

Welcoming the Stranger  
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**Reading**                    *"Refugees"* by Brian Bliston

They have no need of our help  
So do not tell me  
These haggard faces could belong to you or me  
Should life have dealt a different hand  
We need to see them for who they really are  
Chancers and scroungers  
Layabouts and loungers  
With bombs up their sleeves  
Cut-throats and thieves  
They are not  
Welcome here  
We should make them  
Go back to where they came from  
They cannot  
Share our food  
Share our homes  
Share our countries  
Instead let us  
Build a wall to keep them out  
It is not okay to say  
These are people just like us  
A place should only belong to those who are born there  
Do not be so stupid to think that  
The world can be looked at another way

*(Now read from bottom to top)*

**Second Reflection**

Last Fall, I attended a Winchester Unitarian Society gathering where Sam Wilson, the Director of Youth Ministries, led an exercise, inviting participants to share their family's story of immigrating to the United States, or alternatively, being one of the indigenous peoples of this land. As you can imagine, every story was unique and many included tales of extreme hardship.

I spoke about my Great Grandparents, who were part of the wave of 5 million Italians who immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1800s through the early 1900s. They came to this country because in Sicily – unemployment, crime, disease, and poverty had become unbearable. I remember watching *The Italian Americans* series on PBS a few years ago and learning that the lack of food and money was so severe, some women scraped plaster off their walls to mix into the dough in order to stretch the amount of bread for their families to eat.

Daily life became even more dangerous when the government imposed new taxes on the meager amount of money peasant Italians were trying to live on. This led to an eruption of tax revolts. In response, the government established military laws that resulted in arbitrary arrests and executions.<sup>1</sup> These oppressive conditions are what led my Great Grandparents to leave their homes and come to the United States.

The story of my Sicilian ancestors is just one of many about families fleeing their homeland out of desperation and immigrating to this country in hope of a better life. Were these Italian immigrants welcomed here with open arms? No. Sadly, like most new ethnic groups who come to this country, they were greeted with ethnic slurs and given dangerous, backbreaking work.

In our country's history, wave after wave of immigrants have come to the United States. Some migrated by choice, others endured a forced migration, such as enslaved Africans who were transported here in horrific conditions on ships. It is only those who have Indigenous ancestry who did not immigrate; instead people from foreign countries invaded their land. The United States has a complicated history with colonization and immigration – those who came by choice and by force, legal and illegal.

Yet, opening our country's doors to welcome the stranger is part of our country's identity. When our Music Director, John Kramer, came across a letter written by George Washington in 1783, he discovered welcoming the stranger is one of our country's founding values. An excerpt from Washington's letter reads, "*The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.*"<sup>2</sup>

This founding value of welcoming the stranger is reinforced in the immortal words inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*" These are more than poetic, idealistic words; this is our country's promise to the world.

What has happened to this promise?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~molna22a/classweb/politics/Italianhistory.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://winchester.wickedlocal.com/news/20171205/winchester-church-wants-to-welcome-immigrants--with-music>

Syrian refugees are currently the largest population seeking resettlement, yet how many of those huddled masses are granted refuge in the United States? According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the number of Syrian refugees allowed into the U.S. has dropped from 12,587 in 2016 to only 62 people in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the need to welcome Syrian refugees is growing. Earlier this week, Turkish forces began attacking Syria. The military action sparked a mass exodus of thousands of Syrian refugees who are fleeing the reach of Turkish artillery and air strikes, adding to the tens of thousands who have been fleeing to safety since a brutal civil war began in 2011.<sup>4</sup> Camp Moria on the Greek Island, Lesbos, was built to house 3,000 refugees; it's now bursting with 13,000 who are seeking resettlement.<sup>5</sup> I wonder how many will be allowed into the U.S.

We have broken our promise to the world of welcoming the stranger *of all Nations and Religions*. We have broken our promise of receiving the “...wretched refuse of your teeming shore... the homeless,” the “tempest-tossed...” We tell the oppressed and the persecuted to go back Home. Excerpts from **Warsan** Shire’s poem describes “home” for refugees.

