



ACKNOWLEDGING FEARS AND HOPES

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Immigration seems one of those issues where everyone talks in code, and the real issues aren't on the table.

I bumped into the immigration issue some years ago while speaking at an international environmental law conference. Wanting an update, I sat in on one of the sessions on 'population'. I felt I had walked into an alien world. Piles of literature were jammed into our hands as we entered the meeting room. Every seat was covered with competing tracts and fact sheets. Speakers were stridently objecting that opposing speakers were given a minute more time than them. People intent on stuffing our ears with information talked so fast as to be unintelligible. The human energy in the room was so twisted that it was all I could do to keep from bolting for the door. But I was fascinated by what was going on.

Obviously long-standing and powerful differences here. Old enough that handouts could be used to convey each side's message. But something powerful had to be festering inarticulate beneath such powerfully held differences.

As it finally unraveled, the issues were not of population or numbers or even measures to manage those numbers. In one group of speakers, it emerged as a strong and justified fear that immigration and population issues were being used to resurrect old patterns of racial harassment and intimidation. The other group of speakers' fears didn't reveal themselves until someone asked why we shouldn't open all national borders and allow free movement of PEOPLE as well as money and resources.

Then a whole cluster of fears spilled out, centered around the issue of equity. There was fear of not being able to compete and survive without the imbalance of resources and power we've had; fear of retribution against us protected Americans who have had more than our equitable share of wealth, power and resources; and fear of losing the apparent security possible from our inequitable concentration of wealth.

These are real fears, all of them, and important to deal with, but resolvable. Getting our hopes and fears out into the open makes it possible to generate real dialog, empathy, and understanding. Many fears dissolve in the light of day. Others can be dealt

with in the real nuts and bolts process of crafting answers in a win-win way. Not being in the open, we hang onto those inner fears so tightly that we can't even hear what others are saying. So that's one very important part of the real immigration discussion. And also a reminder to look for the questions in the heart people are afraid to speak, that lie behind the "mind" questions they ask.

Another small piece. A friend recently was talking with a Latino in a bar in Cannon Beach. He told her he was a cocaine dealer. She asked why. He was an "illegal", married with two children, holding down three jobs. His mother in Mexico got very sick, so he went back to take care of her. I was about to ask how he got back into the U.S., when she continued. "Turns out there's no problem getting in. Sneaking across the border with help of a "coyote" is risky, and costs \$1000. But you can just go to the legitimate border station. Two options there. On foot, \$4000 – cash. In a car, \$6000. No questions asked, no ID required. Ah, yes, our security's very important – but less important than "privatizing" immigration into a profit center?

Then another curious question. The current administration is very strong on "free trade". Money, resources, business operation, but interestingly, not free movement of the important economic resource of people. Bad smelling inconsistency here.

The UN just released an interesting immigration study. Immigration turns out not to take jobs away from existing residents. And attitudes have changed – in 1996, 60% of developed nations wanted to curb immigration, but now only 12% wish to do so. 20% of all immigrants live in the US. We're a nation of immigrants, remember? They're not weird terrorists, they're us. Or our neighbors.

Want an uncomfortable book? *Planet of Slums*, by Mike Davis. Slums now constitute almost 80% of urban populations in developing countries – a third of the global urban population. They represent unimaginable poverty, and result from conscious exploitation. Sure people want to leave there. And we have profited from that exploitation.

Perhaps there are wiser and more humane ways of resolving immigration issues. Fair trade? Local self reliance? Sharing? Making everyplace as good as what we have?