

Forum on Faith: We'll show our true colors in how we treat refugees

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My favorite restaurant closes only one day every year: Thanksgiving. Owner Larry La once explained that his family comes together from around the country for a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner, foods that are hardly found in his Chinese restaurant or native Vietnamese cuisine.

Mr. La fled Vietnam by boat following the fall of Saigon. After living in a refugee camp in Malaysia, La and his family were granted asylum in America. Decades later, with much hard work, La owns several Washington-area restaurants, decorated with pictures of celebrity customers from across the political spectrum.

For Larry and his family, and for us all, Thanksgiving is a day to celebrate that which makes America great: the values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

So many of us have sought and found refuge in this great nation, journeying to America in generations past or knowing ourselves what it means to be a refugee.

In 1883, Emma Lazarus penned:

“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!” (The New Colossus)

Lazarus evoked empathy with her eloquence, but she was not writing from experience. Born in New York City to a family that was among the first Jews to arrive in America, Lazarus expressed a value deeply embedded in so many of our faith traditions, succinctly described in Exodus 23:9, a reminder to not oppress strangers, for we, too, were strangers.

The founders of our nation empathized with the Ancient Israelites, seeking freedom in a new Promised Land. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson even proposed incorporating images of the Exodus into our nation's official seal. But the Exodus was only a moment on the journey: Survival while wandering through the wilderness towards a Promised Land required people to come together. Our nation was born from the recognition that, as a whole, we are greater than the

sum of our parts, a sentiment captured by the Latin words on the official seal of our nation, “E Pluribus Unum — Out of many, one.”

Several years ago, returning from a trip to Europe, there was a problem with my passport — bearing those Latin words. Arriving at passport control, I was escorted into a small windowless room with a dozen rows of backless benches. I was the only native English speaker and the only person of European ancestry, and I was surrounded by families and individuals, most with tears in their eyes, “tired, poor, huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.”

After about an hour my name was called, and I was ushered into an office where I showed my driver’s license, and correctly identified the last Super Bowl champion before being permitted to go on my way. I can only imagine the fate of the others in that room.

Before the Second World War, many thousands of Jews tried to escape the Nazis by coming to America. Denying refugees entry was tantamount to a death sentence, yet our nation’s leaders hardened their hearts and refused all appeals to loosen immigration quotas. In addition to anti-Semitism, there were fears that spies and Nazi agents would be hidden among the refugees, concerns that sound eerily familiar.

I am saddened by the tremendous amount of misinformation about refugees. An attack by a refugee is highly unlikely. Refugees are, by definition, victims of violence, unlikely to suddenly perpetrate violence. The Cato Institute — a conservative/libertarian think tank founded by Charles Koch — recently concluded that “The hazards posed by foreign-born terrorists are not large enough to warrant extreme actions like a moratorium on all immigration or tourism.”

I believe we should not be guided by unfounded fears or bigoted bluster without basis in fact. Rather than granting terrorists a victory by living in fear, let us consider the positive possibilities that supporting resettlement offers.

Supporting the resettlement of refugees will show that America is not an enemy, but that it continues to be a nation of values and opportunity. Supporting refugees is an opportunity for us to show our true colors, as Americans and as members of faith communities. The commandment to welcome the stranger reminds us to open our arms and welcome refugees into our towns and communities.

This Thanksgiving, let us, a nation of immigrants and refugees, celebrate the values that make our nation great and recognize our moral obligation to support and welcome tired, poor, huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.