

“Sanctuary Stories”

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“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most.” These words by Phillip Pullman remind us that simple human stories can be like scripture, inviting us deeper into life.

And what inspires more than a love story? This is the story of Malik and Zahida.

It was 1989. Malik worked in his father’s grocery store in Islamabad. Every now and then, a dark-eyed beautiful woman named Zahida would visit the store. Soon, it became clear her visits were not only to buy produce but to modestly connect with Malik, whose heart beat faster whenever he was in her presence. Following cultural custom, they asked Zahida’s family for their blessing. When the family withheld their blessing, believing Malik to be of a lower class, the two went forward with marriage anyway, eloping.

Defying family wishes put their very lives in danger. If they were to be a family of their own, they had to move to another country. So they fled first to Saudi Arabia and then to the United States, to Connecticut where Zahida’s cousin lived. Legally, they entered as tourists and applied for asylum.

In time, after many years of hard work, they earned enough money to invest everything and start their own business, a pizza restaurant. As asylum seekers, they were careful to comply with legal guidelines.

By then, they had welcomed a child into their lives, Roniya. As journalist Dave Eggers describes Roniya, she sounds like so many children we know:

Roniya came into the room wearing a pink dress and a tiara, and showed us a picture she made. She had decorated a sheet of paper with butterfly stickers and added a rainbow, grass, and a sun. She whispered something into her father’s ear, and he told her that it would have to wait....

Regular visits to Immigration and Customs Enforcement were woven into Malik and Zahida’s shared life together. Their attempts to achieve legal status were thwarted by corrupt lawyers who swindled them out of thousands of dollars and

subsequent denials by US immigration officials. Roniya's birth as a US citizen complicated the proceedings. But then the Obama administration passed laws in 2014 granting them protection from deportation as law-abiding asylum seekers.¹

"I know a lot about my own family's stories of migration." It was a meeting here at the Winchester Unitarian Society. Our Director of Youth Ministries, Sam Wilson, led the group through an exercise we often do to stimulate conversation. On one side of the room was a sign reading "This is true for me" and, on the other, a sign reading, "This is not true for me." As he read different statements, the group was invited to walk – or for those seated, to point – to our place on the spectrum between true and untrue. Sam would then ask us to tell our story, explaining why we positioned ourselves as we did.

The stories we shared were as rich as the love story of Zahida and Malik. "I am a descendent of Oceanus, the only baby born on the Mayflower as it sailed to the New World," said one. Another spoke of ancestors from Ireland, fleeing imprisonment. On the other side of the family, their Italian ancestors literally began their journey to America by jumping out an open window to escape the brown shirt Fascists. And another stood in the exact center between the poles of "true" and "not true." Like so many, he is uncertain about his paternity and thus uncertain about what migration story is his to tell.

While the family lore varied throughout the room, I was struck by how many stories spoke of uncertainty, struggle and hardship yet somehow concluded with us, their descendants, gathering in the Symmes Room on an autumn evening, a mere moment in our collective lives of relative privilege.

We also hear struggle in the lives of Zahida, Malik and Roniya. Before Malik opened the pizzeria, he worked eighty hours a week, delivering pizza for another shop. As someone with diabetes, Malik simultaneously balanced the demands of work and parenting, living in the United States as an immigrant, speaking English as a Second Language and chronic illness.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/no-one-is-safer-no-one-is-served>

But their struggles became more acute when Donald Trump was elected president. The Trump administration lifted protections for law-abiding migrants seeking legal status. In January, Malik and Zahida's scheduled visit to the ICE office was no longer routine. An officer told them to arrive with plane tickets to Pakistan. They were to be deported.

Despondent, Malik, Zahida and Roniya left for the airport, planning to fly to Pakistan – a place Roniya had never been – to leave behind everything in America. They then learned their flights were cancelled due to snow. This delay inspired them to accept the invitation by the First Congregational Church in Old Lyme to enter into sanctuary.

Founded the same year as the town, 1665, First Congregational is an antique building in a quiet, leafy and affluent community. Drawing on many years of partnership with international communities and galvanized by the 2016 election, the congregation's board voted for First Congregational to become a Sanctuary church in April of 2017, thereby joining the modern sanctuary movement.

The sanctuary movement began in the 1980's when conservative Christian churches opened their doors to refugees fleeing violence in Central America. Immigrants in sanctuary enter a state of house arrest, receiving "nourishment, shelter and companionship" from the host congregation, along with protection from deportation. While ICE is authorized to arrest anyone anywhere, houses of worship, hospitals and universities are considered "sensitive locations" where agents do not make arrests.

Becoming a Sanctuary congregation is part of First Congregational's story and not without its own struggles. After joining in solidarity with the undocumented, some members left the church, taking significant financial support with them. But the community moved forward, receiving Malik, Zahida and Roniya and providing them a home within their spiritual home. Eggers describes their space as:

a small bedroom and...two rooms customarily used for Sunday school...A shower has been fashioned in a bathroom by connecting a garden hose to the sink. A large picture of a beach scene brightens the windowless bedroom. A guitar leans against a wall. A pair of bongos rests on a bookshelf. Members of the congregation have been teaching Zahida how to

play both instruments. “I always wanted to learn the drums,” she said. Because she and Malik can’t leave the church, they try to stave off boredom and depression by taking classes in yoga, needlepoint, and ceramics.

Malik and Zahida are just two of the approximately 12.1 million immigrants without documentation in the United States or a little more than 3 percent of the overall population.² Being undocumented is frequently a civil infraction, not a crime.³ As of late August of this year, Zahida and Malik were one of forty-two individuals or families living in sanctuary as protection from civil prosecution.⁴

“If my parents were undocumented, I’d be afraid for what might happen to them.” Sam Wilson’s invitation to consider what our loved ones would face – or do face – without the protections of citizenship was an invitation to imagine those in our most intimate circle in Zahida and Malik’s shoes.

This concern, this empathy is at the heart of the modern sanctuary movement. We whose parents and ancestors fought so hard to make real lives here, we whose ancestors endured such suffering as slaves or indigenous people, we who enjoy so much wealth and freedom, owe the Maliks and Zahidas of this nation the same fair chance to survive and to thrive in what is still for so many a new world.

But the Trump administration has issued a number of executive orders, first seeking to ban travel to the US from predominately Muslim countries, then increasing immigration enforcement, phasing out the DACA program - granting undocumented immigrants, brought to the US as children, the right to work – removing Temporary Protection Status from those fleeing emergencies in their countries of origin and adopting a “zero tolerance” policy in immigration enforcement. Collectively, the Trump administration has rewritten the American story to be one where we turn away the “tired and poor,” “the homeless and tempest tost.” It is through this rewriting of the national narrative that the stories of people like Zahida, Malik and Roniya are forever changed.

² <https://www.factcheck.org/2018/06/illegal-immigration-statistics/>

³ https://www.aclu.org/files/assets/FINAL_criminalizing_undocumented_immigrants_issue_brief_PUBLIC_VERSION.pdf

⁴ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/no-one-is-safer-no-one-is-served>

But our nation's story is still being written and we have our own role in this tale. Those of you who visiting this morning, I now tell another kind of love story, a story of compliance with a higher kind of law.

Not long after Trump's election, like the governing board of First Congregational in Old Lyme, the Winchester Unitarian Society Standing Committee wondered how we might respond to the increasing hostility towards immigrants. Thus, they formed a Sanctuary Task Force that invited this congregation into discernment. As part of this discernment, we held dedicated worship services, one featuring an original cantata by Director of Music, John Kramer, titled "The Immigrant Experience," and testimony from youth who visited the US/Mexico border. In a special congregational meeting on January 7th of this year, the congregation voted to become a "Level 2" Sanctuary congregation, a community committed to supporting another faith community housing an immigrant. The vote was 69 for, one against and one abstention.

Our timing could not be better as the Level One Sanctuary congregation we sought to partner with, First Parish Bedford – another antique building in a quiet, affluent suburb - just received someone into Sanctuary, a mother and grandmother they call "Maria" whose family includes both US citizens and undocumented migrants. In a short period of time, more than thirty members of this community underwent a criminal background check and received training so they could be some of the hundreds of volunteers providing presence and support to Maria 24 hours a day.

Since we joined the coalition supporting First Parish Bedford, I have committed to one 12-hour shift a month, beginning at 7 in the evening and concluding at 7 the next morning. The temporary bedroom for the two nighttime volunteers is a classroom next door to Maria's tiny but attractive apartment.

I first met Maria, a diminutive woman originally from Central America, during my first shift. She invited me and my fellow volunteer into her home for tea and some bread friends brought earlier in the week. So early in her English studies, with my "un poquito" Spanish, it was hard to communicate. But her profound warmth and kindness shone through. As one volunteer observes, "When you're able to...be with her, she's so warm and engaging; she'll always give you a hug."

Since then, I have not seen her much but the daily log hints at the story of Maria's time in Sanctuary: "Today, our guest enjoyed yoga class." "Our guest taught the youth group to make guacamole." Maria frequently receives visits from friends and family and attends worship at First Parish from the balcony. First Parish has also invited her faith community to worship on-site so she can stay connected to her congregation. Once I ran into her right before bedtime when she had a thick facial cream on her face. "It's made with lemon!" she said with wonder and delight.

But the log also suggests the pain that comes with being an undocumented immigrant in America. In late February, Maria learned that one of her sons had been deported back to the dangers of Central America. We volunteers also received disturbing updates: "Two people unknown to our guest visited yesterday to give unsolicited legal advice. They do not have permission to return." Sanctuary ministry coordinators also warned that a vehicle marked "Homeland Security" was circling the neighborhood. Thankfully, we learned it was a Bedford police vehicle; for now, Maria was safe.

Now nine months into our partnership with Bedford, I am grateful to have a tangible way to counter the hostility towards immigrants. And I am not alone. In our Sanctuary meeting, volunteers spoke of the value of being in direct service to someone impacted by ICE, of being part of an interfaith coalition, of spending time in the lively hive of an active congregation, with odd and beautiful and joyous interactions happening all around.

But there is more to be done. One pillar of the Trump administration's approach to immigration is a zero-tolerance policy. As we watched with horror this summer, this policy led to separating children from their parents. These children, like Ronia, are like so many children we know. Despite a July deadline for reunification, about 350 children are still in federal custody. Many successful reunifications were made through the work of the ACLU and affiliate organizations even though it was the government's responsibility. Attorney Laura Pena states, "The government has been dragging its feet and fighting tooth and nail at every point"⁵

⁵ <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/10/04/zero-tolerance-policy-reunite-separated-immigrant-families/>

“Sometimes there are justifications for keeping children in cage-like prisons.” When Sam read these words, this was the only statement that motivated the group to gather firmly on one side. “This is not true for me.”

This morning, the choir sang, “A child, torn from her father's arms...makes orphans of us all.” We who live in this nation must reconcile with the reality that immigration “reforms” are done in our name. If these acts are committed without our consent, we must author another chapter in the national story.

Two young lovers, Malik and Zahida, found a love in each other greater than family, culture and their physical safety. Their love inspired them to do terrifying things so they could found a family and a life on that love.

While Attorney General Jeffrey Sessions notoriously quoted Romans 13 in defense of following governmental law, others follow another scripture, Leviticus 19:33, speaking of a love greater than human law: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself.”

If not these ancient gospels, may we find in the stories of Zahida and Malik, of Maria, of First Congregational of Old Lyme and First Parish Bedford, of the 12.1 million aliens residing with us, quietly and unnamed in the shadows, what we need to know. For, as Dave Eggers observes through the words of Studs Terkel, “There is a decency in the American people and a native intelligence...providing they have the information.”