

Cynthia and Marylyn's Story of Injustice in America

Cynthia and I took a Thelma and Louise journey, without the cliff scene at the end, this past March. It became an odyssey through injustice in America. We spent two day at the African American Museum in Washington. We then drove to Alabama and the Legacy Museum and Memorial that commemorated the agony of slavery, through time, to mass incarceration of black people. These two experiences gave us so much insight into the experience of black people in America and how successfully white America has hidden, ignored, or excused what was done to black people, and subdued the guilt and sorrow held deep inside many white hearts. It is not easy to confront the part our ancestors played in other peoples misery, nor acknowledge that the wealth of this country came to be because of the ceaseless labor of slaves. It is not easy to accept that slavery still exists in modern forms. The dominant white culture has invented myriad ways of keeping people of color in a subtle kind of bondage.

When we arrived in Beaumont, Texas, we felt the strength and commitment of African American leaders in the Community Development Corporation. They did more than rehab houses wrecked in Hurricane Harvey or just old houses. They made it possible for African Americans to actually own houses, something denied most of them for most of their history in this country. They also provided rental houses at prices a poor family could afford so they could live in dignity. It was humbling to work with these dedicated people and provide some solid work to bring these houses back to life. It was more than charity, as we were contributing to a form of social justice made possible by the people in the Community Development Corporation. Not until very recently has white America faced the fact of no GI bill for World War 2 black veterans, no mortgages for houses, no houses available to buy unless behind the red lines. The fact that black families had little to no way to build family wealth is the very reason so many black families live in poverty today. According to YES Magazine, the median net worth of United States black households is \$11,000. Median net worth of white households is \$141,900. Reparations hardly seem adequate to make up for the injustice of these practices. The CDC in Beaumont, Texas, gave us some hope that things can change.

The San Antonio Bus Station came next for us, in the company of 15 other people from the Congregational Church of Yarmouth. Working in the San Antonio bus station, we touched the lives of several hundred people who gave up so much and suffered such a long journey to come to the hope of America, seeking asylum. They left grinding poverty, violence, fear of gangs, and a changing climate

that made growing food difficult in their Central American homes. I think they expected open arms and welcome from our country. Instead they got frightening detention centers (prisons) and uncertainty as to their future. Women with their daughters and infant children, men with their sons got dropped off at the station with a voucher for a bus ticket to their sponsor's city. Imagine not speaking English, not knowing where you were or where the place was you were going, not knowing where your husband and sons were, carrying a bag with a bit of food, a jacket, some diapers, and a little blanket. The courage and determination of these asylum seekers was inspiring.

Equally inspiring were the people who volunteered to help them on their way. It is encouraging to know that every bus station and airport on the Mexican border has volunteers helping like this. Sister Denise of Welcome Immigrants Coalition, ran the San Antonio bus station with the Greyhound manager, and the assistance of a parade of volunteers. Her compatriots were the pastor of the Mennonite Church, the Methodist Church across the street, a retired Presbyterian minister, sisters from her order, and an amazing group of legal volunteers from RIECES. Together they saw to the needs of the families, giving them directions on how to get to their next destination, with legal advice about their rights, and a backpack filled with necessities for a trip with children.

I stayed two extra days at the Bus Station after my Maine partners headed home. I took the train back to Maine and there I really got to know about asylum seekers in a personal way. The train was 4 hours late getting to New Orleans, arriving at 1:00 in the morning. Locked in the bus station with a handful of other travelers, I became aware of a woman with four young children. She was clearly Mayan and I guessed from Guatemala, with bags I recognized as coming from a detention center. I became concerned, as a young man was avidly talking with her for a very long time. We had learned at the bus station how men enticed women and children who then became the victims of trafficking. Fourteen women and children had been taken from the San Antonio station in the 2 weeks before we came.

When the young man left for a while, I introduced myself to her and tried, in my limited Spanish, to tell her about traffickers. She actually understood me and said the young man was okay. I asked if **she** was okay. She said shyly, “No comida, no dinero.” (No food, no money) I asked where she was going. “Hamica, Nuevo Yorka she said.” Her mother and father were there and would meet her at the train station. I had no idea where Hamica was, but we were both going to Penn Station. Her food from the detention center was a bag of lime Doritos and a big bag of trail mix. I dug out all the food I had – a jar of peanut butter, a box of crackers, one apple, 5 granola bars. She gave the children my stash and they

made short work of the jar of peanut butter. They had already traveled a day and a half from El Paso on a bag of Doritos and trail mix. Fortunately there was a Subway restaurant in the train station that opened at 6 a.m. I bought 5 breakfast sandwiches and 8 veggie rolls for the 7 a.m. train.

