn't allow many poor folks to go where they wished in Canada, USA and Mexico to get the best compensation for the investment of their hard work.

This is why I completely agree with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, including Philadelphia's Cardinal Rigali, when they declare that immigration reform should include the principle that "Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families." Free Trade is complicated and multi-faceted. It actually brings many jobs and material improvements to communities that are often left isolated. Free Trade is happening and will continue, so the only reasonable conversation focuses on how to manage it with fairness and inclusivity for as many communities as possible.

We Unitarian Universalist have lots to offer in this conversation because we come from the Free Church movement. We are the free thinking, creedless religion of Free Souls. This religion empowers each individual and community to find and create purpose and meaning to their lives. For hundreds of years our religion has placed confidence in

the belief that when engaged in a free search people will come to believe in a boundless love for all people and life itself. In the history of immigration in America we see the spiritual rewards for our country when we have followed these principles.

I know that many of us share deep spiritual longings to live in an increasingly authentically multi-cultural, multi-racial community where people come from cultures all around the world. I know I am not alone in wishing for people of African, Asian, Latino, European and American cultures to freely share their music, food, literature, theater, philosophy and spirituality. Last year the US Congress passed a bill to build a huge, massively expensive wall along our boarder with Mexico. To our President I say, “ Mr. Bush don't build that wall.” Not only will it be another terrible waste of money it will be a horrific symbol. Eventually we will just have to tear it down and we already have too many cultural and social walls between our Mexican neighbors and us. We already need so badly to more effectively collaborate with Mexico on the economy, education, and cultural arts.

I want the church to help focus immigration conversations on the abundance and richness of immigration. I want Philadelphia to become more international. Wouldn't it be great to have new neighbors from Nigeria, Ghana and India? How great would it be to have people ordering cheese steaks in Chinese, Portugese, Urdu, Farsi, Japanese, Maori and Swahili. How great it would be to have people in our church speaking these languages. Why don't we start a city movement where establishments put up signs showing how to order cheese steaks with and without cheese and onions in languages of the people around the world. Why not present our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes in languages from all over the world as a way more of us to grow into a higher

level of language skills? This would be one small step towards perhaps talking with, reading and learning about each others cultures. This might attract more people from around the world to the city of brotherly and sisterly love. We have so much to offer and we have so much to learn.

Most all immigrants want to learn English. If more people in Philly spoke two, three and four languages English would not suffer. On the contrary in order to learn a second language well one must strengthen their command of their first language. In order to learn the subjunctive and good vocabulary in Spanish you have to make sure you know the subjunctive in English and improve your vocabulary in English. When you learn how different cultures talk about how spicy food is, different words for dog and pig, how people express spiritual values, you learn more about life.

When we accept harsh borders and a culture of fear we all suffer from thirst. Together we can find the valor to take down walls and to tap on the rocks so that blessings flow and we continue learn to tell our stories, listen more deeply to one another, dance, and sing. Together in a world with sanctuary and free souls the wellsprings, our lives will flow with love, courage and hope for all brothers and sisters. So be it.