



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Love, Responsibility, and Immigration

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As an immigrant myself, it really warmed my heart to see the outpouring of compassionate love and care of so many people in the U.S. toward the immigrant families separated at the border earlier this summer. People marched by the thousands. Passionate conversations overflowed in all kinds of contexts against the coldhearted treatment of mothers and fathers and their children. Heartbreaking photos covered the U.S. news for days. Prayer vigils were held as God was asked to intercede in this humanitarian crisis. It was good to see. People cared.

I thought how it would have been if my sister and I had been ripped apart from our parents after that horrendous boat ride from Cuba some fifty years ago. We had left all our extended family—which in our Latin American countries is as much “family” as the nuclear one. We had had the scariest day, night, and another day of our lives in that overloaded boat, with young and old bracing each other so as not to slide off into the stormy strait from the boat with the motor broken. It was traumatic enough after that to be held together as a family in a military barrack for a couple of days before being released *on parole* to a sponsoring couple that we had known in Cuba. I literally cannot imagine how it would have been if my sister and I had not had the arms of our parents to cling to, and their hands to be caressed with, and their voices soothing us with “We love you. It’ll get better soon.”

My parents died in this country, which they did not plan to do. They always thought of going back to Cuba—at least to die. They only came, and they only brought us, risking our lives, because they thought they had no other alternative. They had left all they had worked hard for and all they had known and all whom they had loved except for my sister and me. They came from professional class jobs to work in factories without the ability to speak the language of the land and with the awareness that they suddenly, somehow, would become inferior “persons of color.” Their hands bled every night, but they were determined to survive and to give their family a chance in this place. They worked hard for decades, so hard that my sister and I were never in the least hungry and were able to earn advanced degrees. I can almost hear their outrage from heaven over the families separated at the border, not knowing

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if they were going to be together again, powerless as their hopes for a better life had turned into a scary nightmare.

But public opinion had a say. Legalities were reversed. Families were reunited, albeit not all. There was a communal sigh of relief. It was a successful protest. Compassion won. Cold-heartedness had to cede. It was a victory of love.

And then, no more news. The children disappeared from the screens. Only a rare update here and there some days. The children and the parents, waiting for hearings, or still in military barracks, or walking back to where they had escaped. They are mostly off the screens. They are out of the news. But they are not out of trouble.

They had tried to escape harassment, rape, even death by gangs of hardened, hopeless young people who must protect their drug trade and only source of power. Now we do not see the would-be immigrant parents who had wanted to save their kids from the hopelessness that leads to that violence of perpetrator to victim or the mothers who had wanted to leave domestic situations infected with violence, too. We do not see them returning to the fear now. They are gone or will soon go without the newscasters and the

marchers and the prayers. Just by themselves, again. They go, and will go when their asylum cases fail, to rejoin the others who had not even tried to leave. We do not see them there, where it is scary, in the places they wanted to leave behind.

And we, the marchers, those who pray, the voters of this country here with other pictures in front of us on our screens. They, those families we cared about so much just a few months ago, now pretty much out of sight and out of mind.

I might have disagreed with my parents about Cuban politics, the Cuban revolution, and why they felt they had to leave our country, but I know that whatever side you are on in the judgment of the Cuban revolution, one thing is a certain fact: Cuba's history is completely entangled with U.S. economic and political interests. This is not the space to go into the details of that history beginning with the Spanish American War, the Platt Amendment to the Cuban constitution imposed by the United States, the multinational companies that owned our sugar as the main export, the almost 60-year-old economic blockade, etc., etc., etc. So it is also with the rest of Latin America. The et ceteras would be legion. Some are not secret—the military invasions, the CIA involvement, the assassinations of popular leaders or support of *coup d'états*, the multinationals...and the bananas.¹

The ubiquitous banana from the “Banana Republics” as we in the U.S. have heartlessly called those countries, from where the bananas and other natural products come. No one in Latin America has ever called their country a “Banana Republic,” but here we readily recognize the term and most know what their referent is. To reduce a country, or several countries, to one of their exports whose profit is made by multinational companies is at the least arrogant and colonial. But it is not only a problem of language.

Every time we peel a banana, we dispose of the peel and the sticker with the name of the country where undercompensated workers handled and shipped the huge banana bunches on the way to our grocery stores all over the U.S. for our breakfasts and our lunches. And many others make money in that journey by investments in the U.S.-based companies that “own” the produce, ship it, distribute it, and sell it in the neighborhoods in this country. So it was with the Cuban sugar, the gold from our land. Those who cut it and processed it in the sugar mills were poor and illiterate; their kids ran barefoot and with big bellies full of parasites. These children did not have much to do or to look forward to except growing up and learning to squeeze the golden juice out for others' profit. They knew their future. They would work for those investors in the north who own the sugar or the banana because they—now we—bought the land for a fistful of dollars a long time ago.²

Can the banana, or the sugar, or the mango make their way to our mind and heart instead of merely to our stomach? When we buy them in the supermarket do we think of the picker, of the

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handler of the fruit? Can we see their children and their future? Are *they* the neighbors that Christians are called to love? Or are they too far away for us to notice how our way of life impacts theirs? Is it because they are too far from our TVs and computer screens that we do not see them? We saw the same children and we loved them. Has our love followed them now that they have returned or will be returning to the places they tried to leave because their foreign-enriching economies only leave them with crumbs to kill for or escape from?

As a once-immigrant child whose family felt the whip of unquestioned history and as a Christian, I ask myself: Are *we* Christian neighbors to the children who tried to escape the economy of the banana and what it does to the whole country, especially in their scary homes and neighborhoods? Will they be bitten by the hopelessness that infects the people who are exerting violent hopelessness on the children, so they can only try to escape? Will they continue growing up to be the future victims or the perpetrators of that violence and hopelessness? We loved them only as long as they were the breaking news.

And now? Are they too far away for us to see how we are complicit through our selective blindness to the causes of their emigration? Are we free enough citizens and bold enough Christians to confess our sin of selfishness and question our pocketbooks? Or are we okay with forgetting those children that we once loved so passionately as to effect a speedy change in immigration policy? How can we continue to assume our historical and contemporary responsibilities for the emigration and immigration tragedies that we have seen and that are still befalling the children every day?

1. <https://medium.com/s/story/timeline-us-intervention-central-america-a9bea9ebc148>

2. <http://www.coha.org/peeling-back-the-truth-on-the-guatemalan-banana-industry/>