

Grateful, not Gambling: Why All this Concern about Immigration Policies is Important

**November 6, 2011
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**Greeting, Centering
Kindling
Opening Words:**

We are here
to give thanks for life and love
and for the whole earth
undivided by human failings,
a good gift to all, no exceptions.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children, and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story: The Book of Ruth

Once upon a time, near the village of Bethlehem in the territory of Judah, there lived a woman named Naomi and her two sons. Naomi's husband had died years ago, and her loving sons took care of her. A terrible famine came to the land. No rain fell for a long time, and the barley all dried up, and so there was nothing to eat. So Naomi and her two sons immigrated to the country of Moav, where there was plenty of food. After a few years, Naomi's two sons married women from Moav, and lived happily for a while.

But then both of Naomi's sons suffered terrible accidents and died. The three women were very, very sad for a long time. But then, news arrived that more rain fell near Bethlehem, and the crops around the town were full and rich. So Naomi decided to return back home.

The two women who had married her sons followed her to the border. She told them to go back to their homeland, Moav, and promised them that she would be OK. After all, it wouldn't be easy for either of them, she said, being foreigners, to live near Bethlehem in the territory of Judah. They were usually suspicious of strangers around there.

One of the two woman, Orpah, decided to return to Moav. They all cried, and then, after hugging Ruth and Naomi goodbye, Orpah left. The other woman, who was named Ruth, said to her mother-in-law. "Don't ask me to leave you. For where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people are my people. Your God is now my God." Naomi was touched by her daughter-in-law's great love, and together they crossed the border.

When they got back to Bethlehem, they had to make a living. So Ruth, who was younger and stronger, went out to the fields. As a stranger from another country, a migrant worker, as they now call such people, she was allowed to harvest barley from the edge of the great fields. She was not allowed any more than that. But at least she and Naomi could survive. By complete chance, the field she chose to gather barley from belonged to a distant cousin of Naomi, a man named Boaz. Boaz came out to the fields one day, and met Ruth. He found her delightful, and spoke with her. He noticed she was wearing the clothing worn by people from Moav, but that didn't make any difference to him. As for Ruth, she found Boaz very delightful too, and kind and loving, and she began to love him. Boaz spoke to Naomi about marrying Ruth. But there were rules as to *who* could marry *whom* in those days, just like there are now. Another man, a closer cousin to Naomi, could claim the honor of marrying Ruth first, thereby making her a citizen of Judah. But Ruth and Boaz and Naomi worked out a plan that convinced the other man into saying that he was not interested in marrying Ruth. Following the ancient custom, he tossed his shoe to Boaz, saying he no longer cared to follow the senseless law that controlled who could marry whom. And so Ruth from Moav and Boaz from Bethlehem in Judah got married, and lived happily ever after. They had a son named Obed, and Obed grew up and had a son named Jesse, and Jesse grew up, and had a son named David, who was the greatest ruler in that land in a thousand years.

Sequence for the Day

The evening comes earlier now.
The leaves fall like bright torches,
their abandoned dark branches now thin fingers
pointing to the cooler days that are on their way.
A week of glowing, balmy days does not last,
just as days of cold and dark do not last,
for nothing is forever,
and all things flow and become.
Even when we sit still we flow like rivers...
tumbling currents of memory and hope,
the very cells in our bodies changing shape,
the miracle of our breath streaming in and out.
And only a few months from now,
the evening will come later again,
and the night will retract back beyond dawn.
But now is now; light and dark are balanced just so.
Cold and warmth are balanced just so.
And we are here, sitting together,

each with our own lives and concerns, just so.
Let the silence release us into the presence
of this moment, just so...

silence

We are here with our own lives, just so.
Grieving and grateful, surprised and wounded,
we are here as whole human beings in a network
of community and family that stretches far beyond
this place of here and now.
So blessed by this time, we are free to
bring to mind, or soft-spoken voice,
the names of those who are essential to our lives...
those whom we miss, mourn, mind or magnify.
Let this time be our thanksgiving for the week:

naming

We have experienced the word, and
experienced the silence;
Let the experience of music release us
and fulfill this moment in gratitude, just so.

Music

The First Reading *this morning comes from a June 22, 2011 essay in the New York Times by Jose Antonio Vargas, called My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant.*

One August morning nearly two decades ago, my mother woke me and put me in a cab. She handed me a jacket. “*Baka malamig doon,*” she said. (“It might be cold there.”) When I arrived at the airport with her, my aunt and a family friend, I was introduced to a man I’d never seen. They told me he was my uncle. He held my hand as I boarded an airplane for the first time. It was 1993, and I was 12.

My mother wanted to give me a better life, so she sent me thousands of miles away to live with her parents in America — my grandfather (*Lolo* in Tagalog) and grandmother (*Lola*). After I arrived in Mountain View, California, I entered sixth grade and quickly grew to love my new home, family and culture. I discovered a passion for language, though it was hard to learn the difference between formal English and American slang. One of my early memories is of a freckled kid in middle school asking me, “What’s up?” I replied, “The sky,” and he and a couple of other kids laughed. I won the eighth-grade spelling bee by memorizing words I couldn’t properly pronounce. (The winning word was “indefatigable.”)

One day when I was 16, I rode my bike to the nearby D.M.V. office to get my driver's permit. Some of my friends already had their licenses, so I figured it was time. But when I handed the clerk my green card as proof of U.S. residency, she flipped it around, examining it. "This is fake," she whispered. "Don't come back here again."

Confused and scared, I pedaled home and confronted Lolo. I dropped my bike and ran over to him, showing him the green card. "*Peke ba ito?*" I asked in Tagalog. ("Is this fake?") My grandparents were naturalized American citizens — he worked as a security guard, she as a food server — and they had begun supporting my mother and me financially when I was 3, after my father's wandering eye and inability to properly provide for us led to my parents' separation. Lolo was a proud man, and I saw the shame on his face as he told me he purchased the card; "Don't show it to other people," he warned.

I decided then that I could never give anyone reason to doubt I was an American. I convinced myself that if I worked enough, if I achieved enough, I would be rewarded with citizenship. I felt I could earn it.

I've tried. Over the past 14 years, I've graduated from high school and college and built a career as a journalist, interviewing some of the most famous people in the country. On the surface, I've created a good life. I've lived the American dream.

But I am still an undocumented immigrant. And that means living a different kind of reality. It means going about my day in fear of being found out. It means rarely trusting people, even those closest to me, with who I really am. It means keeping my family photos in a shoebox rather than displaying them on shelves in my home, so friends don't ask about them. It means reluctantly, even painfully, doing things I know are wrong and unlawful. And it has meant relying on a sort of 21st-century underground railroad of supporters, people who took an interest in my future and took risks for me.

Last year I read about four students who walked from Miami to Washington to lobby for the Dream Act, a nearly decade-old immigration bill that would provide a path to legal permanent residency for young people who have been educated in this country. At the risk of deportation — the Obama administration has deported almost 800,000 people in the last two years — they are speaking out. Their courage has inspired me.

There are believed to be 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. We're not always who you think we are. Some pick your strawberries or care for your children. Some are in high school or college. And some, it turns out, write news articles you might read. I grew up here. This is my home. Yet even though I think of myself as an American and consider America my country, my country doesn't think of me as one of its own.

Second Reading: *the poem Psalm, by Wislawa Szymborska, which I have used before, but which I find perpetually and freshly brilliant in its observation each time I read it. 1976. This is my own published translation.*

O how leaky are all the borders
we draw around our separate nations!
How many clouds cross those boundaries daily,
without even paying the toll!
How much desert sand simply sifts
from country to country,
or how many mountain pebbles hop down slopes
on to foreign turf, just like that!
Need I remind you of each and every bird
as it flies over, and now sits,
on a closed border-gate?
Even if it's small as a sparrow,
its tail is abroad while its beak is still at home.
And if that weren't enough, it keeps fidgeting!
Out of countless insects,
I will single out the ant,
who, right between the guard's left boot
and his right, pays no attention to any questions
of origin or destination.
If only this whole messy affair could be studied more, in detail, all around the world!
Look! Isn't that familiar hedge on the far bank
even now smuggling its hundred-thousandth leaf over the river?
And who else but the squid,
unashamed of the length of its arms,
would violate the precious boundary of our territorial waters?
How can we speak of any semblance of order around here when we can't even rearrange the stars
to show which one shines for whom?
Not to mention the fog,
which reprehensively goes wherever it pleases.
Or that dust blowing blithely all over the prairie,
as if the land had never been partitioned.
And the voices gliding on the obliging airwaves!
All these conspiratorial gurglings and suggestive sounds. Funny, isn't it, how only what's human
is truly alien? Everything else is just mixed vegetation,
a few subversive moles, and the wind.

Sermon

So it's Friday night, and I am ten years old. It's supper time. My mother makes *frittata*, which is a kind of Italian omelet. For the first time I could remember, my mother had put green peppers in it; I didn't, and still don't, much like cooked green peppers.

So I only ate a little of it. My mother was annoyed. She gave me the same lecture she often gave my brother who didn't like it when she cooked fish. "Listen young man. You are *lucky* enough to have been born in this great country. We have enough to eat here every day. If you had been

born in China, you wouldn't have anything to eat. You would starve. So *mangia la frittata*." (Eat the omelet!)

That was 1959. Things change, don't they? In 2011 the people in China are eating very well indeed in the shadow of their spectacular skyscrapers. But nevertheless, that little lecture at supper first started me thinking about the nature of luck. What did my mother mean that I was *lucky* enough to be born where we could eat. And the people in Ethiopia and China were *unlucky*? What did I do to deserve such luck?

Lucky. Unlucky. Words often tied to lotteries and gambling casinos. As if the good life was somehow intimately connected with gambling. Which I confess I've done a few times. Gambled, that is. I remember the first time especially. At the time, my friend Flip Wellford, a comedian, worked at Lake Tahoe, opening for Andy Williams or Sammy Davis. I used to go visit him, but he always had rehearsals to attend mid-day, so he used to hand me rolls of quarters...his quarters ... and say: "I've got plenty of money, so here, lose my cash instead of yours. Go play the slots while I'm practicing. It's entertaining."

Well, entertaining, yes, AND completely futile. You do win a bit of money, but I found it impossible not to gamble away what I had won. It's well established that gambling has this effect on people; some become seriously addicted and attend 12 step meetings. It's also demonstrable that only the very few will win big, the 1% (to use a percentage much in the news these days). There are systems in place...clever, clever systems, *to make sure* the casinos don't go broke. Casino luck after all, is controlled luck; rigged, is the harsher, but perhaps more honest, word. I discovered two things the day I first gambled. 1. I discovered the part of me that moves addictively, and I have to say, I didn't like what I found. And 2. I discovered the true religion of the United States. Not any religion Huston Smith will write about in his World Religions surveys. But the real religion that under-girds many of the others: the mindless worship of Rigged Luck.

The religions based on Calvinism, for example, teach that all people are *predestined* to either paradise or damnation. What you *do* has nothing to do with anything. Your efforts are worthless. All your good works, all your prayers...meaningless. It's all laid down in advance. Rigged. Good *and* bad luck.

Many preachers in these religious traditions are clear that America is the land of luck. They say *Blest by God*, but when I hear that I need to be grateful for having been born here, it sounds like luck to me. And those poor starving Chinese in 1959, or the thousands of Somalis dying right now because of famine, are simply unlucky, I guess. Or, put more theologically, the American way of life - the one dedicated to the sacredness of profit, and to the redeeming power of disproportionate wealth - is the only way of life blest, that is, graced, by God. If you live someplace overwhelmed by poverty, where food shortages and famines are common - Somalia, Bangladesh, you name it - it means you have fallen short of the grace of God - that is Rigged Luck.

Of course no one in any church I know would actually say that Luck and God are the same, but

as I observe the present world, I'm convinced that the Religion of Rigged Luck, although *sub rosa*, governs almost everything. The Market. Wall Street. Our political elections even, with voter suppression and tampered voting machines. Bernie Madoff, on the pattern of many casino owners, for example, recognized that luck, either good or bad, is a lot more efficient if it's rigged, so he figured out a system to create bad luck for others so he could have good luck. Insider trading, Ponzi schemes - in fact, *all* the various deceptions so clearly outlined by the Occupy movement - reveal a culture where the most common titular frameworks holding the meaning of life - Christianity, Judaism, Islam and the various Skepticisms (atheism, agnosticism etc.) - have nowhere *near* as much power and might as the Religion of Rigged Luck.

My grandparents, as some of you know, grew up in astonishing poverty. They were unlucky too, I guess. My grandmother was too poor to buy wheat flour to make pasta in her home town of Fanano, Italy. So she knocked chestnuts off the trees, roasted them and made them into pasta, not, I assure you, an easy, or time-efficient, task. But she and her husband Nazzareno decided that starving wasn't fun; so they immigrated to this country in 1921, along with 10 million other poverty-ridden Italians who were barely surviving. It took them a long time to become citizens. They had to learn to read and write. They had to learn the dreadful English measurement system with its 3's and 4's and 12's instead of the rational ten of the metric system. But at least there was a path for them to become citizens. A clear, if often obstructed path, which they themselves did not know anything about when they came here. They came here to eat. They came here because we had been proclaiming, even back then that we were the best country in the world, and that our "fruited plains" were the richest on earth. No growling bellies here. "Come you tired and you poor," the Statue of Liberty proclaimed via Emma Lazarus. And so they did. Like the poor widow Naomi and her sons moving to prosperous Moav. To survive. To live. To offer their gifts. Despite how different the culture was there; and it was different.

The culture here is different from the culture in the mountains of Italy as well; the culture they found here confused them. They did only manual labor when they moved here. They were given the message that manual labor was unlucky, since the *truly* lucky got to live richly without exerting their muscles. Being a ditch digger was shameful. Being a CEO was glorious. My grandparents were not sure they wanted to stay. But they worked it out over time, especially after my father was born.

Five million Italians did return to Italy, however, just like Naomi re-crossed the border into her homeland, taking a foreigner with her, thousands of years ago. Migration after all, is hardly a modern story. Those who went back had found the culture here too difficult to adjust to. The vast gap between rich and poor disturbed them. Too often they heard the Rockefellers of their new nation praised and publicly envied, and the poor immigrants blamed and caricatured. When people expressed gratitude here, they heard over and over again people giving thanks for what set them apart, and for their particular bounty. When my grandparents, who were still poor by most standards, expressed gratitude, it was always for what most everyone shares in common: being alive at all, being with family and loving friends, and for being able to eat enough everyday.

Today, immigration issues have surfaced all around the globe, not the least in our own country.

The Italians themselves have Albanian and Somalian immigrants arriving on their shores, and the French and Germans argue about Turkish and Algerian immigrants. In this country, laws are passed against immigrants in many states, while others build fences and walls. Legislation which *would* help, like the Dream Act, seem to be postponed forever. My friend Marco Hidalgo, from Phoenix, wrote me these clear and stunningly powerful words this week about the DREAM act when I asked him to share his wisdom. *The DREAM act, he wrote, is a necessary piece of legislation that needs to be passed if this country has any intentions of keeping up with globalization and the demands of the economy. The immigration problem facing North America is a problem of economics. The US desires cheap labor and the south of the Border immigrants provide that happily. In my experience, I've met with students who want nothing more than to go to college, become professionals, and give back to their community. They want to be police officers, scientists, researchers, judges, engineers; but they have lost all hope because the system and legislation has criminalized the very thing they have come to know and love, being American. Rhetoric in the community is sickening. There is a generation of lost children and students brewing. With budget cuts, drop-outs, and the inability for undocumented students to attend college, we are on a path of dismay. Many children were brought here without documentation, that is to say that their parents immigrated without the proper visas or governmental approval, and unbeknownst to them, they are here in this country of opportunity without a hope. DREAM Act is not an amnesty bill, it's a start to comprehensive immigration reform! If passed, millions of students will have the opportunity to serve in the military and attend college. Without the DREAM Act, hundreds of thousands of the nation's brightest students are left to flounder in a system that labels them as second-class citizens.*

Alabama is facing similar problems as they have passed HB 56, a bill similar to Arizona's SB 1070. Either the United States can INVEST in strength-ening communities and developing an educated workforce by bringing immigration to the forefront of our country's issues, or we can continue to squander our resources, money, and talent pool by alienating some of our hardest working members of society.

