

A Migration Story
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In eighth grade, we were assigned a project in social studies. We were to make a poster about some part of our ancestry. I made mine about the story of the migration of my great-grandmother, her husband, and their three children to the United States, from Germany, in 1930.

My great-grandmother, Emma Johanna Jacoba Kranenburg Mehl, her husband Carl, and their children: Irmelin, Fritz, and Ingrid, sailed for New York and made their way by train to eastern Washington state. Carl had fought in the first world war for the Kaiser, Carl's son, Fritz, was about to be a teenager, and Carl saw the signs. He knew by 1930 that another war was coming. So they sold the house and vineyard and left Europe behind.

For the poster, in eighth grade, I got pictures of the family, pictures of New York in 1930, a map of the route.

And a photo of the ship they sailed on: The St. Louis.

So, a few years later, when I saw the name of that ship again, I'm sure in a history class, I remembered. I remembered.

I quote to you an official version of the story:

On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 937 passengers. Almost all were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich. Most were German citizens, some were from eastern Europe, and a few were officially "stateless." The majority of the Jewish passengers had applied for US visas, and had planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States.

I'll summarize the next part: The drama of the arrival in Cuba was complicated - but most of them were denied entry. Negotiations to secure their entry were unsuccessful - the new Cuban president had supported Franco who had been supported by Hitler, and he wanted a bribe that the refugees were unable to pay. And, again from the official account:

Hostility toward immigrants fueled both antisemitism and xenophobia. Both agents of Nazi Germany and indigenous right-wing movements hyped the immigrant issue in their publications and demonstrations, claiming that incoming Jews were Communists. Reports about the impending voyage fueled a large anti-Semitic demonstration in Havana on May 8, five days before the *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg. The rally, the largest anti-Semitic demonstration in Cuban history, had been sponsored by Grau San Martin, a former Cuban president. Grau spokesman Primitivo Rodriguez urged Cubans to "fight the Jews until the last one is driven out."

A few passengers were accepted, but 743 were not. They went north. "Sailing so close to Florida that they

could see the lights of Miami, some passengers on the *St. Louis* cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking for refuge. Roosevelt never responded. The State Department and the White House had decided not to take extraordinary measures to permit the refugees to enter the United States. Public opinion in the United States, although ostensibly sympathetic to the plight of refugees and critical of Hitler's policies, continued to favor immigration restrictions. Roosevelt was not alone in his reluctance to challenge the mood of the nation on the immigration issue. Three months before the *St. Louis* sailed, Congressional leaders in both US houses allowed to die in committee a bill [that] would have admitted 20,000 Jewish children from Germany above the existing quota.”

The ship was turned away.

The official account, from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, concludes as follows:

“Following the US government's refusal to permit the passengers to disembark, the *St. Louis* sailed [back to Europe](#) on June 6, 1939. Jewish organizations negotiated with four European governments to secure entry visas for the passengers: Great Britain took 288; the Netherlands admitted 181, Belgium took in 214; and 224 found at least temporary refuge in France. Of the 288 passengers admitted by Great Britain, all survived World War II save one, who was killed during an air raid in 1940. Of the 620 passengers who returned to the continent, 87 managed to emigrate before the German invasion of Western Europe in May 1940. 532 *St. Louis* passengers were trapped when

Germany conquered Western Europe. Just over half, 278 survived the Holocaust." The rest, 254 souls, were murdered.

Every time I read this account, I weep.
I weep.

Because my family got on the boat, and got off. And took the train.
And so I live.

Every time I read this account, I weep.

I don't know what else to say.

I want to take every politician and pundit, every one whose heart has shrunk two sizes too small, I want to take them and sit down at a table together. A kitchen table, perhaps, where we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks. A kitchen table, and we can pray, and give thanks, and recall our ancestors, and then I'll just read the account of the St. Louis, its passengers, and I'll read it again, and I'll read it again, and I'll read it again, until their hearts are opened, and their conscience awakes.

How dare we.
How dare we.

Governor Rauner, who's turned out to be more like Ebenezer Scrooge before Christmas Eve than after,

joined those others this week who said their states wouldn't take any Syrian refugees.

Forget that Governor's have no such power.
Forget that that's exactly what ISIS wants - a war of religion.

Forget that the terrorists who struck Paris weren't refugees, or that France itself has reaffirmed its commitment to take tens of thousands of migrants.

Forget all that.

Tell the story.
Listen to the voices.
Open your heart.
Listen to the voices.
See the face before you.

Last week, Oliver Willis wrote a tweet that summed it up pretty perfectly. He said:
If only we had a seasonally appropriate story about middle eastern people seeking refuge but being turned away.

I planned months ago to preach about immigration today.
We're talking about ancestry and it's about to be Thanksgiving. Speaking of seasonal stories about welcoming the stranger. Speaking of the holy table, around which we learn what it means to be a human being, what it means to give thanks, what it means to serve one another, to listen to one another. Where wars begin and end, and the terrible victory is marked.

I planned months ago to preach about immigration today.

I thought I'd mostly be talking about immigration reform - about the effort to bring out of the shadows those who are here but without full dignity under the law, about protecting the "dreamers," those children brought here by the parents who are without legal status. I thought I would preach about the inhumanity of tearing children from their parents' arms, so that the parent is deported, the family that remains - citizens - left without their father, their mother.

