

2007-11-25 Immigration  
Mark Belletini

### **Opening Words**

We are here

*to breathe together for a time on a Sunday*  
after a demanding holiday schedual.

*Now we journey through a territory of time,*  
past a deep lake of words and singing hills  
**on a silent path leading to a city of peace**  
May we set forth in joy with these words:

**Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.**

**Affirmation** (*From Black Elk, Lakota Nation,*  
*and the Sutta Nopata from the Pali Canon of*  
*Theravada Buddhism*)

tune to 181

Then I was standing on the highest mountain  
of the them all, and while I stood there, I saw  
more than I can tell. And round beneath me was the whole hoop of the  
world.

*tune (or verse depending) of 181*

For I was seeing in the sacred manner  
the shape of all things of the spirit, and while  
I stood there, I saw more than I can tell,  
and I understood more than I saw.

*tune (or verse, depending) of 181*

And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people,  
which was one of many hoops that make one circle, wide as daylight and  
starlight. And they must all live together as one being, for in their

center grew a flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and father. And I saw that it was holy.

*#181 (either last verse, or whole hymn)*

## **Sequence**

And now, we in the northern hemisphere are approaching the gate of winter, though the air is still warm and the yellow leaves still cling tenaciously to their branches. Unaware of us, the great earth below our feet turns, giving us the gift of the morning, and the gift of the evening, every day.

And now, the planning and scheduling crowds our calendars with the round of get-togethers, special dinners, holiday lunches, and concerts. Unaware of us, the great earth below our feet turns, giving us the gift of the morning, and the gift of the evening, every day.

And now the memories of the holidays past, whether we stood within them, or outside of them, whether we loved them or hated them, rise up inside us like amazing fountains.

Unaware of us, the great earth below our feet turns, giving us the gift of the morning, and the gift of the evening every day.

And now, the time for restful silence has come at the center of our worship. Unaware of us, the great earth below our feet turns, giving us the gift of the morning, and the gift of the evening every day. Whether we speak or are silent, it moves and we are moved. Praise for the wonder of it all. *silence*

And now, the love in our hearts takes shape as we remember those who have blest our days with their caring, or who have left us legacies of honesty and intelligence and wisdom. These we name, gratefully, aloud or in the silence, as the earth below our feet turns without ceasing. *naming*

And now, music comes into the world, rising out of the silence like the universe once rose from the primeval mystery. Praise for the wonder of it all.

## **Readings:**

**The First Reading** *consists of actual quotations from the 1911 Immigration Commission of the U.S. 61<sup>st</sup> Congress. This was a huge document, and was*

*very influential in discussions of immigration in those days. Note that a Protestant minister of some sort was sitting on the Commission. This is not easy to listen to.*

Reverend Lichliter...I appear before you to represent the Junior Order United American Mechanics. As an organization, we are non-sectarian and non-partisan, founded on patriotism, the love of country being the chief cornerstone.

The question of restricted immigration has been increasing before our order for twenty years. In fact, we were among the first to call the attention of the American Congress to the evils of the "open-door" policy of the Government, resulting particularly from its recent changed character, by which the "undesirables" from foreign countries have been entering our portals by the millions. We are receiving a different kind of immigrant now. We protest against the admission of those who come into this country whose habits and manner of life tear down the standard of American life, I mean races possessed of a low intelligence and inferior standard of life.

Early immigration to this country consisted of people of Teutonic or Celtic blood. They came of their own initiative to better their condition. They were the better part of the nations from which they came...morally, mentally and physically. They were intelligent, industrious, frugal, law respecting and liberty-loving. They belonged to that independent race of men of the Aryan blood. By contrast, the latest wave of immigration has sent undesirable people into large cities, reinforcing their slum population. They are hotbeds of vice and corruption. They tax our assimilating powers. New York City alone has over 500,000 Italians, for example.

I have seen our own people at the mill office asking for work, and were told there was no opening. The next minute an Italian would come into the office, the smell of steerage still on his clothes, and he would get the job for mere asking. The vast majority just come to accumulate a good bank account. Then they depart.

**The Second Reading** *is a poem by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, the daughter of an immigrant Italian. It's called Arturo.*

I told everyone your name was Arthur; tried to turn you into the imaginary father in a three piece suit that I wanted instead of my own. I changed my

name to Marie, hoping no one would notice my face with its dark Italian eyes.