The 14th amendment to the American Constitution says with clarity: “nor shall any State deprive any person...(not citizen mind you, person!) of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person equal protection of the laws.” People pulled over in Phoenix traffic, or along Morse Road - for that matter, just for “looking” like they might be undocumented (really?) are just that, *persons*, yet their liberty is deprived by mere suspicion, not due process. Both Marco’s insights and the Constitution help me to understand this whole immigration conversation as one about human persons, and how they can humanely relate to others no matter what side of a border they’re on.

Not that borders themselves have any ultimate meaning. Arizona, Texas and California WERE Mexico for a good long time. And their borders in the nineteenth century, or in our 21st century, would hardly have impressed the natives here, who had a hard time seeing dotted lines running along their shared landscapes. Remember what Szymborska said (and, look, she should know, being from Poland, a country that once was Germany, Prussia, Russia and the Austrian Empire): *O how leaky are all the borders we draw around our separate nations! How many clouds cross those boundaries daily,*

without even paying the toll! Need I remind you of each and every bird as it flies over, and now sits, on a closed border-gate? Out of countless insects, I will single out the ant, who, right between the guard's left boot and his right, pays no attention to any questions of origin or destination. If only this whole messy affair could be studied more, in detail, all around the world!

Exactly. All boundaries being somewhat tenuous to begin with, often the result of violent war, rather than any fair agreement, this whole messy affair needs *to be studied more, in detail, all around the world*. Like my friend Marco said, *The DREAM Act is a necessary piece of legislation that needs to be passed if this country has any intentions of keeping up with **globalization** and the demands of the economy*. Globalization. This conversation is a global conversation, not a dotted line drawn by the voters and the adamant governor in Arizona.

It was Marco who suggested I read the article by the courageous and undocumented Filipino-American Jose Vargas. He was most moved by the article, and I was, as well. And talk about gambling! Vargas announced in the New York Times that he was undocumented...so far, the INS hasn't put him on their deportation list...he's not criminal enough, they say. Remember? He wrote that he thought he could "earn" citizenship. But since the Religion of Rigged Luck is founded on the Calvinist notion that you can't earn salvation, you have to be predestined, that is, born entitled, it won't work. The DREAM Act however, is a challenge to the Religion and Worship of Rigged Luck. It says, as my immigrant, illiterate grandparents knew 90 years ago, that luck that is rigged is not luck at all. Luck that is rigged doesn't just gamble with people's lives, it throws them on the trash heap and blames them for it. The DREAM Act, (look it up on line for more details) is based on the rational idea that we can be grateful for our shared life across borders, and not gamble away our future, that is, our young people, and cover our tracks by saying "Aw, too bad; just bad luck your folks brought you here." Instead we can be grateful for the opportunity to work on the complexities of this issue together; after all, haven't we always said, America is the land of opportunity?

Offering

To make our congregation strong so we can
be there for others and for ourselves,
we invest in our future by the pledges we make
behind the scenes, and this, our more informal morning offering.

Prayer in the key of Gratitude

Less gratitude for what I have,
but more for what we share.
Less gratitude for the blessings
that randomly have come my way,
and more gratitude for our thoughtful capacity
to transform random injustice
into a more universal
outreach of kindness.

Less gratitude for my little local plot here on earth, more gratitude for our common home,
the earth itself.

O Love, let the roundness of the earth itself
match the emblem of arms which embrace,
reminding us that just as the elemental world is round,
so the circle of spirit: affection, compassion,
kindness and willingness to face issues...is round,
and circles back to include all of us.

Hymn 1064: Blue Boat Home

Blessing: Remember that Szymborska is telling the truth...all boundaries dividing nation from nation are agreed-upon fictions. There are no dotted lines crossing the earth. Which means, all of us are undocumented. Everyone of us. Go in peace. Amen.