

December 2, 2018  
Angels Unaware  
Rev. Linda

In the second chapter of the story from the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian Bible, we read the story of the “Flight into Egypt” in which, after the birth of Jesus and the visit from the Magi, an “angel of the Lord” comes to Joseph in a dream and warns him to leave Bethlehem for Egypt (Mt 2:12-15). Why? Because King Herod was planning to “seek out the child to destroy him.” Mary and Joseph do leave, along with Jesus, and, according to the Matthew writer, make their way into Egypt. Afterward, King Herod slaughters all the male children in Bethlehem under two years of age.

A family is forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution. This is the classic modern-day definition of a refugee. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines that group of people as follows:

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

The angel when speaking to Joseph uses the *pheuge*, “flee,” from which derives the word “refugee,” the one who flees. Even the Matthew writer’s angel identifies the Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees when he says, “Arise, and take the child and his mother, and flee into Egypt....” (Mt 2:13).

We have been bidden to protect and feel compassion for refugees and strangers throughout time. The Hebrew Bible is also quite clear on this. In “Love the Stranger,” biblical scholar Alice Laffey, writes that in the Hebrew Bible, the words “gûr” and “gêr” that refer to the “stranger,” appears almost 50 times, and the fifth book, Deuteronomy, delineates a number of specific provisions for treating “the stranger” not just with courtesy but also with active support and provision.<sup>1</sup>

So what has become of us? Why do we fear the stranger so viscerally? Why do we turn away from those who do not think or dress or look like us? We all do it. If someone smells strongly or is disheveled or speaking in a way that is not familiar - a piece of us turns away. If we are prepared for the encounter, if we tell ourselves the tools of compassion will need to be engaged, we can make our initial reaction better; we can get closer to being who we wish ourselves to be.

But when the stranger comes unbidden, what then? I remember when a young man on island, I’ll call him Gabriel, from South America, lost his job and his housing and Gary and I were asked to take him in and it all happened in one day’s time.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/what-the-bible-says-about-welcoming-refugees-72050>

We did take him in, he stayed with us for a few weeks, and we learned to care deeply for this young man, but I was still afraid when Gary was out of the house and I and this young man were in it. He was too unlike what I knew: his clothes were dirty, he left a big black ring in the shower when he showered, he needed things from me emotionally that I was not used to giving to grown men I did not know. He wanted to be nurtured, understood, listened to, seen. I was wary with him until I took responsibility for my reactions and went into prayer and saw what I could not see immediately, that he and I shared very similar needs and fears.

I was speaking to my best friend Rita of many years who is a Jungian therapist in Geneva the other day on Skype and I asked her opinion of something that Patrick Kennedy said during his talk at the Dreamland in August where he spoke about his fight to end discrimination against mental illness, addiction, and other brain diseases, as well as his own personal journey. It was a beautiful event.

At one point Kennedy said something like, *If people are not acting in a way that gains them compassion and respect, then they are not well mentally and need to be brought into the fold of community in order to heal.* I really appreciated that statement and I wanted to know what Rita thought about it too.

She said, "Linda, for me that is a dream of paradise which is perfect love, understanding and compassion. This idea that we are all seeking love and if we are not, we are not whole or well is a set up. We were kicked out of paradise because we are good and evil, light and shadow. The Christian concept of God and the Devil as separate has not served any of us. If there is a God, then this God too must be good and evil, light and dark. If we are made in God's image, that is the only image that rings true. God cannot equal the absence of evil."

If we take on Rita's premise, then we have to accept too that we are multiple, that I am not purely one thing and not another. We are good and bad, right and wrong, loving and hateful, holy and long tossed out of paradise. We have to accept that there is a part of us whose clothes are dirty, who leaves a ring around the tub when we bathe, who is homeless and lost and looking for a place to rest. I believe this lives in all of us and is what we most fear when we greet another who is very different: that we will lose track of what we think of as our solid selves, or selves that are good and right and strong. If we get too close to the other within us, we might just break open and find in ourselves more than our need for a single story of perfection allows us.

Empathy does not mean acceptance or prevent the need for boundaries. It means imagining the meaning the other is experiencing as real for them, no matter our judgments. And when others who are not us create meanings that we do not find valid or logical or scientific or based on values that we hold, then this bridge is a long one, but it can still be built with intention.

I am also thinking of migrants and refugees seeking to enter this country at this time. It is hard to imagine the lives of these people and when we cannot imagine what it is to be another, empathy flounders.

We now have 15,000 American military, more than we have in Iraq, to face people on the border coming from Honduras. The military are being told that if a stone is thrown at them, despite American civil law and military regulations, they may fire their guns.

The President of the United States said at a rally, “We have our military on the border and I notice all the beautiful barbed wire going up today. Barbed wire used correctly can be a beautiful site.” We are being told that it is right and good and part of the American Christian story to not only fear strangers but to do them harm if our fear gets too great.

The St Paul writer in Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” This tradition is not only a Christian tradition. To greet the stranger with kindness, food, and dignity is a tradition that Abraham followed by keeping his tent open on all 4 sides because he knew the stranger might come from anywhere.

What is the message these angels in these stories are trying to tell us?

The stranger holds a key to our humanity that we require to remain human. When we explore our own darkness well enough to know that most fear comes from imagining that we do not know who another is and what they will do or ask of us and how they will change us, we can begin this journey.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, writer of short stories, and nonfiction. She did a Ted Talk 2009 called “The Danger of the Single Story.”<sup>2</sup> In it she says:

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help...the year I turned eight we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor.

My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, this his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner my mother would say, “Finish your food! Don't you know popel like Fide's family have nothings.”

Then one Saturday we went to his village to visit. And his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket, made of dyed raffia, that his brother had made.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ssw.unc.edu/files/TheDangerofaSingleStoryTranscript.pdf>

I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something.

All I had heard about them is how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.<sup>3</sup>

We forget that we are in so many ways strangers to ourselves. We think if we just keep going doing what we do and saying what we say and wearing what we wear then we will forget that within us are many stories, some of them contradictory. We know this because something will happen and we will respond in a way that does not match with who we believe we are and we will say, "I cannot imagine what possessed me to do that! It was so unlike me."

Carl Rogers, an American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach to psychology, in his book called, "On Becoming a Person" writes about how he practices empathy with another whose behavior feels strange or is bringing up fear for him.

I expected some psychological treatise that would be difficult to follow but what he wrote was about admitting that he was full of light and dark, pieces he understood well and those he did not and acknowledging it all as part of himself, even when it did not lead him to the person he had decided he was, was essential to his capacity for empathy. When he could offer himself the understanding of his own reactivity and judgments, it made it possible for him to accept and understand others.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Rogers wrote, "I find I am more effective when I can listen acceptingly to myself...I feel that over the years I have learned... to be able to realize that I am angry, or that I do feel rejecting toward this person...or that I am anxious and fearful with this person...It becomes easier for me to accept myself as a decidedly imperfect person, who by no means functions at all times in the way in which I would like to function...when I accept myself as I am, I can change...We cannot change...until we thoroughly accept who we are."<sup>4</sup>

And who are we? Beautiful, broken, generous, selfish, whole, incomplete, introverts, extroverts and people who spend a lot of time acting as if we are only the good, light side of the dualisms.

But we have all of it in us, and when we can admit this, we can begin to accept not only ourselves but others too. People are dying for lack of our empathy. We are dying from lack of our empathy.

In his op-ed column, NY Times columnist David Leonhardt writes about some of what is happening on our borders.<sup>5</sup>

"The administration's policy of separating migrant children from their parents at the Mexican border officially ended in June. A recent "60 Minutes" report concluded that the number of separated and detained children could top 5,000 — twice the number the White House lists. An unknown number remain in custody.

Many of the guards who implemented the policy continue to suffer from shame and guilt, writes Claudia Kolker, who volunteered in South Texas as an interpreter for separated children. She writes: "What I saw at the border was far worse than I imagined, not only because of what these families experienced, but because of what had happened to the American workers guarding them." When we separate ourselves from our humanity, and act out of ignorance for who we are and our connection to others, we grow sick.

Last weekend, immigration agents lobbed tear gas into Mexico to deter members of the migrant caravan from crossing the border or seeking asylum.

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (Carl Rogers, New York, New York, 1961), 17.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/opinion/trump-immigration-border-migrants.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2F david-leonhardt&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=5&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/28/opinion/trump-immigration-border-migrants.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2F david-leonhardt&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=5&pgtype=collection)

Tear gas “has a particularly harsh effect on children because of their weaker respiratory systems.”<sup>6</sup> Tear gas, commonly known as CS gas — is an aerosol compound considered a chemical weapon that has been outlawed on the battlefield by nearly every nation on Earth, including the United States.

But as a riot-control agent, 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile is legal to use by both police and federal authorities in the United States and many other countries.

As Howard Thurman, an influential African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader wrote,

“Every living thing, including [humanity], belongs to every other living thing. And I can never be what I ought to be until the last living manifestation of life is what it ought to be. For better or for worse, I am tied into the idiom of everything that lives. And if I forget this, I profane creation. If I remember it, I come to myself in you...and you come to yourself in me.”

700 years before Jesus, Jerusalem had been destroyed and Jewish people were in exile. And so the prophet Isaiah said: And for those from far away. You will rebuild the ancient ruins. You will raise up the age old foundations and you’ll be called repairers of the breach.”<sup>7</sup>

May we be called repairers of this breach that allows us to treat human beings with disdain and disregard and violence. May we consider what in us keeps us believing we are separate and deserve more than we have. This may not be paradise, but it is a beloved community where we can all be whole, knowing that we are multiple, good and light, beautiful and ugly, broken and perfect and so open the doors to new understanding and empathy. These strangers that so many faith traditions remind us are angels, do so to tell us that when we reach out, open hearted, the miraculous becomes possible.

And in doing so, may we find compassion for ourselves and all others so the wise among us called magis can reach us all when we are hungry, homeless, sacred, persecuted so that we might all go on with love.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> David Leonhardt, “Opinion Today”: [https://static.nytimes.com/email-content/TY\\_8119.html?nlid=69135462](https://static.nytimes.com/email-content/TY_8119.html?nlid=69135462)

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Stephen Kendrick, “Angels Unawares” November 4, 2018: <https://www.firstchurchboston.org/media/angels-unawares>