Arturo, I send you this message from my younger self, that fool who needed to deny the words (Wop! Guinea! Greaseball!) slung like curved spears, the anguish of sandwiches made from spinach and olive oil and roasted peppers on homemade bread, the rice pies of Easter.

Today I watch you, clean as a cherub, your ruddy face shining, closed by your growing deafness in a world where my words cannot touch you.

At 80 you still worship Roosevelt and JFK, read the newspaper carefully, know with a quick shrewdness the details of revolutions and dictators, the cause and effect of all wars, no matter how small. For the children you carry chocolates wrapped in gold foil, and find for them always your crooked smile and a \$5 bill.

I smile when I think of you. Listen America. This is my father, Arturo, and I am his daughter Maria. Do not call me Marie.

## **Sermon**

A few years ago, a man from Vedbaek, Denmark, came to our Morning Celebration. The man was John Hertz, a Unitarian Universalist from Europe who happened to come to Columbus for business. He and his wife Gevene have been part of the European group of Unitarian Universalists for a good long time, and I have known them ever since my first trip over to Europe to preach back in the early 90's.

He was here on business, but he was also here to talk with me about the lecture they wanted me to give at their next retreat.

They wanted me to talk about immigration issues over in Europe. I said to him quite clearly, "I don't know anything about immigration issues over in Europe, John. Not one thing. Really." He said, "I know, but you *do* know something about immigration per se, I think. Weren't your grandparents immigrants from Italy?" "Well, yes, of course," I said. "But what does that...?" And all of a sudden it occurred to me that I did indeed have some powerful feelings about the word *immigration*. And it was those personal

stories that I used to frame my talk over in at the Guesthouse in Oberwesel, Germany, where they held the retreat that year.

But, I also realized as John and I talked in my office back there that I *did* know a few choice things about European immigration issues. To wit: the last time I had been in Europe, I was staying with my friend Hans in Hilversum, just outside of Amsterdam. While I was there, and just a few blocks away from where I was staying, a man named Pym Fortuin was assassinated. Mr. Fortuin had been running for office in Nederland on a platform of immigration reform. The Muslim immigrants from Morocco and Algeria had been building mosques in every single Dutch town during the preceding years. This seemed to threaten the Dutch, who also resented that many of these immigrants bitterly complained in every newspaper about the loose way of life they felt the Dutch people were enjoying...looseness about sex, looseness about drugs, looseness about the roles of women and men. Mr. Fortuin had told these immigrants: "You can go home if you don't like it. We welcomed you, but that does not give you the right to question the way we do things." He was doing very well in the polls, Mr. Fortuin, right up to the day he was assassinated. Every indication we have insists that had Mr. Fortuin not been assassinated, he would have been elected handily by a wide margin. In the notably very liberal Nederland.

With this experience under my belt, I had to conclude that at the very least, new immigration patterns in Europe were generating strong feelings on both sides of the fence. After all, neither furious election platforms nor assassinations can be called subtle.

And as I read as many European documents as I could find, in preparation for my European lecture, I learned that the European experience of recent immigration was not as dissimilar from the experience we once had here as some would like to make it.

When I read European newspapers and magazines and websites excoriating the new immigrants from Morocco and Algeria and Turkey as being 1. people who are consistently dirty and lazy and self-segregated 2. people who are prone to criminal behavior and violence 3. people who only immigrated to get rich personally 4. people who were in the thrall of an evil religion from overseas which would one day take over the whole area with its authoritarian and pernicious teachings, 5. people who were both oversexed and sexist at the same time, the men keeping their women on pedestals like

the Madonna while being lewd and obnoxious to all the women who were already in the cities to which they had immigrated. And finally, 6. people who just weren't very intelligent, and thus "undesirable."

It became clear to me that the anti-immigration feelings in Europe are based squarely on these 6 perceptions. But then, when I continued my study, and went on to read what was written in the New York Times, The Atlantic Monthly etc. about folks like my Italian immigrant grandparents, who arrived here early last century, I realized that the exact same 6 perceptions, expressed almost word for word, colored US immigration issues back then.

The Italian immigrants were looked upon as dirty criminals, purveyors of terrorist death, riddled with anti-woman attitudes, and totally obedient to the evil pope in Rome, whose purpose was clearly seen as the Catholicization of the world. Modern attitudes toward Muslims found in Europe and America repeat this ancient diatribe almost word for word, substituting the word "imam" for pope. I have even heard people who call themselves liberal in both theology and politics making statements suggesting that they are not too far off from this assessment. Oh not to the extent of the late Mr. Falwell of course, or Franklin Graham, Billy's son, who have both specialized in the cultivation of anti-Muslim bigotry. But still, I have to say that this kind of prejudice does not seem to mind whether it's associated with liberals or conservatives. It simply wants to thrive.

