

Toward a World of Open Arms and Open Borders

By

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Once upon a time, America was great, then a bunch of immigrants arrived and ruined it for everyone. I think it's time for us to make America great again.

That's not a line from one of Donald Trump's campaign speeches. Okay, it is, but that's not how I mean it, nor am I being insincere. There was a time in this country when a mass migration of immigrants overwhelmed its people, gobbled up most the resources for themselves, leading to destitution and grave injustices. If you don't believe me, just ask the American Indians who are still around or the descendants of those other original "Americans" whom we now call Mexicans.

There's a few lines in John Steinbeck's 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about dustbowl refugees migrating west, that masterfully make this point:

Once California belonged to Mexico and its land to Mexicans and a horde of tattered feverish Americans poured in. And such was their hunger for land that they took the land—stole Sutter's land, Guereiro's land, took the grants and broke them up and growled and quarreled over them, those frantic hungry men; and they guarded with guns the land they had stolen. They put up houses and barns, they turned the earth and planted crops. And these things were possessions, and possession was ownership.

The Mexicans were weak and fled. They could not resist, because they wanted nothing in the world as ferociously as the Americans wanted land.¹

Today, I consider myself a native American of sorts, for this is the country in which I was born, as were generations of my ancestors, mostly quakers, who have been here—mostly in Maine, Kentucky, and Oklahoma—since the 17th century. I also consider this my home because I had no more choice where I was born than a daffodil has over where the fur of an animal, the feathers of a bird, or the winds end up planting it. This is the country I grew up in, the land and culture that has shaped me, the place in which I have found opportunities and experienced hardships; where I have found love, and family, and friends, and purpose; and where I have experienced injustice, prejudice, hatred, and grief. It is my home. I am an American. I am not overly proud nor ashamed of being an American. It is just a fact of my existence. It is the place the forces of nature and history have planted me, and it is where I have had to find and continue to make my way.

Yet I do not consider this country *my* land. I do not own it. It does not belong to me, despite having a deed to the small parcel my home is on. I belong to it. I am part of it. I can't help belonging it to it for all the reasons I have already said, because I was born here, grew up here, and have had to find my way and make my life here. Nor am I unaware of, intentionally ignoring, or unmoved by the traumatic history of this land's earliest inhabitants and many of those desperate immigrants who have also come or tried to come

here to make a better life for themselves and their families. White European immigrants may have had it easier than some, but this wasn't true for most of them. More than half the English immigrants who arrived here during the 17th and 18th century came as indentured servants, a practice that didn't end until 1865 with the establishment of the US Constitution's 13th amendment, the same amendment that abolished slavery, because that's what such servitude was, slavery.

Many others, as we know, weren't immigrants at all, but were violently dragged here in chains and cruelly forced to work as slaves for generations. Others, like the Chinese immigrants, once the largest group of immigrants in California, seeking fortune during the Gold Rush, were forced out of the gold mines by whites, where prohibited from filing mining claims, and ended up having to work low wage service jobs, or in deadly and deplorable conditions as miners for those who could own mines. Others had no choice but to undertake equally as oppressive and dangerous work constructing roads, bridges, and the western section of the Transcontinental Railroad. Yet, despite all they were accomplishing and contributing, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act officially banned Chinese immigrants from even coming to America, and prohibited those already here from testifying to any crimes committed against them by whites.

Single, unaccompanied women of any color were also once prohibited from coming to America under penalty of being arrested as prostitutes. The Naturalization Act of 1790 barred American Indians, free blacks, slaves, indentured servants, Asians, and anyone else who wasn't considered of "good moral character," from obtaining legal citizenship. Even desperate Irish immigrants, the victims of famine in their own country due to the potato blight of 1740, were utterly despised because of both their nationality and their Catholic religion. They were treated so poorly that slaves used to add levity to their own circumstances by jesting, "My master is so cruel he treats me no better than the common Irishman." Legal immigration quotas continued to be based almost exclusively on race and nationality until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's.

Yet, here we are today, still discriminating against immigrants, if not formally, then informally, if not legally, then illegally, based on stereotypes, prejudice, race, nationality, fear, and hate. During his first run for office, Donald Trump characterized those immigrants crossing into the US from Mexico as criminals and rapists. Once elected, his "zero tolerance" policy resulted in the forced separation of thousands of children from their parents at the southern border, some of whom have yet to be reunited. DACA recipients—young people brought here as children, who know no other home—were repeatedly threatened with deportation, their futures held hostage to Trump's political whims. In addition to Mexicans and other South Americans, Trump also issued a series of executive orders banning those from predominantly Muslim countries from entering the US.

His administration's actions toward immigrants today is just as bad, if not worse. During his first weeks in office, Trump signed executive orders revoking thousands of student visas and putting the fear in most that if they leave to simply visit their native homes and families, they won't be allowed back in, and if they don't leave, they may be arrested and deported anyway. His administration has arrested, transferred to other states, and incarcerated legal immigrants who were involved in protesting Israel's current genocide against Palestinians, without due process and by labeling these protestors terrorists.

He's arrested over two-hundred individuals and deported them overnight to a notorious prison in El Salvador, accusing them of being part of a gang without producing any evidence, or giving them their legally required day in an American court, despite the orders of federal judge. He's even ignored the Supreme Court's order to facilitate the return of at least one man proven to be innocent of Trump's unsubstantiated accusations.

Just a few weeks ago, he deported three very young children, who are US citizens under the birthright citizenship clause of the Constitution, including a child with cancer, along with their mother, who is not a citizen, sending them all to Honduras, a country none of them is from. He's also announced intentions to deport illegal immigrants to Libya, regardless of where they are originally from. This week the Supreme Court heard arguments from Trump's attorneys asking it to reinterpret the Constitution, settled and clear as it already is, so that he can continue kick American children out of the US, to wherever he wants. Ironically, just this past week he granted asylum to a small number of white South African farmers, citing the dubious claim of "reverse racism."

Historically, there have always been territorial divisions and disputes between groups of humans, which have been especially brutal since the advent of agriculture, sometimes resulting in outright war. At this moment in time, despite our many great advances, there is little difference regarding our attitudes towards those who live on the other side of the artificial lines we have placed between us and the rest of the human family. Today alone, there are two wars happening, one between Russia and Ukraine, and another between Israel and Hamas that has resulted in violence between Israel and Gaza, the West Bank, Iran, Lebanon, and Yemen. Additionally, in recent weeks, the US and UK have engaged in airstrikes targeting the Houthis in Yemen in response to their attacks on ships in the Red Sea.

There's also Donald Trump's trade war against every country in the world in his effort to "make America great again," a country representing less than 4.3 percent of the human population, at the expense of everyone else. In response, our closest neighbors have themselves begun to more firmly hold to their own lines of separation, with the "Canada first" movement above the northern US border, which Trump recently said "is an artificially drawn line" that "makes no sense;" and, below the southern border, Mexico's President, Claudia Sheinbaum told him, "No, President Trump, our territory is inviolable, our

sovereignty is inviolable ... we will never accept the presence of the US army in our territory ... We can work together, but you in your territory and us in ours."

It is only natural when we feel threatened to withdraw behind the artificial lines we have established between ourselves and those we consider outsiders. But territorialism, isolationism, and nationalism that result from such fears cannot benefit us within the global community that the whole of humanity now occupies. Either we will isolate and impoverish ourselves or end up in pointless wars and conflicts that hurt everyone involved, except, perhaps, the oligarchs who start them.

So, we can continue down this age-old path, discriminating against and turning away those fellow human beings who most need our help, or we can try something different. Instead of tightening our borders, we should begin loosening them. Today, we can't imagine a global society in which the people of the world have the right and freedom to travel wherever they wish, but this was also once true for those of us living in the US and Europe. Yet, in 1992, less than 30 years ago, the formation of the European Union gave those living in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Wales—thirty different countries—the right to move about freely anywhere within the EU. This means they can travel, work, study, or settle in any other EU country.

Sadly, those in the UK—England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales—lost these rights after they voted to leave the EU in 2016. They can still travel within the EU, but not for more than 90 days within a 180-day period. Studies suggest Brexit has also negatively impacted the UK economy, causing disruption to trade, investment, and labor shortages. But if the failure of Brexit should teach us anything, it is that we cannot successfully withdraw from the global community that we are all now a part of. And it should also teach us that we are all stronger together.

