



The American dream
had turned into a
nightmare.

'For I was a stranger

by Donald Clymer

Resident aliens and wandering strangers

My whole life is a lie," she sobbed in Spanish on her hospital bed. "I came here for a better life and have found nothing but disappointments." María's latest setback was an unexpected bout with appendicitis; I was visiting her as a volunteer chaplain.

María had told me she was from Honduras. Her confession came after a telephone call interrupted us and she identified herself as Josefina from Puerto Rico to her social worker. It was obvious she was working and living with a false identity.

Her story is typical of the many undocumented workers I have met. She was working for a clothing manufacturer (maquiladora) in her hometown with a wage that barely covered her expenses. She had two children when her husband abandoned her. Struggling to make ends meet and hoping to provide a brighter future for her two children, she handed them over into her sister's care and took off to the United States without documents. Because of payments to the immigrant smuggler and higher-than-expected living costs in her new land, she had little money left over to send home to her family. The American dream had turned into a nightmare.

María is considered an illegal alien in the United States. However, this is where she lives and works. Her situation allows her few other options. Like María, the Israelites were once "resident aliens in Egypt" (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery). After they were liberated from their slavery, they were commanded by God to remember their experience in Egypt. By so doing, they would respond more compassionately to María's situation and invite her in instead of condemning her immigration status.

Jorgé had been in the hospital for more than a week when I met him. He was isolated for fear of tuberculosis. He didn't want to talk to me, another white man with a tie, a clipboard and an assumed agenda. He was from Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. When he learned that I had spent more than three years in his country and was there to stand by him in his pain, he opened up. Slowly but surely, his torturous story unfolded. Lacking employment opportunities and desperate to provide a better life for his family, he left his wife and three children more than 18 months earlier to seek a better life in the United States. He started out with little money, no fixed destination and no legal documents.

Without money, his main means of transporta-

tion was hitchhiking and freight trains. Along the way he did odd jobs to sustain himself. The stories of how many people took advantage of his situation were hard to believe: robbery, extortion and abandonment. To their credit, some few compassionate people reached out to him with temporary food and shelter. He reached my city on a freight train suffering from a high fever and a debilitating cough. He got off the train and checked into the Emergency Room of our hospital with no friends, family, money or papers.

Not only is Jorgé considered an illegal alien in the United States, he has no permanent place of residence and is a wandering stranger. Like Jorgé, the Israelites were once "wandering strangers in the wilderness" (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery). After they entered the Promised Land and ceased their wandering, God commanded them to remember their experience in the desert. By so doing, they would respond more compassionately to Jorgé's situation and invite him in instead of condemning his immigrant status.

The biblical record on treatment of aliens and strangers is remarkably clear and consistent.

The biblical understanding: The biblical record on treatment of aliens and strangers is remarkably clear and consistent. Throughout the Old Testament, the theme is repeated: "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 22:21, NIV). "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:34. See also Leviticus 24:22, Numbers 15:15, Deuteronomy 10:19, NIV). By remembering their "foreignness" and "strangeness," the Israelites would be better able to respond compassionately and invite the stranger in. Was this hospitality only extended to "legal" strangers?

Jesus' life exemplified being both an alien and extending hospitality to the stranger. He left the glory of heaven and "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7, NIV). By Jesus'

Continued
on page 10

and you invited me in'



Remember when you were a stranger, when you were an alien and when you were completely dependent on God.

Continued
from page 9

time, the Jews had forgotten their resident alien and wandering stranger status and mostly abandoned hospitality toward the stranger. Instead they set up strict barriers against relating to sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans and other unclean (undocumented?) strangers. In contrast, Jesus extended hospitality to all of them. Luke Bretherton, in his book *Hospitality as Holiness*, states it this way: "Through his hospitality, which has as its focal point actual feasting and table fellowship, Jesus turns the world upside down."

Added to the Old Testament teaching on how to treat the stranger, Jesus' teaching comes from Matthew 25:35: "For I was a stranger and you invited me in." By inviting the stranger in, one invites Jesus in. This invitation is echoed in Hebrews 13:2 (NIV): "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it." The Old and the New testaments seem to be in agreement on welcoming the stranger. "I was a stranger and you invited me in" resounds throughout the ancient texts," writes Bretherton. Furthermore, "This hospitality is entirely in keeping with Jesus' tradition (Mark 10:21, Luke 16:19-25) and the Old Testament tradition."

Becoming strangers and aliens: Fair treatment for the stranger arises from remembering one's own foreignness and strangeness, like the Israelites in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New. Christine Pohl in her seminal book on hospitality, *Making Room*, writes: "For the Israelites and the early Christians, understanding themselves as aliens and sojourners was a reminder of their dependence on God." Furthermore, she writes, "The periods in church history when hospitality has been most vibrantly practiced have been times when the hosts were themselves marginal to their larger society."

When we forget the transitory nature of our existence on earth, we tend to "build 'extravagant mansions,' and indulge in 'countless other luxuries,' wasting [our] substance on 'inaneities,'" writes Pohl, and more often than not we ignore the strangers and foreigners in our midst, being especially inhospitable to undocumented ones. When we remem-

ber our "strangeness," our response to the "resident aliens" and "wandering strangers" among us is more compassionate. David Buschart writes: "When faced by a stranger, those who extend the embrace of hospitality have a keen awareness of God's hospitality toward them. Furthermore, this hospitality includes not only a sense of who they are (strangers) and what God has done (embraced them) but also an awareness that what they have to offer in hospitality is ultimately from God" (*Exploring Protestant Traditions*).

Growing up Mennonite in the 1950s, I had little difficulty understanding my strangeness and alien nature in relation to the surrounding culture. Even though that strangeness was reinforced by peculiar dress and theology, I still retain a sense of being different without the peculiar dress. Mennonites, however, have become so assimilated into mainstream culture in the United States that many of my peers—and certainly my children and their peers—do not feel this same strangeness. Therefore, many of us, as Pohl writes, "build 'extravagant mansions' and indulge in 'countless other luxuries,' wasting [our] substance on 'inaneities,'" perhaps to the detriment of inviting the stranger in.

How can we return to being "aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Peter 2:11, NIV) and invite María and Jorge in? The answer is to remember when you were a stranger, when you were an alien and when you were completely dependent on God. If you cannot remember any such time, you should place yourself in situations of marginalization, relate to those who are at the fringe of society or even travel to another place and immerse yourself in that culture as a foreigner.

One story helps me remember my foreignness. I was walking down a street in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and a man I did not know spit at me and cursed me. He was displeased with U.S. foreign policy in the region. I will not soon forget the anger and hatred in his eyes. I never felt so foreign and strange. Whenever I become too settled with my in-group, my comfort zone, I think of how I felt that day in Honduras. By so remembering, I am more apt to invite in the strangers around me, even the undocumented ones.

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