Why? Because our American culture teaches, in a variety of steady ways, that differences are to be feared, and caricatured and fenced off by innuendo. For example, and I know I have said this before, one percent of all the Italian immigrants had anything at all to do with the fabled Mafia. The Mafia, certainly, I admit, is a very real organization with true murderous ability. Yet the main cultural depiction of Italian immigrants in Hollywood is a godfather film, a Mafia movie. Not families eating supper. Not adoring grandparents giving gold wrapped chocolates to their children. Not hard working miners like my father's father, or hard working Chrysler plant employees like my other grandparents. Not peasant immigrants who never went to school a day in their life learning to read and write on their own. Both English and Italian. Not people with the thrift and money management skills to buy a house after only a couple of years of being in this country. Not about skillful gardeners who could bring dead things back to life. No, the media portrayal of many immigrants, and not just Italians, was to affirm

them as murderous rascals bent on, ungratefully, destroying “the American Way of Life.”

Ten million Italians came over here, mostly from the South. “To the land of opportunity where the streets were paved with gold,” as some pundits like to put it. What you don’t hear is that five million went back; and many more wanted to...for a long time, but held out till they finally adjusted. Just like Yoon wanted to go back to Korea in this mornings story. Why? Oh, partially, as for Yoon, it was simply that the culture here is very different. The trees, the plants, the foods, the geography, and the climates...all odd to the stranger. The language, difficult, full of colloquialisms it would take a lifetime to learn. But that was the small stuff. Mostly the 5 million Italians left because they found bigotry and violence here, the very violence they themselves were accused of. For example, the number of Italian immigrants that were lynched in Louisiana, back in the twenties would surprise you. It wasn’t much less than the number of young black men that were lynched in those days. Italy actually broke off diplomatic relations with the US of A because of these assaults on Italian immigrants. The anti-Catholic propaganda was fierce too; the mockery in the newspapers, including the New York Times, was crude. The Times in fact suggested that Italians could be more welcomed if they just converted away from Catholicism and became Protestant of some sort, the American religion. This conversion strategy is exactly what is going on today with Franklin Graham types, who are trying to convert all Muslims to Evangelical piety. And some of that, I sometimes think cynically, is because most Jews simply won’t put up with such Evangelical nonsense any more.

Many immigrants, of course, as you might suspect, bought into this pressure to conform. Maria Mazziotti Gillan writes of wanting to become Marie, of wanting her father to be that dad on *Leave It To Beaver* always wearing a suit. She was ashamed not to be Anglo. She no longer wanted to be cursed as “Greaseball” or called “Wop!” (And “wop”, please, does not mean “without papers”, (I remain aghast at the ignorance of modern pop culture) but which comes from a Spanish-rooted word in the Italian dialect spoken in Naples, *guapo*, which means “good-looking.” The immigrants were often heard to comment on the beauty or handsome-ness of their fellow immigrants...“Ma, che guapa la donna la!”)

Then, over time, this blushing daughter of an Italian immigrant began to see her father not as an ethnic embarrassment, but as a kind human being, a man

who loves children, a dedicated man who knows his radical politics, a thoughtful man who understands the sociological under-pinnings of any war. In her moving last lines, she reclaims her heritage, no longer ashamed, and re-introduces her father to America as Arturo, not Arthur, and herself as Maria, not Marie.

When I read about immigration issues today, with angry tirades on both sides, with debates about building fences and walls (as if the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, or Hadrian's wall worked for a minute!) I often have to pause, take a breath to soften my anger, and remind myself that everyone in this room has immigrant blood in their veins. Even, as you'll see in a moment, people with Native American ancestry. Yes, some of the immigration patterns were forced. For economic reasons...the slave trade, or the Chinese laying railroad tracks across the mountains for next to nothing, things like that. But then, as the nasty first reading opined, some think all immigration has to do with money-grubbing somehow. "Those damn immigrants just want to get rich on our backs and take our jobs." Right. As if folks whose families had been here for generations were lining up to take the dangerous, often lethal mining jobs my grandfathers "took" along with Lithuanians, Poles, Hungarians and Ukrainians. According to the first reading, these Eastern and Southern European newbies to the immigration scene were apparently not like the early English speaking immigrants to this land...those "liberty loving Aryans" in the words of that young man talking to the Immigration Commission in the First Reading. (And do note, please, how this young man conveniently leaves out all the Spanish colonial immigrants, who got to the Americas first.) Apparently the anti-immigrant lobby in those days assumed that the early English speaking immigrant colonists were coming here to take up poverty as a life-style, like a bunch of monks, and had no interest in prosperity. My God, I don't remember when I have ever read such drivel.

