

¿Adonde Pertenezco? (Where Do I Belong?)

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Ramon Lobo's father Maximo became eligible for a visa to move to the United States by working for a US air base in the Philippines. By the time Maximo's visa arrived, however, Ramon had turned 21, and was thus unable to join his family when they moved. He stayed behind in the Philippines.

There, he applied for his own visa, and waited. In that time, he could not even see family—US law does not allow people to visit their family in the US once they've petitioned for a visa, and it does not allow visa holders to re-enter the US once they've applied for a green card.

By 2003, when Ramon Lobo received his own visa, he had a family in the Philippines—he and his long-time girlfriend Ana had a two year-old son. In order to move to the US, he had to leave them behind. Ramon and Ana cannot marry—doing so would start Ana's visa process all over. Because she is an unmarried mother, Ana cannot find employment as a nurse in the deeply-Catholic Philippines, and thus is dependent upon money Ramon sends her.

Five years later, Ramon's family is still waiting, and they try to make do with chats over a Web camera and occasional visits by Ramon to see them. *(Story paraphrased from Jennifer Ludden, as quoted in UUA resource)*

Mahmod is a Palestinian man who lawfully entered the United States in 1996. Here, he married an American citizen, Ree, who works for the US Department of Homeland Security. He became step-father to her five children and a major source of income for the family. His application for permanent residency was rejected, solely for having distributed leaflets about the Palestine Liberation Organization—the PLO—while a college student twenty years ago.

In a further step, our government ordered him deported to Jordan for having engaged in what they deemed to be “terrorist activities,” and imprisoned him for twenty months while he appealed their decision. His legally-required custody review never happened. His family, deprived of his presence and his income, had to declare bankruptcy. Facing an indefinite stay in prison, he gave up and allowed himself to be deported.

Today, he lives in the United Arab Emirates, where at least he can visit his family and work to send money home. Ree and her five children were forced to remain in the US. *(Story paraphrased from Detention Watch, as quoted in UUA resource)*

The stories are endless—stories of families torn apart, and of people detained without charges; stories of people living lives of fear, and of ruthless employers taking advantage of undocumented workers. They are stories of people being held in slavery in locked sheds in fields and of people being denied visas for demanding that employers follow labor laws.

The people in these stories come from nations all over the world, and the settings for their stories span the breadth of our nation.

Our community has such stories, too. Any of you who have spent time at Neighbors Link for Family Night or helping with our Religious Education program have heard them. Any of you who have had dinner with the homeless men in our Emergency Shelter—who work low-paying jobs all day and sleep on the streets at night—have probably heard them as well. If you read local papers, you know something of the ways in which immigrants—documented and not—face hardships in this very community.

Despite this, the subject of immigration is a touchy one to bring up in any community where diverse opinions are cherished. It's a politically-charged discussion, it touches on the unfairness in our laws and the unwillingness of our lawmakers to develop a fair solution.

It's a discussion fraught with myths that are deeply-held by many who seek to deny opportunities for immigrants. Myths that teach us, for example, that immigrants are a drain on our economy, or that they're taking jobs away from Americans. Myths that frighten us into thinking that people—most of whom are simply seeking a better life and willing to do hard work—are somehow a threat to our national security. Myths that turn anyone born in another country—especially people not from Europe—into automatic suspects, dehumanizing them and making it easier to hate, or fear, or ignore.

But this is a discussion with profound moral implications, and so it's a discussion we must engage in as a religious community. Whether you agree with my conclusions on the issue or not, the one thing I want you to walk away from here with today is an understanding that above all, in talking about immigrants we are talking about human beings.

Human beings with aspirations and fears, joys and sorrows.

Human beings with inherent worth and dignity.

Human beings with, the words that Thomas Jefferson wrote to declare the independence of this nation, "certain inalienable rights."

And as a religious institution that claims to value human beings and human experience, we have a certain obligation to make sure that human beings are treated with respect and justice.

Today's stories from immigrant families are starkly different from the ones I grew up hearing. Perhaps you can relate.

In my family, I heard stories like the one of my great-grandfather, Giuseppe Falanga and his family. The Falanga family were poor farmers from a town on the side of Mount Vesuvius, just outside of Naples. Faced with dire poverty at home, they set out to find a better life. Their first stop was Marseille, France, where my great-grandmother, Lucia, stayed with her three daughters while her husband went off to America.

Giuseppe Falanga landed at Ellis Island on April 3, 1909. He made his way to Brooklyn and began work as a brick mason—common work for Italian immigrants at the time. After establishing a home, he sent for his family, who

arrived to join him in 1910. Giuseppe, Lucia and their five daughters—two born in Italy, one in France and two in the United States—were all American citizens when they died.

I heard stories like that of my grandfather, Lucien Esposito, who some of you met last September when he came to visit. My grandfather was a teenager when the German Army marched into France in 1940. Though quite young, he joined the French Resistance and fought despite great cost to himself and his family.

After the liberation of France in 1945, Lucien joined the French Merchant Marine, travelling with them around the world until the ship he was on docked in New York Harbor. There, he jumped ship and set out to find a family of old friends his parents had told him about—the Falangas, who had met the Espositos during their brief stay in Marseille. Before long, he married their youngest daughter, Helen, who had been born in Brooklyn after her parents' arrival there.

My grandfather's only marketable skill was physical labor, and he worked backbreaking jobs as a longshoreman on the docks in Brooklyn. Married to my grandmother and with a young daughter on the way, he quickly became eligible for American citizenship. No green cards, mind you, no long waits for visas. Citizenship.

It is possible that you heard stories like these in your family. It is possible that you have lived a similar story. If so, then you know that United States immigration policy has not always been the mess that it is today.

Now, I'm not trying to advocate a return to the policies of the early twentieth century, when non-White immigration was banned (and our government's policies, affirmed by the Supreme Court under Unitarian Chief Justice William Howard Taft, were written so that who was and was not "white" was a completely subjective affair).

I am not looking to return to a day when Irish and Southern Italian immigrants were officially discouraged because they were a little too dark for the tastes of those in power. Goodness knows there is plenty to be learned by looking at racism and ethnic discrimination in our nation's immigration history.

But at least in my family, there are stories that go like this: faced with poverty or war, a hard-working young man set out for America in search of something better. There, he found work and was able to support a family. There, he found a nation willing to let him in, a nation willing to make him a citizen in return for his hard work.

Neither Giuseppe Falanga nor Lucien Esposito had to wait years for permission to come. They simply boarded the first ship they could afford passage on—one in steerage, the other as a crew member.

And neither of them had higher education, worked in critical industries, or had a job lined up before they set out for New York.

Today, the stories that made my family possible are not the reality. Hard-working people come into this country—some on temporary work visas, some as students, some without any documentation at all—and find themselves unable to go any further. Living in fear of immigration raids, they subject themselves to the whims of unjust employers in an underground economy that helps no one.

Because of the immigration policies of the United States, these people are given little other choice but to work for wages below minimum wage, to accept jobs with no benefits, to work on farms and in factories where health codes and labor laws are fiction more than fact.

Because of the immigration policies of the United States, families are torn apart every day. It is not uncommon for families to have members with different immigration status—some permanent residents, some citizens, some undocumented. Often, undocumented parents must face the decision of leaving their US citizen children behind or bringing their children back to the poverty they themselves tried so hard to escape.

Because of the immigration policies of the United States, religious communities like this one—people who see poverty in their midst, who see human suffering in their towns, who see educational opportunities in their school—must first stop and ask if their work in the community is benefitting people who are breaking the law.

There is an alternative.

Here in this community, we can and should stand up for fair treatment of all people. We can leave immigration enforcement to Federal authorities, and not deputize local law enforcement officers as agents of the US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement bureau, ICE.

Here in Mount Kisco, we can and should work in interfaith coalitions to help alleviate poverty, create and assist with programs so that children can have proper education, and form bridges of understanding between immigrant populations and agencies like the police.

Right here in our community, we can and should treat people as humans, with dignity, compassion and respect. We can reach out to others, listen to their stories, understand their situations.

There is an alternative for our country as well.

Our nation can create immigration policies that treat people with respect and fairness; policies that treat immigrants seeking a better life as human beings.

Our nation can create immigration policies that seek to keep families whole. Policies that eliminate multi-year backlogs in family and employment-based immigration.

Our nation can create policies that provide ways for people to enter this country legally—ways that are not dependent upon pre-existing wealth, higher education or citizenship in a select group of nations. We can create paths to legalization and naturalization for otherwise law-abiding undocumented immigrants working hard to make it in this country.

Our nation can create a border security policy that is not based on fear and intimidation, and an enforcement policy that respects our Constitutional guarantee of due process.

Our nation can and must enact comprehensive immigration reform that creates immigration policies in line with the values and ideals of this country, the ideals of promise, of hope and of belonging, fairness and justice, the values of equality and opportunity.

If my great-grandfather were to land on these shores today, he would be turned away.

If my grandfather were to jump ship in Brooklyn and seek a job on the docks, he would face detention and deportation.

Lady Liberty's torch no longer welcomes strangers to these shores. She no longer, in the words of Emma Lazarus, the Mother of Exiles. She no longer beckons those who seek freedom and the possibility of a better life.

Where are we, I have to ask, what has happened to the promise of our nation? I shudder to think that the answer to these questions is somehow too political for us to explore.

These are profoundly moral discussions, and I hope that you will have them with me.

Works Consulted/Cited

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