

Immigrants like us: Family stories

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [September 21, 2010](#) issue



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We never knew much about my father's side of the family, but on my mother's side we knew a lot. My Calhoun relatives are descended from Vice President John C. Calhoun, who is known for his outspoken support of slavery and for having inspired the southern secessionists of 1860-61. It took me a while to realize that the rest of the world didn't see history in quite the way my family did.

For example, I was taught that only very ignorant and uneducated people ever spoke of the Civil War. That was an oxymoron because John C. Calhoun, who died in 1850, would have favored secession from the Union; it could not be a civil war because there were two separate nations. It should be called, by people of education and distinction, the War Between the States or the War of Northern Aggression.

As a student I came to resent our family heritage. I was not proud of being descended from someone who was the standard-bearer for slavery and therefore on the wrong side of a great moral issue in our nation's history. Unlike the generations before me, I was not raised in the South. I did not eagerly claim my branch on the Calhoun family tree.

Perhaps because of that, my mother worked doubly hard to get me to see the contributions our family had made. She talked about the value of knowing one's roots and appreciating one's heritage. But I was not interested. So when I was 12, she decided to organize a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Scotland for a large group of

extended family members and to trace our roots in the Calhoun clan.

Around that time Alex Haley's book *Roots* was capturing the world's attention. The story begins with the author's trip to Africa to trace his ancestors, some of whom were slaves. Referring to our planned trip, my mother explained, "Why darling, it's just like *Roots*!"

"Oh, it's exactly like *Roots*," I replied, "except we're tracing our roots back to the people who owned the slaves, who were on the wrong side of history and who are already covered in all the history books. But other than that, Ma, it's *exactly* like *Roots*." I can feel my eyes rolling as I remember my words.

So a group of aunts, uncles and sarcastic teenagers from South Carolina made its way to a remote town in Scotland. Despite my jaded attitude, I naively assumed that if we came all this way, family members would be waiting for us. They'd invite us into the manor house and serve us dinner—or at least tea and shortbread. But the palatial manor house had become a museum, and we were asked to pay an entrance fee just like everyone else. Apparently Scotland is full of people related to the Calhoun clan.

We saw the gravestones of our relatives and traced them and the dates (back to the 1600s). Even a sulking preteen felt the connection to another world and to short, fragile ancestral lives. My mother had done a considerable amount of research. After finding our tartan she had us search guidebooks for references to the clan. She discovered that our clan motto was something that sounds like *conocolation*, which translates to "gather up on the hill." So whenever our group was gathering anywhere, my mother would call out, "Conocolation!"—which became our tourist rallying cry.

We asked a local about the word. He told us that our clan was known for conocolation because ours was the most cowardly clan in Scotland. Not only that, he said, but the Calhouns were scoundrels who made their profits unethically. Apparently our clan's prosperity came from forging letters with the names of other clans on them, thereby goading them to fight with each other in the valleys. Our clan's rallying cry was "Gather up on the hill!" because that's where we would hide while others battled, then swoop down and grab the spoils.

My mother was very disappointed in this discovery but had us continue to comb through guidebooks. Finally I found a paragraph that said one of our relatives had

been a member of Parliament. "Now that's what I'm talking about," my mother shrieked. "Tell us what it says!"

"Mama," I asked as I read the entry, "what does 'expelled for sexual indiscretion' mean?" My mother lit a cigarette. "Give me that [expletive] guidebook!"

I reflect on this story because we are all immigrants, of course, no matter how long our families have been in this country. Once we were all strangers in this land. Many African Americans were forced into immigration by slavery. Native Americans had their own migration patterns. Other people came on the Mayflower or by riding in a truck or walking through the desert, but all were immigrants at some point. The founders of my own Congregational tradition came from England in search of religious freedom. They were immigrants to America back in a time when there was no such thing as a "legal" or "illegal" immigrant.

But things are much more complex now. The issue of immigration is confusing and baffling to us as a society. It affects people in all parts of America, from cities to rural communities to the midwestern suburbs where I live.

One of the most controversial aspects of the issue is the question of undocumented immigrants. Fired up about that, we often forget that most immigrants—about three-quarters of them—are here legally with visas or are on the path to citizenship. The one-quarter who are undocumented total about 12 million, although the number is hotly debated and difficult to verify. Five million of these are children

Undocumented immigrants place a burden on social services and on our already convoluted and confusing health-care system. Undocumented workers often pay taxes because they're using a fake Social Security number. But even though they're paying into Social Security and Medicare funds, they will never see or benefit from the investment. Many request a tax ID number because they *want* to pay into the system.

The American economy depends upon undocumented workers. This dirty little secret does not get talked about very much, but most of us know people who work in industries that would collapse if it were not for the undocumented. They play an integral role in the economy, whether we admit it or not.