And finally, I find myself thinking of the story cultures found at the center of the Jewish and Christian traditions, our tap-root traditions, which seem to be largely based on immigration. Cain immigrates to the land of Nod, Abraham immigrates from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran, and then later, immigrates again to settle three hundred miles southward. Abraham's grandchildren immigrated to Egypt and stayed there 500 years, which is a lot longer than any immigrant line ever lived here. Ruth, the great grandmother of King David, was an immigrant from Moav. Simon Peter in the New Testament supposedly immigrated to Rome where he died, and Paul apparently was



killed before he could fulfill his dream to immigrate to Spain. And look, anthropologically, all of us, including those native to these American continents, like the Cherokee, Lakota, Maya and Inka, immigrated from the ultimate warm meadows of central Africa. Without immigration there would be no humanity, no civilization as we know it.

What am I saying? Only that in order to come up with any solution to the so-called problems of immigration, either legal or illegal, we are going to have to come up with a solution to the more serious problem of bigotry and caricature first. Present practices are tied up entirely with fears, cheap burlesque, unconscious bigotry, conscious distortion and a sense of entitlement. Look, I am not saying open the doors wide, nor am I saying close them until we figure this all out...together. All I am saying is that no one can honestly expect either satisfaction or justice until we face the real issues, which I think are spiritual in nature. Facing these issues means getting honest about fear, and about any terror of difference. These are spiritual issues. Facing these issues means getting honest about our impatience and our deep capacity for bigotry...every one of us. These are spiritual issues. Facing these issues means getting honest about how many of us imagine catastrophes where there are none documented or able to be documented. "Those immigrants are taking our jobs." This is a spiritual issue.

I am the grandchild of immigrants. I am a Unitarian Universalist, a religion that doesn't exist in Italy per se, although they do have freethinkers galore. I do not speak as my grandparents spoke. I am far more school-educated than they were...easily, since only one of them graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I love music they would not understand as music, enjoy Chinese food, something they never tasted, and have been lucky enough to travel from Moscow to Tierra Del Fuego to Jerusalem, whereas they never left Detroit once they immigrated there, nor did they ever see Florence or Rome when they lived in Italy.

But I am not, because of these things, any better than they were. Better off, maybe, but not better. And that, I suppose, is really the point of my sermon this morning. Until all human beings can be seen as just that, human beings who are each and every one worthy to be part of the circle, the great hoop of the world, then any impetus toward social justice remains merely self-serving charity..."Gosh, ain't I a good person, helping out those undesirable folks?" Until any one of us can accept that we might be changed for the

better by a real welcome to what scripture calls “the stranger in a strange land,” changed both personally and nationally, then our hopes for a just world are mere cotton candy. And until we can admit that, whether we are talking about Europe, or the Americas, or China or Arabia, we are each and every one of us the children of immigrants, we are deceiving ourselves about both our importance and our permanence.

When I go to Europe again to preach, I will have to thank John Hertz for asking me to think about such things. For in doing so, I have once again strengthened my own understanding of the broad nature of our religious tradition. And I have once again come to the place where I am not ashamed to imagine that the world might indeed grow just.

### **Offering**

No walls without a foundation.  
No earth without sky.  
No thirst when there is water.  
No defeat when there is hope.  
No joy without facing reality first.  
No church without generosity from  
those who agree to be a church.

### **Prayer for Peace**

O Love, beat with my heartbeat,  
steady, steady, steady,  
until I come to understand that  
there is no peace without justice;  
until I come to understand that there is no peace which can exist with any  
bigotry whatsoever;  
until I come to understand that there is no peace which can exist without  
looking into my own heart before I look into the hearts of others,  
until I come to understand that there is no peace without a home hearth, and  
food and sleep and work and play and love.  
O Love, beat with my heartbeat, and in the  
rhythm of this song: