



Column Amy Domini

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Otherness

AS A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS, WE SURE SPEND A lot of time worrying about whether immigrants make good Americans. As the daughter of an immigrant, I find myself quite personally fascinated by the discussion. My father didn't come to America for opportunity; he came because he had married an American. He also came because he had a vision of "the land of freedom" and wanted to be a part of it. America had just liberated his country from the Fascists, something he had fought for his entire young life, since he had the misfortune of being the son of a prominent Socialist.

My parents met in an odd sort of way. After World War II, the American government sent thousands of volunteers to rebuild Europe. My mother was one. There she met Italian volunteers who were trying to save street orphans by attempting to locate relatives who might take them in.

One of the Italian volunteers spoke English, and eventually my mother brought him to America as her husband. Italians and Italian Americans were not much liked at the time. There were nasty words used to describe us, and my father could not seem to get a job except from his own kinsmen. He tried importing pasta from Italy, but although it was cheaper than American pasta, Americans found it too chewy for their taste. Yet during my own lifetime, I have seen the visceral disgust that so many New Englanders felt toward Italian Americans completely fall away. And I have seen them come to love Italian-made pasta.

What are the elements that cause the distrust of an ethnic group to emerge and then fade? Can it still happen? The current group that is most central to the debate is the Hispanic population. They represent the big new constituency. Are Hispanics too overwhelmingly different to fit in America? They come for freedom. Freedom from random tyranny and poverty will allow them to prosper and raise families. We understand that, but we also want them to be like us.

The Immigration Restriction League was founded in 1894 by people who opposed the influx of "undesirable

immigrants" who were coming from southern and eastern Europe. My mother's grandfather, a very fine man in most ways, was one of them. He felt that the new types of immigrants were threatening the American way of life and especially the high wage scale that we Americans enjoyed. He wrote articles about it and was published widely.

His last point, wages, is a tough one. Arguably, if we completely ran out of workers, it seems that we'd be forced, as a nation, to do a better job of bringing those who are currently shut out into the mainstream. I'm not so sure. It is true that during the last few years of President Clinton's administration, unemployment was so low (4.1 percent in 1999) that the papers ran stories of new jobs for the mentally disabled or recently incarcerated. But if you look at the segregated figures, each worker demographic group (Hispanic, black, elderly, teen) improved, but the harder-hit remained the harder-hit. We did not see the gap between college-educated males and teenagers narrow, for instance. So worker scarcity does not seem to lead to a fairer distribution of jobs. Meanwhile, most studies indicate that the new immigrant taxpayers support our social security systems, and their purchases fuel our economic growth.

So really, nothing is new in the debate over immigration. We still fear otherness, we still fear a new language, and we still fear job or wage loss. This time is not different. The reasons for opposing a path to citizenship have not changed. The actual movement from alien cluster to mainstream citizen has not changed. The acceptance—even celebration—of the ethnicity of our own family's past continues to be appreciated, not abhorred, by our neighbors, but only after a generation or two.

In the end, for me it comes down to the gut. My father was a good man. In spite of a certain amount of prejudice, he made a living, became admired by friends and neighbors, built a modest business (cooking eggplants), and left a mark on the world. His simple factory created jobs and taxpayers; his values were key to shaping mine. His life would have been good, very good, if he had stayed in Italy, but America was a shining beacon of something more than a good life: freedom. That is what he craved, and what he found. Should we now deny this to others? I think not. ■

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