

Sermon and order of service Lady Liberty  
Copyright Sarah K. Person  
Delivered November 1, 2015 Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

Sermon            Lady Liberty

Whenever I meet someone whose last name is Person, the first thing we usually ask one another is “what was your family name before Ellis Island?” Mine was Persky, in case you’re interested. Our names were either changed by officials or, more likely, by our great-grandparents themselves to sound more American. Between the 1890s and 1954, 70% of immigrants arrived at the United States by way of Ellis Island, and under the upraised torch of the Statue of Liberty. There was a great demand for cheap labor, and European immigration was fairly unrestricted. The other entry points were Angel Island in San Francisco and what are now 45 official sites along the Mexican-American border.

My father’s parents arrived on boats at the turn of the twentieth century. My grandmother, Dora Berlind, had traveled from a small shtetl outside of Kiev. Her father was the scribe for the village. They all left the Ukraine together, the entire community; first going to London until everyone could earn passage, and then on to America. On the day they were to depart for America, Dora’s younger brother got his head stuck in the railings in front of their building and the police had to come to free him. This is the only story that was passed down to us of her life before coming to the United States.

As they reached New York Harbor, the ships had to pass quarantine inspection. Then Immigration and Public Health Service medical examiners would board the ship and check first and second-class passengers. Third-class passengers, like my grandmother’s village, would be transported by barge to Ellis Island with all their belongings. Once they landed on the island, they would pass in ones and twos through gated walkways that looked like cattle pens. At the end of the line, examiners waited to look them over for diseases, deformities and mental illness. These were what were called “at a glance” inspections. Those who didn’t pass were often detained in island hospital barracks, sometimes for years.

Because of the scientific racism of the times, Latin American and Asian immigrants suffered a more rigorous inspection; being stripped, showered, disinfected and tested for parasitic infections which required days of detention. This was required because they, particularly the Asian immigrants, were more inscrutable and harder to diagnose at a glance.

Once my grandmother’s family passed the examination, they would have joined long lines in the Great Hall. There were hundreds of interpreters calling out to people milling about to make sure that order was maintained. Bored children would cry themselves to sleep, or occupy themselves carving messages into the pillars and walls. When they reached the end of the line and stood before an immigration clerk, their names would have been checked against the ship’s manifests and they would have been asked questions:

- what was their religion
- did they have any relatives in America
- how much money did they have
- where did they get the money to come here
- could they read
- what were their occupations
- did they practice polygamy or anarchy

By 1924, political elitists persuaded the United States to start restricting undesirables, especially Eastern and Southern Europeans. Medical inspections were to be conducted abroad, we started restricting immigration based on national origin, and the visa system was introduced. We no longer, if we ever did, pretended to welcome the wretched refuse from other nation's teeming shores.

My grandmother's family settled in the Lower East Side of New York with other Eastern Europeans. My great-grandparents started forbidding their children from speaking Russian at home, only English. All the children went to school for as long as they could and worked to bring money home for the family. They strove to join the great melting pot that was the image of America and did not pass stories of the Ukraine to their own children. Their children and children's children were supposed to give up their backgrounds and be part of the American Way.

This is the way it was for my great-grandparents. They survived by fitting into an American Way – a way defined by racism and politics as much as economic necessity. Immigrants, like the slaves before them, are the backbone of our economy. They were sources of cheap, healthy labor. But even then, there were competing fundamental cultural understandings of the American Way – cheap labor should stay cheap if the society were to succeed, versus cheap labor offering a steppingstone to greater prospects and the possibility of crossing class boundaries by virtue of hard work. One mindset welcomes change and one resists change. One approach wanted to preserve differences in order to maintain class systems; one approach wanted to eradicate differences in order to move from one class to another. Immigrants and former slaves who could not eradicate how different they appeared and sounded only fit in if they stayed functioning as cheap labor. Nowadays, a growing segment of our popular culture wants to preserve differences and eradicate class. All of these competing ideologies form the culture in which we were formed.

As a nation, we are in the process of moving from the self-image of the melting pot to the salad bowl of cultural pluralism. In the salad bowl, families, employees, hold on to their language, their foods and their faith traditions. Think of our institutions and our society enhanced by diversity and creativity, offering new perspectives and colors and tastes to help us succeed – especially in a global economy. Yet there is still a prevailing, competing notion that immigrants are valuable only if they contribute to our economy and don't drain our economy. It is a mindset of scarcity and suspicion. If all newcomers are huddled masses yearning, then they are likely to be looking for free handouts rather than freedom. That mindset requires that we offer them low-paying jobs, no matter what their qualifications. It requires that we not allow many of them to bring their spouses or their children until they are financially well-established and go through the naturalization process. It demands that we, as a matter of political assumptions, cause great pain and disruption for millions of families and children who are trying to make a new life in our country. And that is their formative experience of life in America – caught in a war of opinions between those who are driven by a sense of abundance and opportunity, and those who are driven by a sense of scarcity and loss.

Immigrants, any newcomers to any culture, trigger a tension between those who are driven by a sense of abundance and opportunity, and those who are driven by a sense of scarcity and loss. In any country, culture, system, town, congregation, it is a balance that has to be met. It is a natural order of things, and we, even here in our congregation, are not immune. Unitarian Universalism doesn't have the equivalent of a standard, an American Way, a creedal affirmation that distinguishes between those who are one of us and those who are not. Like Lady Liberty, we offer a wide welcome, and we struggle as well – because we've always been a salad bowl that's a little uncomfortable with how we'll guarantee

that all the ingredients will fit together. Like Lady Liberty, we've tended to view newcomers to our faith as though they were all wounded in some way, rather than offering us strength and color. Liberty, liberalism does need boundaries if it is going to succeed, and on principle we have tried to find them without causing the pain of exclusion. I think in the past we've focused on that rather than on strength and color. It is ironic that, even as we honor diversity, we strive even harder for something to hold us in common.

I cannot offer you any guarantees. I can only offer you the insight we need to recognize those things in ourselves and each other that welcome change and resist change. It is my profound belief that if we can be mindful of our tendencies both to welcome change and resist change, we can make better choices for our future. Sometimes we need to find what we have in common and sometimes we need to find what we offer that is different. Some of us changed our names when we came to America, and some of us held on to them. We need not think alike to love alike, and that might be the most difficult and the most rewarding principle to live by. You have my love and my deepest respect for your work of self-discovery and community. There is no finer challenge than this. Bless you.

Some sources:

<http://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/the-immigrants-statue.htm>

<http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/ellis-island-history>