Throughout its history, interstate travel has often been resisted within the US, but the Supreme Court has consistently upheld the fundamental right to travel between states, recognizing it as an implied, yet core constitutional protection. Half a dozen key rulings, dating as far back as 1868 to as recently as 2004, make it clear that states cannot impose restrictions or penalties on individuals exercising their constitutional right to move freely between states. This means states cannot deny welfare benefits, medical care, voter registration, or other services to new residents. I bring this up only to point out that what may currently seem inconceivable—a world of open borders between all nations—could feel as normal as traveling across state lines is in the US, or as crossing from one country to another is in the EU, or from one Province to another is in Canada.

Last Sunday I gave a sermon by John Dietrich, the father of religious humanism, that he originally delivered in 1919, only two months after World War I had ended, the war that was supposed to end all wars. He spoke in anticipation of an international peace conference and the possibility of it establishing “some kind of a league or fraternity of nations which will assure us that fighting on a universal scale will never again blast the earth” and make it possible that an “Englishman will not be a foreigner in America any more than a Pennsylvanian is a foreigner in Minnesota.” In this sermon, entitled *Nationalism and Internationalism*, Dietrich made several visionary and inspiring statements, which I’ll condense here into one paragraph:

There are many who tell us that until we have moved beyond this present resting place of the nation with its borders and boundaries and barriers, we cannot hope to construct the fabric of that ideal internationalism of which the prophets have dreamed ... To love one’s country should not mean to hate all others, any more than to love one’s home means to despise all others ... We must learn that the interests of the whole are greater than the interest of any one part ... This does not mean that we should not love the nation to which we belong. It means, rather, that when there is a clash between the interests of our nation and the world at large, we must recognize the supremacy of the interests of humanity to those of our nation ... [that] beyond the nation is the world and beyond the people of one country the great circle of humanity, and I believe the day will come when we shall recognize that our first and highest duty is to mankind as a whole and not to any single section of mankind ... And each nation will grant the right of interchangeable citizenship so that no dweller in a new land will need to go through the process called naturalization ...

Dietrich was a religious humanist, the first religious humanist, in fact, and a Unitarian minister. But his seemingly radical idea of global citizenship, allowing all people to freely move about our shared world, is something almost all religions teach us in their universal admonition to be kind to strangers and to treat everyone as we ourselves wish to be treated.

This is why almost all religions, at their best, entreat us to be kind to strangers. The Hebrew scriptures say, “The stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.”² Christianity’s Apostle Paul said, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.”³ Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”⁴ The 9th century Islamic scholar, Ibn Majah, wrote, “For the white to lord over the black, the Arab over the non-Arab, the rich over the poor, the strong over weak or men over women is out of place and wrong.”⁵ Sikh scripture says, “All jealousies have vanished in the society of the Saints. All are my friends now, there being no enemy or stranger.”⁶ Hinduism’s *Atharva Veda* says, “Let us have concord with our own people, let us have concord with people who are

strangers to us; the divine Twins create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts.”⁷ A Buddhist sutra says, “Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha nature.” The Japanese *Ofudesaki* tells us, “All the people of the whole world are equally brothers and sisters. There is no one who is an utter stranger.”⁸ Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said, “The Earth is the Mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.”⁹ And the great Baptist minister and Civil Rights Leader, Martin Luther King Jr., said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly,”¹⁰ and that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”¹¹

It is now 2025, more than a century since Dietrich anticipated a world of open borders, and centuries past when these various religions first expressed our universal dream of a world of peace, and compassion, belonging, and open arms to our entire human family. I’m not sure if and when this will happen, but I’m sure it should, and I’m sure we must not stop working to make it so until this dream finally comes true, a dream etched into the base upon which our Liberty stands.

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.

¹ Steinbeck, John, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Penguin Books, New York, New York, 1939, 2002, p. 231.

² Leviticus 19:33-34

³ Hebrews 13:2

⁴ Matthew 25:35

⁵ Hadith of Ibn Majah

⁶ Karnara, M.5, p. 1299

⁷ 7.52.1-2

⁸ Tenrikyo, *Ofudesaki*, 13.43-45

⁹ Freedman, Russell, *Indian Chiefs*, Scholastic Inc., New York, NY, 1987, p. 111.

¹⁰ MLK, “Why We Can’t Wait,” 1963.

¹¹ MLK, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” 1963.