

## “Immigration Reform: How Are We Called to Act?”

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One of my favorite cartoon strips in the newspaper is called “Pickles.” It’s about an old married couple, Earl and Opal. There was a strip the other day that showed the two of them sitting on the porch and chatting. Opal says to Earl, “Did you know that the DNA of humans and chimpanzees is 96% the same?” Earl says, “Yes, I do know that. I don’t believe it, though.” Opal says, “You know it, but you don’t believe it?” And Earl says, “Absolutely. I don’t believe everything I know.”<sup>1</sup>

And it struck me: that sentiment is alive and well all over the country, but especially today in Arizona, where Governor Jan Brewer went on record last month claiming the majority of undocumented immigrants are not coming to this country to work, but to smuggle drugs across the border and terrorize families.<sup>2</sup>

Let me just say: she and I have different perspectives. I am proud to be the sister-in-law of a recent immigrant from South America who came here with nothing but his own determination, who has worked really hard to put himself through college and become a nurse helping people who are sick and in need. I have a very different belief about why most people come to this country, documented or not. In my own admittedly limited experience, the immigrants I know—my friends, my family—

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Crane, “Pickles,” July 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/politics/2010/06/27/jan.brewer.drug.mules.ktvk?iref=allsearch>.

have come here to work  
and make enough money to feed their families,  
and to escape very scary and oppressive governments—  
not to sell drugs or commit violent crimes.  
Governor Brewer’s comments don’t make sense to me.  
That said, I don’t want to get into a war of perceptions,  
my experience versus Governor Brewer’s.  
I do want to be really clear that there is no evidence  
for Governor Brewer’s highly inflammatory statement  
other than her own fears.

In fact, a member of the National Border Patrol Council,  
a union of border control agents, has said  
Governor Brewer’s comments are “clearly not the case.”  
He said, they don’t “comport with reality—  
that’s the nicest way to put it.”<sup>3</sup>  
And you don’t have to take his word for it, either.  
Governor Brewer claims immigrants  
are bringing crime and violence to Arizona.  
In fact, the FBI’s own statistics show that violent crime has been  
*declining* in Arizona for the past four years, even as unauthorized  
immigration has *increased*.  
And on top of that, research going back nearly 100 years  
has consistently shown that immigrants are actually *less* likely to  
commit crimes than native-born Americans.<sup>4</sup>

These are the facts.

This is what we know.

But a lot of folks in Arizona and around the country  
are awfully ready to believe some pretty wild misconceptions  
about a whole group of people, fellow human beings,  
rather than what they know or ought to know.

A lot of people are acting out of bias rather than fact,

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/06/25/arizona.immigrants.drugs/index.html?iref=allsearch>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://immigrationpolicy.org/issues/crime>.

fear rather than information,  
fear of people who come from different countries  
and look a little different  
and speak different languages.  
And this is a very human thing to do.  
We can all get blinded by our fears now and again.  
The people supporting this law are not bad people,  
but they are afraid,  
and I cannot condone where their fears are leading them.  
Because what's happening in Arizona,  
and sadly in a lot of copycat states around the country,  
is that legislators are letting their fears railroad their intellects  
into passing laws that are racist and unjust.

Let me remind you of what the situation is in Arizona.  
On July 29, a new law targeting undocumented immigrants  
is going to take effect.  
S.B. 1070, as it's called, says that when police officers  
stop or detain or arrest someone,  
they have to "make a reasonable attempt"  
to determine the immigration status of that person  
if there is a "reasonable suspicion" that they're undocumented.  
Lots of people have already been asking,  
how exactly would someone look suspiciously undocumented?  
What does an undocumented person look like?  
Here's what African-American newspaper columnist  
Eugene Robinson has to say about that:  
"Aggressive enforcement of the law would seem to require  
demanding identification from anybody who looks kind of Mexican.  
Or maybe...those who look kind of Mexican and also kind of poor.  
Or maybe anyone who dares visit the Mexican Consulate."<sup>5</sup>

The people who wrote the law keep saying,  
they're not into racial profiling, they're not targeting Latinos,

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Robinson, "Arizona turns Latino citizens into second-class citizens," *Stockton Record*, April 29, 2010.

but let's get real.

In Arizona the vast majority of undocumented people are Spanish-speaking Latinos and Latinas.

It seems pretty clear that the people who are going to get hassled are people who look Latino and speak Spanish, no matter if they are U.S. citizens or if their families have lived here for generations.

Now, President Obama's administration has already filed a lawsuit arguing the Arizona law is unconstitutional on the grounds that Arizona is usurping a function that properly belongs to the federal government. And if that argument is enough to get the law overturned, I for one will rejoice.

But that's not really why I oppose this law.

That's not where it gets me in the gut.

And it's not even the racial profiling aspect of this law that gets me the most, even though I absolutely do find it offensive and wrong and racist.

What *really* gets me at a gut level—

you know, that place deep in your core where your energy lives and when you are touched you *know* you have to act—

what really gets me—for me, it starts with a very deep knowledge that diversity is a good thing. It's a joyful thing.

I want to live in a United States where people come from all over and bring their traditions and their history and their language and keep them alive.

We all know this country is changing.

We've all heard the statistics that tell us soon the United States will not be a majority-white country any more.

Here in the Central Valley it's already happened, and I say that is a beautiful thing.