I thought I might tell stories about detention centers, run by private companies for profit, places where folks who have been convicted of no crime, who, at most, committed a civil offense in their search for a better life, are held without lawyers, without decent food, without heat or fresh air, for months or even years.

I thought I might tell stories about the Unitarian Universalists who have fought so hard for immigration justice - in Arizona and across the United States - who have stood before the guards, the buses, the sheriff and his posse, and said, "No, we are one family, no matter where we come from, or how brown our skin might be. We are one family. No more of this, no more of this; we are one family."

I am inspired by those stories, and I know you would be too.

I thought about how we could talk about migration stories. Some of us in this room are migrants - we've come from other places, maybe other countries or just other states. Some have parents, or grandparents, who were migrants. Some go back generations, or before memory; some migrated here by land or boat tens of thousands of years ago, and some, of course, have ancestors who did not migrate by choice but by force - a story that disrupts our happy narratives of everyone coming for freedom. For some came in chains, but nonetheless, we all have migration stories to tell. Often, many migration stories to tell.

I will say that it seems to me, if we want to be fair about it, it is only those folks whose migration stories predate written history - who were themselves overrun by the Europeans - who I think get a vote one which migrants to accept or not. If we want to be fair about it.

When I planned this service months ago, I also thought we could draw the spiritual parallel: how our own lives are migration journeys, not necessarily physical journeys, but journeys of the heart, toward - we hope - depth and understanding, a sense of coming home to wherever we are. Come and go with me, to that land, for which we are bound - the land of the spirit, the land of meaning and joy and service.

But then, I thought, I'd return to the justice theme. That it is for us to speak up for justice, for our neighbors, near and far; for compassion and mercy and solidarity with one another. I'd call upon you to speak up and vote and agitate and to make personal

connections with one another. We'd raise money for immigration justice - and we will do that - and we'd all leave feeling proud of our faith and recommitted to the work of justice for everyone.

And we'd enter the Thanksgiving holiday in the right spirit — moved by gratitude for the gifts of our life, committed to share those gifts more widely.

The movement from gratitude to generosity.

I thought all that might fit into this sermon, which I scheduled back in the spring.

And then the world kept on spinning.

And then thousands upon thousands of refugees, fleeing war, tumbled across the land and the sea - little boys laid lifeless on the beach; some countries closed their doors, while many towns opened their hearts.

And then politicians did what politicians do, and appeals to the basest instincts called immigrants rapists and murderers and saw their poll numbers go up.

And this, this week.

Lord, this week.

Terror and fear.

Some seek to close the door.

Others open their hearts.

I want to say.

Listen to the voices.

Open your heart.

Tell the stories.

I want to say, to all those who would close the door, who would be guided by fear instead of hope; who would clutch in scarcity rather than live in generosity; who would say "no you can't come here;" I want to say to you, governor, politician, pundit, neighbor, I want to say to you,

How dare you.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, . . . mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers once too.

How dare you.

Listen to the voices.
See the faces.
Open your heart.

Lest the tears of the holy drown us all, may we be summoned to a higher calling, one of faithfulness and hospitality and open-hearted love. The best of us and not the worst.

Both impulses are in our history and in our present. That colonizing and the nativist, the supremacist - that's part of our history. The part that says difference is scary and there isn't enough and so it's just for us. That is part of who we are, we who live here in this

land. But it's only part of our history, and only part of our mythos, our story, about ourselves.

Another part of our story is the welcome -
the table, open,
the door, open,
the heart, open,
the embrace of variety and diversity as quintessentially American, the land of freedom regardless of origin or color or faith, the affirmation that there's plenty. There's enough. Come, and be welcome. That's another part of our story.

When you give thanks this week, give thanks for the best of our story; give thanks for your ancestors and the courage of those who have made journeys - journey's of time and space and journey's of the heart -
including yourself.

Give thanks that there is plenty,
give thanks for hope and love and possibility.
Give thanks for love,
which despite what you might see on the news,
is stronger, in the end, than hate.
Give thanks, and from that place of gratitude,
open your heart, open your door, be a living witness of the spirit of hospitality.
In joyful thanksgiving,
whose bounty we share,
we join in the journey.
Come and go with me
take one more step,
when bound to human care and hope,

then we are free.

In joyful thanksgiving, in awareness of the truth of our own stories, our own contingency and fragility, our own need to be welcomed, we can see in the faces of one another, we can hear in the voices of one another, the core humanity - our siblings, our family, our neighbor - and say, come, come, whoever you are, you are welcome here.

In 1939, the St. Louis never got as far north as the city of New York. They were turned away. I wonder if they had made it so far, if some of the passengers would have looked out across the harbor, and seen there that statue, a gift of the people of France, lamp raised. I wonder if they would have made out the words, and known the full poem, those words of Emma Lazarus. Nine years earlier, my ancestors saw those words. They applied to them. They were included. Thus, I live.

It is my prayer this morning that we remember them, those words, a portion etched on that statue. That we have a country where those words apply to everyone, not just some. Where our hearts are open, and our door stands ajar. As the poet wrote:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name*

*Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "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-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

May it be, may it be, may it be,
and may we make it so.
May we make it so.
Let us sing.