

The wisdom of the bear

Leonard Hitchcock

January 27, 2018

I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that Paddington Bear is the son that we all wish we had. Though he is, indeed, a bear (from the darkest jungles of Peru), and somewhat accident prone, Paddington is basically a cheerful bear, and, more importantly, a kind, helpful and polite one. He is not immune to anger (what bear is?), but expresses it only by means of a stern stare at the person that has displeased him.

Paddington does, admittedly, have a way of getting into trouble. When he first came to live with the Browns in London, having only known the jungle before his arrival, his unfamiliarity with the modern world led to a good many mishaps, and even after becoming accustomed to the city, he is rather prone to have adventures that cause trouble, even crises. But it is never the case that Paddington's intentions are anything but good.

Paddington was raised by a bear he calls Aunt Lucy and she impressed upon him the importance of treating all people with respect and being helpful to them whenever possible. She taught him to approach people with the expectation that they will be friendly and considerate. Paddington's foster father, Mr. Brown, puts it this way: "Paddington looks for the good in us all, and somehow he finds it."

In his most recent film, *Paddington 2*, our bear (Spoiler Alert!) is falsely convicted of burglary and imprisoned. His fellow inmates are a pretty grim, unfriendly and threatening bunch. But Paddington, acting on his belief that even the apparently nastiest folk are decent people underneath, wins them over and makes several convict friends who eventually help him to escape and prove his innocence.

The day after I saw *Paddington 2*, I became aware of a T.V. advertisement that has been aired by the Trump re-election campaign. It shows video of a Latino man, Luis Bracamontes, who has confessed to killing two sheriff's deputies in California in 2014. He was an illegal immigrant from Mexico at the time of the killing. The advertisement asserts that Democrats will be complicit in all crimes committed by illegal aliens because they oppose the president's proposal to build a wall and prevent aliens from entering the United States.

This ad is clearly meant to imply that immigrants, especially Latino immigrants, commit crimes at a high rate and constitute a serious threat to U.S. citizens. But that implication is, according to the available evidence, utterly false. A 2015 study by the National Academy of Sciences concludes that "Immigrants are in fact much less likely to commit crime than natives, and the presence of large numbers of immigrants seems to lower crime rates." The study added that "This disparity also holds for young men most likely to be undocumented immigrants: Mexican, Salvadoran and Guatemalan men."

The conservative Cato Institute, using census data from the 2014 American Community Survey, compared incarceration rates for native Americans, and legal and illegal immigrants. It found that “The incarceration rate was 1.53 percent for natives, 0.85 percent for illegal immigrants, and 0.47 percent for legal immigrants.” That meant that “Illegal immigrants are 44 percent less likely to be incarcerated than natives. Legal immigrants are 69 percent less likely to be incarcerated than natives.”

It’s worth remembering that stigmatizing immigrants by attributing criminal behavior to them is something of an American tradition. In the mid-nineteenth century it was the Irish who were thought to be prone to crime. That’s when the term “paddy-wagon” came into use. Later, it was the Italians who were denigrated -- accused of being associated with the Mafia.

Out here in the west, it was Chinese immigrants who were treated with contempt and hostility. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, in part through the encouragement of white, working-class members of the labor unions, Chinese were vilified and discriminated against. The unions, in an eerily familiar way, accused Chinese workers of stealing jobs and preventing salary raises because of their willingness to accept below-average pay.

In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first time in U.S. history that an ethnic minority was refused the right to immigrate. (Trump’s proposed denial of immigration rights to Muslims would have been the second, had he succeeded.) Five years later, with the public now convinced that the Chinese were undesirables, there was the famous massacre of a Chinese mining community on the Oregon side of the Snake River in Hell’s Canyon, a crime for which no one was ever convicted.

This, then, is the way in which a great many Americans have welcomed the tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to be free. And the stereotypes invented to disparage them were, as numerous studies have shown, just as false then as those that stigmatize Latinos today.

The Trump re-election campaign ad I mentioned earlier seeks to revive that dishonorable American tradition of despising, distrusting and demeaning immigrants. It tries to sell a lie that we Americans are, it seems, all too prone to accept.

And what would Paddington Bear have to say about an ad campaign that tries to arouse public fear and hatred of an ethnic minority seeking to emigrate to this country -- an ad campaign that aims at doing just the opposite of what Paddington believes in, because it looks for the bad in us all: our willingness to think the worst of anyone that looks or acts differently than we do? Paddington’s response would surely be a long, and very severe, stare of disapproval.