

On My Mind;
A Haitian Father

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Body

Almost always now, when I read about Haitians who risk the seas to get to this country but wind up on distant shores behind barbed wire, I think of an illegal immigrant I happened to know myself, and of his daughters and his son.

Then a shiver of shame and embarrassment goes through me, for a particular and large group of Americans.

This fellow I am talking about needed work to help support his wife and six children. He was living at the time in Canada, where he had once found the outdoor work he loved -- farming, laying track, traveling to the far country to trade. But work dried up in Canada, so he took the night train from Toronto to New York.

There he found employment as a house painter, which he hated. But he was an excellent painter as he had been an excellent farmer and fur trader. One day he fell off the scaffold; he died.

This man, who was known as Harry, never told his children exactly how he managed to cross the border. After Harry died, immigration authorities could never discover any record of his entry, or of his son's, who was also on that train from Toronto. They both were declared illegals -- night-train wetbacks.

But in the meantime Harry's daughters and son had grown up in the United States. Always Harry, his wife and his children blessed America. Many years later, when his children told the story of their *father* and his determination to find work in America, to hell with borders, people smiled in admiration of this man. And always, his children were filled with pride about him, and gratitude.

So of course when I read about the Haitians I think of *my father*, Harry, the illegal who came in search of work. Of course, Harry never went through the hells of the Haitians. He had left Russia for Canada, sick of the stench of czarism and longing for the clean air of political and religious liberty. But when he left Canada he was not in fear of being shot in the streets, as are the Haitians. He was just looking for work, which means not only bread but self-respect. But I know that if he had been born in Haiti or lived there, he would have broken every law that stood between him and work in the U.S. But where are Harry's children now?

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Where are all the American Jews, and Poles, and Irish, and Balts, and Italians who can remember a parent or a grandparent who came to this country looking for work, when visas were bought by steamship agents, or who borrowed a cousin's papers, or who just took a night train from someplace to someplace?

Don't they ever feel like getting on their knees and thanking God that at least their folks never had to crawl into stinking, pitching boats out of fear and hunger?

American Jewish organizations are proud that their money helped Ethiopian Jews get to Israel, and Irish-American groups rally round the thousands of illegal Irish immigrants. The Eastern Europeans of America struggled to get to America's grace, and for their parents' homelands to be free of Communism. Does not one of these organizations understand their causes would be stronger and cleaner if they could manage, in their sympathy for refugees and work-hunters, to cross religious, national and color lines?

Forget about blaming the White House and the bureaucrats. Blame ourselves, children of Harry. Imagine what a quick pickup lobby, or parade, demanding succor for Haitians could do if it were headed by a few Irish-American Cardinals, a batch of rabbis and the presidents of Eastern European, Greek, Italian, Arab and Turkish organizations. American blacks and wasps welcome, too!

We are told, be reasonable, America can't open its doors to economic refugees. Pull up the gangplank, Jack, I'm aboard. Maybe, but the Pakistanis, who have barely a half-penny to our dollar, give refuge to millions of Afghans and Washington scolds Hong Kong and Britain for not accepting the Vietnamese refugees.

But even reluctantly recognizing some economic limitations, this country should have the moral elegance to accept neighbors who flee countries where life is terror and hunger, and are run by murderous gangs left over from dictatorships we ourselves maintained and cosseted.

If that were a qualification for entry into our golden land, the Haitians should be welcomed with song, embrace and memories.

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