*no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark.*

*... you have to understand,  
no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land.*

*who would choose to spend days  
and nights in the stomach of a truck  
unless the miles travelled  
meant something more than journey.*

*... i want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark*<sup>6</sup>

Families with babies and young children risk their lives coming to our country’s borders seeking safety from the “*mouth of a shark*.” In Central America, Women and children are especially vulnerable to violence. Many are victims of sexual assault, kidnapping, torture, murder, and children are recruited into gangs.<sup>7</sup> Families flee their homes and walk hundreds of miles over hills, mountains, deserts in the blazing sun, in the hope of seeking safety; only to be met at our

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<sup>3</sup> <https://cis.org/Rush/Refugee-Resettlement-Admissions-FY-2018>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/the-us-has-slashed-its-refugee-intake-syrians-fleeing-war-are-most-affected/2019/05/07/f764e57c-678f-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/the-us-has-slashed-its-refugee-intake-syrians-fleeing-war-are-most-affected/2019/05/07/f764e57c-678f-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/greece-migrant-crisis-16000-migrants-have-fled-to-lesbos-this-year-only-one-humanitarian-boat-left-to-help/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lexrap.org/asylum-seekers.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/fleeing-for-our-lives-central-american-migrant-crisis/>

borders with guns, walls, inhumane detention centers, and to have babies pulled from their mother's arms and locked in cages. What has happened to our country's promise of welcoming the "tired," the "poor," the "huddled masses who are yearning to breathe free?"

In April 2018, members of this congregations' youth group went on a service trip to Nicaragua, the largest country in Central America. They were there when Ortega announced social security benefits would be slashed to cut costs. After years of political unrest, this was the spark that lit the fuse of a civil uprising. The youth were forced to evacuate amid protests, which were met with violent government force in an attempt to crush the protest movement. They fled Nicaragua a mere 7 hours before roads to the airport were shut down.

Because of their privilege, the U.S. borders were open to our youth, and our precious children arrived home – back to safety. Meanwhile, borders are closed to many from Central America and someone else's precious child is told to go back where they came from – back into "the mouth of a shark." How is this keeping our country's promise?

You may have seen a meme on Facebook with the Statue of Liberty sitting on her base, crouched over in despair, holding her bowed head in her hands. Her torch, symbolizing the hope of freedom and liberty, is tumbling to the ground. It's an image that portrays the shattering of our country's founding value of welcoming the stranger.

As citizens of these United States, by virtue of our founding values, we have a moral responsibility to receive *the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions*. For Unitarian Universalists, who promise to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people, there is a spiritual responsibility to counter fear and hatred with love and justice.

Let us harness the holy power of Love, and ask, "What does Love call us to do?"

In 2017, the Winchester Unitarian Society's Standing Committee asked how Love was calling them to respond to the increasing hostility to immigrants in our country. They formed a Sanctuary Task Force and invited the congregation into discernment of whether to become a Sanctuary congregation to provide protection to those who are at risk of being deported.

As part of the discernment, there were dedicated worship services on immigration, one featuring testimony from youth who visited the US/Mexico border and an original cantata composed by John Kramer, titled "The Immigrant Experience" which looks at some of this country's complicated immigration history. One movement speaks to the struggles of Chinese and Irish immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in the spring of 1882, was this country's first significant law restricting immigration by instituting a 10-year prohibition of all Chinese labor immigration.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=47>

The cantata lifts up the words of George Washington and other U.S. Presidents who proclaimed our country's commitment to give asylum to the oppressed and persecuted, to be a land of freedom for all people, of all Nations, of all Religions. The piece shines a light on our current grim reality and offers a public statement of support that the "poor" and "the oppressed" can still turn here for refuge.

On January 7, 2018, at a special congregational meeting, the Winchester Unitarian Society answered the call to love by voting to become a "Level 2" Sanctuary congregation, thus committing to support a "Level One" Sanctuary congregation that is housing an immigrant who is at risk of deportation. An opportunity came shortly after the vote to partner with First Parish in Bedford, who received a mother and grandmother they call "Maria" into Sanctuary. More than thirty people in this congregation quickly underwent a criminal background check and received training to be part of an interfaith coalition that takes shifts to provide safety and companionship to Maria 24 hours a day.<sup>9</sup> Now twenty months into the partnership, the Sanctuary Taskforce is rejuvenating their cadre of volunteers to support Maria. If you are interested, please contact Marilyn Mullane or see Patty Cameron at social hour.

Love has called this congregation to participate in interfaith vigils at ICE immigration detention centers. At each vigil, detainees' wave, knock on windows and hold handwritten notes against the glass. Those participating in the vigil, raise their voices in song and prayer. They hold up signs with messages of love and support to remind our immigrant siblings in detention that they are not alone or forgotten.

Some who are appalled by our Nation's anti-immigrant policies are fighting for justice at the systemic and institutional levels. Others feel overwhelmed with the enormity of what is happening nationally, so they choose to support immigrants who, like Maria, have made it across the border and are living in our midst.

As we heard in this morning's reading, some are working to flip the current anti-immigration narrative by putting moral and spiritual responsibility into action:

*Let us share our country  
Share our homes  
Share our food  
Let us make them feel welcome here, in their new home.*

The mission of a local non-profit is doing just that. The Lexington Refugee Assistance Program, which goes by LexRAP, was recently created to assist refugees by providing a network of community support, thus integrating refugees into society. They are currently supporting more than 50 refugee and asylum seekers who are living in the local area. LexRAP volunteers provide shelter, food, clothing, transportation, English tutoring, employment and financial assistance.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.winchesteruu.org/sanctuary/>

But, perhaps most important – volunteers offer social connection, care and friendship to refugees who are strangers in a strange land.

Karen Hirschfeld is one of a small group of people in Winchester who have been supporting a local asylum-seeking family since last Spring and, as Karen aims to do “*welcome them with warmth against the literal and metaphorical New England chill.*” This small group recently realized they – and the family – would benefit from being connecting with the depth of wisdom and resources that LexRAP could provide. In September, the family was accepted as a new LexRAP client.

I had the great pleasure of meeting this local family and the group of volunteers for the first time at an outdoor gathering a few Sundays ago. I was immediately drawn to the warmth and affection between volunteers and members of the family. I smiled watching the father chase his young child around the yard. They laughed, hugged, and explored the area for treasures. And, when music from their home country began to play, they danced!

The mom was socializing and talking with people – practicing her English. She had a huge smile that never left her face. At the end of the gathering, people were packing up food for the family to take home and I had a chance to speak to the mom alone. I learned her family has lived in multiple places in the United States before coming to Massachusetts. At one point, she glanced at the people bustling around, packing up food for her family. I saw tears begin to well up in her big brown eyes and she quietly said, “*We feel love again.*”

Four simple words “*We feel love again*” that say volumes about what is truly lost when a family flees their country of origin. The loss of leaving their extended family, friends, community, and culture. The loss of loving and being loved.

By offering tangible support and kindness to those who have fled from the “*mouth of a shark,*” we offer strangers from a strange land, our neighbors, the opportunity to “*feel love again.*”

In alignment with Winchester Unitarian Society’s multi-faceted commitment of answering the call of Love to support immigrants, I am leading an initiative to broaden and deepen the ways this congregation support immigrants. The initiative invites us to offer hospitality to refugees and asylum-seekers who make it across our country’s borders and are living in our neighborhoods.

I’m inviting the congregation to support LexRAP and the refugee families they support because crossing over the border is merely the physical part of entering this country. Welcoming refugees into our communities is what makes being here a safe, new home. Welcoming begins by getting to know our neighbors. Offering our time, energy and resources. Being kind and caring. That’s radical hospitality. That’s creating beloved community right here, in our own backyards.

In our Nations' current anti-immigration climate, answering the call of love is risky. We may encounter controversy and angry people. We may be in situations that feel unsafe. Spiritual transformation often requires us to take risks and to stretch out of our comfort zone. It is holy, soul-growing work to:

- Travel in someone else's shoes, even for a short time. You can read about it, watch it on TV, but to be 100% present and look into the eyes of another human being is transformative. It changes who we are and how we see the world.
- It is holy work to open our hearts wide and care for another person. To risk our hearts being broken if the ones we care about are harmed – or deported. There is no guarantee of a happy ending. But, what's the alternative? They do it alone?

What does love call us to do? Maybe it's as simple, and risky, as offering kindness and support to those who are yearning to *"feel love again."*

If you are interested in answering the call to love by supporting LexRAP families who live in the local area, you are invited to learn more by talking with me, by visiting Patty Cameron at the table in social hour, or attending the conversation in the parlor at Noon with guests from LexRAP.

May we generously answer the call of love. Amen.