It is such a blessing to live in a place  
where people from all different places can come together  
and share with one another  
and become friends and partners and family members.  
Here in the Valley we are the future of the whole country,  
and we know ethnic and cultural diversity is wonderful.  
It's exciting. It's good for our kids, it's good for all of us.  
And even beyond that, here in this church,  
we have inherited a faith that diversity of all kinds—  
diversity of belief, of sexual orientation, of culture,  
of age and gifts and every kind of human variation there is—  
makes us stronger.  
This is a deep knowledge that we have won  
through our living in community.  
I want us to find ways to witness to that knowledge,  
because our country needs it, right here and right now.

If this law goes into effect,  
real people in this country are going to be hurt:  
real human beings,  
some of whom happen to have been born in another country  
where life is so much harder that they would risk everything  
to come to a country where they hope they can be safe,  
a place where they can earn enough for their labor  
so that their families do not have to go without food or clean water  
or medical care—the kind of basic necessities  
most of us have the luxury of taking for granted.

Last year I told you my own family's story.  
My brother-in-law is an immigrant from Venezuela.  
Where he comes from, the electricity is dicey.  
You probably won't have hot water every day.  
If you don't support Hugo Chavez, the president,  
you get blacklisted.  
It's not easy there.

My brother-in-law and my sister have a six-year-old daughter,  
my beautiful niece,  
who was born with a congenital heart defect.  
After two surgeries, she's doing just fine now,  
but she will need special medical care for the rest of her life.

Today my brother-in-law is proud to be a naturalized U.S. citizen.  
But while he was going through the application process,  
things got really messed up, and for a time there was a real risk  
that he was going to be deported and not allowed to return, ever.  
Never allowed to come back to the country where his only child  
has to stay in order to get the medical care she needs.  
And this is a guy who has become a bilingual nurse,  
a health-care professional that our country urgently needs.  
If it can happen to him, it can happen to anybody.

I am so grateful that his story ended well.  
But I am so aware that, for so many immigrants, it's not that way.  
Workplaces are getting raided, people rounded up  
and thrown into detention centers  
and dumped across the border to start over as best they can.  
Families are getting torn apart.  
This is not the kind of country I want to live in.  
The country I want to live in honors its history  
and remembers that every single person within its borders  
was an immigrant once:  
the native peoples who came from Asia  
so many thousands of years ago;  
the earliest English and Spanish colonists—  
the WASPiest Daughter of the American Revolution  
comes from an immigrant family too;  
the African slaves kidnapped and brought here against their will;  
Irish and German and Italian and Chinese immigrants;  
Filipino and Japanese and Norwegian and Polish;  
Jewish and southeast Asian and Haitian and Cuban refugees

and a hundred other peoples:  
all of us come from immigrant families  
just as much as the so-called “illegal aliens”  
who have risked everything to be here.  
The country I want to live in has a heart of compassion  
for everyone who comes here scared and desperate and brave  
and in need. Because this is where we come from.  
This is who we are.

If you agree with me that Arizona’s immigration law is wrong,  
I urge you today to do more than just think it.  
I urge you to get involved and help stop it.  
The need is so clear.

In our unison reading today,  
Mark Morrison-Reed spoke of what happens when you realize  
your life is connected to someone else’s,  
and it changes you so that you have to act.  
I want to show you a short video now  
showing how Unitarian Universalists in Phoenix, Arizona  
are already having to deal with what’s happening,  
so you can hear their stories in their words.

*(Video clip “UUs Stand on the Side of Love in Arizona” from*  
<http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2010/ga2010/165851.shtml>*)*

The prophet Micah asks us:  
“what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).  
And Mark Morrison-Reed reminds us  
church is where we come to expand our vision  
and share our strength.  
I want our church and our faith to shine out  
with compassion and respect for all people

as the struggle for immigrants' rights goes on.  
We can begin right now.

July 29, two Thursdays from now,  
is the day S.B. 1070 is scheduled to take effect.  
Immigrants' rights groups have called on us to make it  
a "National Day of Non-Compliance," and I urge you to honor that  
by writing a letter or making a phone call to your legislators,  
telling them what you believe about immigration.  
In your order of service  
you'll find a list of just a few of the ways you can get involved.  
In particular I want to invite you to an after-church discussion  
on August 1 to talk about how our church might respond  
to immigration as a moral issue.

And I'll tell you another thing:  
Every year, Unitarian Universalists from all over the country  
get together for a national convention called General Assembly.  
The sites for the General Assemblies are chosen years in advance,  
and it just so happens that the 2012 site is Phoenix, Arizona.  
At this year's General Assembly, the delegates realized  
we simply could not ignore the coincidence.  
There was no way we could just show up  
and go about business as usual.  
We talked about boycotting, but that didn't feel right either.  
The UU congregations in Arizona have been deeply engaged  
in the struggle for immigrant rights,  
and they begged us to come and be in solidarity with them  
and the immigrant rights groups they're working with.

So what we decided was, we're going to come to Phoenix  
for General Assembly, but it's going to be something we've never  
done before: a *Justice General Assembly*,  
focused on education and witnessing about immigration  
from start to finish. We will have study trips to the border.

We will march to witness to *our* truth.  
And we will make our presence felt in solidarity  
with our immigrant brothers and sisters  
in Arizona and around the country.  
I hope a lot of us will be able to come and do this too.  
It's not too early to put June 20–24, 2012 on your calendars.

I am so grateful for your compassion  
and your passion for justice.  
Let us join together and help this country live into its promise.  
Let us stand with our brothers and sisters in faith who need our help.  
Let us witness with our voices and our hands and our hearts  
for the dream of one nation,  
with liberty and justice for *all*.

May this be so, starting right now.  
Amen.