

Let compassion rule immigration debate

By C. MATHEWS SAMSON

Just as I arrived in Guatemala for my annual field research, the issue of the migration status of "unaccompanied minors" arriving in the United States from Central America hit the news. Vice President Joe Biden arrived for a brief visit to Guatemala, and media filled with comments on the ways youth and children are dealt with in our immigration system.

Point of View

As an American citizen, I am especially concerned about the lack of social justice and human rights perspectives in the discourse, including the refusal to deal with the more sinister aspects of our immigration policy — keeping young immigrants in an ambiguous legal status while limiting access to organizations that want to assess their living conditions, dividing families while often actively preventing reunification and holding immigrants in detention without true access to the legal system.

The lack of compassion in the discussion of immigration issues and the refusal to embrace comprehensive reform are driven by two factors:

- The largely but not exclusively Republican fears in Congress of granting "amnesty" to those who have entered the country without papers — even children brought to the United States as very young minors and whose entire educational experience has been in the American context.

- A purported desire to "secure" our borders without defining what security really means.

"Rule of law" and "security" sound like winning issues, but without a broader perspective on the complexity of the issues at hand, this language is shallow. Does the effort to provide security through the building of more walls and a stronger military and police presence threaten to imprison us in walls of our own making? The dearth of reflection in the discourse shows a historical amnesia about the pluralism of the U.S. population and what we refer to as the American experience."

Acknowledging the complexity of immigration issues at the outset does not minimize the need to broaden our discourse and consider where social justice intersects with the rule of law. Our legal system distinguishes between degrees of criminality, and it is well-known that those

with resources can get blemishes on their citizenship records erased on various technicalities.

Social justice demands that we look at young immigrants in a different light. Some want to be reunited with family members in the United States. Others are looking for economic betterment in the same way that waves of immigrants have throughout the nation's history. Others are escaping violence. On my first day in Guatemala, a newspaper article reported the murder rate in the country as 34 per 100,000 inhabitants — over 5,000 people a year in a country of 15 million. It is one of the highest rates in Latin America and over 50 percent higher than in Mexico, which receives much attention.

Social justice also means that we consider how policy that divides families and separates minors from their parents is related to the constant reference to family values so many of our politicians claim to support. What if we talked about family reunification and reform at least as much as we talk about law and security? Better questions might lead to clearer solutions. Moreover, they would make our discourse more humane and reflect our better values as a people.

And our histories are more related than we think in the age of globalization. There are textile mills in North Carolina abandoned in part when the industry tried to take advantage of cheaper labor in Central America, which in turn was frequently abandoned in favor of China. Now abandoned downtowns have been partially revitalized by the immigrants themselves. Change is the constant here, and while it brings trials, it also often brings beauty and hard work — only look at the landscape and construction industries in our cities.

There are other values involved, too. North Carolina is at one extreme of the Bible Belt. Whether or not one shares the specific religious values associated with that region, the quality of our discourse — and our compassion — as a society is surely reflected in the way in which we treat the least of these. Who knows? We might even begin to look at some of the other intractable problems facing the rest of our society in a new light.

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