



Crafting the Open-Door City

By Ray Pearcey April 24, 2013

Immigrants are magic assets for America. Some have even called the country's constant stream of newcomers our "secret sauce." In the modern era, people like Albert Einstein, Sidney Poitier, Igor Stravinsky, Rihanna, and others have enriched our culture and our intellectual store. And Elon Musk, a South African immigrant, founder of the electric car venture Tesla, CEO of one of America's first spacefaring commercial ventures, and principal of alt energy outfit Solar City, may be the most important business chief in America.

When I started this essay, the Boston marathon bombings had just happened: as the piece goes to press, the surviving suspect -- a 19-year-old Chechen immigrant and U.S. citizen -- has been captured. Know this: immigrants and the U.S. communities they populate are remarkably free of violence -- a fascinating 2006 (but still valid) New York Times op-ed by Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson typifies the strong consensus on this matter:

"The emerging story goes against the grain of popular stereotypes," Sampson wrote. "Among the public, policymakers and even academics, a common expectation is that a concentration of immigrants and an influx of foreigners drive up crime rates.... Yet our study found that immigrants appear in general to be less violent than people born in America, particularly when they live in neighborhoods with high numbers of other immigrants. We are thus witnessing a different pattern from early 20th-century America, when growth in immigration from Europe was linked with increasing crime.... In today's world, then, it is no longer tenable to assume that immigration automatically leads to chaos and crime."

The Boston bombing is a tragedy, but is a decidedly atypical immigrant entanglement.

What's on Tap

As readers know, Congress is engaged in a wide-ranging reform of America's immigration rules.

Alex Nowrasteh, an economist and libertarian partisan at the Cato Institute, says America should "let almost everybody in." He goes on to say, "My dream setup would be a system where only criminals, suspected terrorists and those with serious communicable diseases like drug-resistant tuberculosis are barred from coming to the United States to live and work." I'm quoting him from a recent NPR interview. Later in the interview, Nowrasteh outlined a piece of now mostly-forgotten but critical U.S. history: "Open borders were the law of the land for almost 100 years of American history -- from about 1792 to 1882." I agree with the guy strongly, but like him, I think there's zero chance that the U.S. Congress will fashion a full "open door." But it looks likely that Congress will enact epic legislation soon: some cities will receive more of the people talent in this new world than others. We need to get more than our share of big doers, "whales" and outsized contributors, and it's going to take a conscious strategy to get there.

The Task

Harnessing the energy at the core of America's immigration challenge is a historic opportunity for Tulsa, and one consistent with our state's Land Run and Sooner/Boomer DNA. The changes we may witness in the next year or so offer lots of dividends for turbo-charging Tulsa's economy, creating jobs and sparking our ever-so-critical new company startup rate.

How Do We Do It?

How about an affiliation of French and Tulsa filmmakers?

An informal confab designed to assist with new information on film financing, production, and the singular assets available for doing film work in both of the territories. This synchronicity fits well with the new local Film and Music commission, but also gives a shiny spin by connecting Oklahoma film folks to French sister city Amien, one of several French locales where we witnessed the birth of the New Wave cinema movement in the '50s.

Imagine an alliance with a sparkling music and cultural character. Several days ago, an Israeli/Palestinian orchestral company was in the area. The group gave a couple of concerts and consulted with the staff and kids at schools housed at Tulsa's Jazz Hall of Fame. Jazz Hall chair Jeff Kos said the encounter was electric both for the kids and for the performers. He went on to say that the day-to-day operations of the Israel Philharmonic was apparently a daily exercise in reconciling different cultures, perspectives, and music styles -- an example that resonates deeply in a town like Tulsa that still has much social, economic, and racial reconciliation work to do.

Things in Play

It's a complicated world out there, but we have to sort it out.

"For most of the past 20 years trade has raced ahead of global economic growth, usually at about double its pace. GDP grew by 3.5% in 2006, the last healthy, pre-crisis year, and trade at 8%. This was, it seemed, a golden ratchet binding the planet ever closer. But the most recent 24 months show something that looks an awful lot like a trade shock.... In some crucial areas trade growth has slipped below GDP growth and this year, globally we'll be below the 20-year average rate of trade growth yet again.... The move is serious enough that economists have begun to ask: Is globalization running backward?"

The quote, from a recent Fortune magazine piece, is from Joshua Ramos, polymath and international business consultant. But his observations don't mean that international trade is an engine that Tulsa can't use to produce additional jobs and startup companies. It means that we have to be thoughtful and imaginative in combining Tulsa's competitive strengths and our fab, risk-happy business culture to play successfully in this new world.

Savoring Tulsa's Sister Cities

Making sense of global ferment and countering Green Country's sometimes-powerful xenophobic strain requires deliberative action: stealing time to meet people from other lands, sampling foreign foods, and doing other quotidian things. Tulsa's Global Alliance/Sister City group has its annual fundraiser and conclave on April 25 at the Greenwood Cultural Center this year.

Should you attend, you'll experience music and cultural delights from Tulsa's sister cities and a panoramic array of foods from all over.

Another way forward: put together more development support "portals" of the kind that Sean Griffin and Kristen Bergman have been hatching with the U.S. State Department, the City of Tulsa, and our sister cities. Recently, I wrote about this new "International Cup" and how it might fuel smaller firms in Tulsa. But with the prospect of a sea-change in U.S. immigration law, we could go a step further by contemplating turning Tulsa into a new wave immigrant "talent haven."