Thus began my 2 ½ day journey with Sindy and her beautiful children Arturo, Nicole, Nicolas and baby Mariella. I never heard the children cry or complain. They played with anything and nothing, using their imagination and what they saw out the window. They laughed and met all the people in the car. A young African American college student named Alexis joined me in taking care of the children.

Jose, the fearful young man in the station turned out to be from El Salvador and was the victim of one of the immigration ploys. When asylum seekers leave the detention centers they are given a date for their court appearance to plead their asylum case. The court dates are all for San Antonio. No one told them that with one phone call they could change the date and place to where they were actually going. If you were lucky enough to land at one of the bus stations where RIECES worked, they actually made the phone call for you to change the place and date. Jose had traveled from New Jersey back to San Antonio for his court appearance. You can imagine how many people miss their court date due to this situation, which means immediate deportation. I apologized to Jose for suspecting him and he thanked me for being vigilant.

Alexis and I fed, loved and cared for this beautiful family all the way to New York. Sindy, the mom, finally slept for hours, which made us feel so trusted as we knew she had not slept much for many days watching out for her children. Somewhere in Maryland I realized where Hamica was. H is not pronounced in Spanish. She was going to Jamaica, New York. She borrowed my phone a number of times to stay in touch with her mother, so all was well.

Sindy's husband was still in Guatemala as they could not afford to send all of them to America and they were fearful for their children and the poverty surrounding them. As we got to know each other, I felt my heart sink knowing that under this administration only about 10% of the asylum seekers are granted asylum. She was so likely to be sent back to Guatemala. During previous administrations about 96% of asylum seekers were granted asylum. I felt myself wanting to hide them and protect them forever.

At Penn Station Alexis and I surrounded the family all the way from the train to the waiting area to be sure no traffickers grabbed them, which actually happens. Suddenly a short, dark haired woman was

yelling “Sindy, Sindy, Arturo, Nicole” And they were in each others arms. Sindy's mother came and hugged us both and thanked us profusely in English and Spanish and smiles and tears. We watched them go with tears in our eyes, knowing how slim their chances were of being recognized as real asylum seekers.

On this trip I became deeply aware of the difference between charity and justice. My charity had made the lives of Sindy and her children bearable and gotten them to their family in Jamaica. But it did not make any difference at all in terms of the injustice of not accepting them as asylum seekers. Charity keeps people alive while justice makes its slow way through the government and the society. Charity feels very good as it is immediate and personal, but ultimately it changes nothing. Giving charity without the work of justice is futile and unsustainable. I believe we all need to examine our own balance of work for charity and work for justice.

And now Cynthia's and my story has become reality right here. As people arrive in Portland on buses from San Antonio, the circle comes to us. This new wave of asylum seekers are from Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola, but their reasons for coming, their lack of welcome at our border, and the uncertainty of their future is the same as the Central American people we met at the San Antonio Greyhound station. Except that now they are close by. Columnist Greg Kesich wrote in the June 16 issue of the Portland Sunday Telegram: “ A cot, a hot meal and a safe place to sleep are blessings for someone who has nowhere to go, but they are not a plan. Good people can talk about a future where immigrant families are woven into the fabric of our communities, but that doesn't just happen by magic. The challenge for all of us who believe that welcoming the stranger is not only the right thing to do but also the smart thing will be moving from abstract notions to specific plans. And we are going to have to do it quickly.”

I signed up as a volunteer for these folks and was only one of 350 people who had done so on the second day. Once again, the struggle between easy charity and difficult justice arises. One cannot happen without the other. For a start, justice would be reformed immigration laws and plenty of affordable housing. How could any immigrant family move to Kennebunk? Only if people offer space in their homes, as there is unlikely to be a single affordable home for rent in this town. If we are paying attention to what is happening to other people around us, it becomes clear that the work of justice is neither abstract nor the responsibility of far away government. It rests with us.