Adding to the complexity are the children of immigrants. Although children who are born here automatically have citizenship, their parents can be deported if they are

undocumented, and the families can be broken up. When a mother is deported, she faces a horrible decision. Does she take the child with her, or does she allow her child to stay in the United States and be raised by others? A mother in this situation may reenter the country again and again, risking everything in order to be with the child that she wants to raise in a better life.

Children who are not born in the U.S. but are raised here have no part in the decision-making. Growing up in this country, they often reach the point where they want to go to college but then can't obtain financial aid. They're stuck in low-wage jobs and unable to make it to the next level through education. Some are deported and sent to their country of origin with no memory of that country. They are as out of place there as any foreigner would be.

A lot of loaded terms come up in the immigration debate. Some people call undocumented workers illegals, turning an adjective into a noun. In human history, when we turn an adjective into a noun to describe people, it's usually a way of dehumanizing them, of saying they're not really people by taking the *people* word out of it. Most people who care about these issues prefer the term *undocumented workers* because it's more respectful of the humanity that we all share and draws attention to the work they do.

One of the dilemmas is how to protect the native-born worker from unfair competition in this uneven playing field. It is almost always the case that an undocumented worker will accept substandard working conditions and a much lower wage.

Other dilemmas are created by the guest worker program. The guest worker is given a visa to enter the country as a migrant worker who comes and then leaves. The guest worker's visa is based on what type of work is to be done and where. But what if the employer is unethical? What if the workplace has abusive conditions? The guest worker cannot easily leave the workplace because the visa is tied to the job. This leads to the creation of substandard positions. Workers don't dare blow the whistle on a bad situation because they don't have full protection under the labor laws. If there were no guest workers willing to toil in substandard conditions, might these jobs become full-time ones with benefits?

The path to citizenship presents a problem too. Often people say, "I have nothing against immigrants. I just want them to come into the country legally." I challenge

those people to research what is required for certain foreigners to enter the United States legally and gain citizenship. It's almost impossible, even if you do everything right.

There is also the issue of highly skilled human capital. The immigration debate affects our prosperity as a nation and our ability to keep jobs here. It's not just that low-wage jobs are going overseas; high-end jobs are disappearing too. Many Americans work for companies that are moving research and design departments overseas because the company can't get enough U.S. visas to hire foreign engineers.

Finally, let's not assume that the immigrants who clean the bathrooms in our hotels, drive our cabs and mow our lawns began their careers in low-skilled jobs. Many come here with college and graduate-level degrees and have experience, for example, in engineering or medicine. But here they are considered unskilled. Still, they believe they can do better here in a low-skilled job than they could in their profession at home.

Unlike migrants, who move in order to find work on a temporary basis and expect to move again, many immigrants want to move to a new country on a permanent basis in order to make an entirely new life.

In church on Sunday mornings we read texts that are thousands of years old—sacred stories that trace the history of the Israelite people in and out of exile—and we remember how fluid those Old Testament borders were. We might also remember that in the arc of history, much of the United States—Nevada, California, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas—was once a part of Mexico. Like the Old Testament borders, U.S. borders have always been relatively fluid in terms of commerce.

But Americans tend to take a very short view of history. We react to what has happened most recently as though it has always been so and always will be. That kind of reaction led to the immigrant backlash after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. In our pain as a nation and in our terror that something like this might happen again, we slipped onto a level of comfort with racial and ethnic profiling that we would not have tolerated before that calamity. Suddenly it became OK for someone who looked Middle Eastern to be pulled aside for extra questioning at the airport. We allowed that state of terror to render our core values sloppy. Fear

can do that.

Isaiah wrote, "Woe to the those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless" (10:1-2, NIV). *Woe to those who make unjust laws.*

People often say that America is a nation of laws and that we have to respect the laws that we have in place or everything will unravel. They apply this principle to immigration, saying that there is no excuse for anyone to break the law and enter the country illegally. Inherent in that point of view is the assumption that our immigration laws and policies are just, fair and worth following.

But a look at our immigration history can give a much-needed perspective on our behavior in the past and on what the American people once accepted as fair and just. Take, for example, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 that resulted in the Trail of Tears: 70,000 Native Americans were uprooted from their homes and their land at gunpoint; about 4,000 Cherokees died on the forced march westward. And consider the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; if you helped a slave, you were violating a law that the majority of Americans accepted as just and fair.

The Page Act of 1875 essentially prohibited Asian women from immigrating to the United States. The economy at the time was riding on the backs of male Chinese workers who were building the transcontinental railroad for very low wages, but our government didn't want those "coolies" to settle here, start families and put down roots. Years later, in 1942, Executive Order 9066 gave the U.S. Army the power to arrest every Japanese-American on the West Coast. As a result, 120,000 men, women and children of Japanese descent were sent to internment camps in isolated areas and kept under armed guard. It is one of the saddest stories in American history.

All of this, of course, was legal. Now we have a similar situation in Arizona, a place that is dear to many of the snowbirds in my midwestern congregation. Under a recently proposed Arizona law, immigrants are supposed to be arrested without warrant if they appear to be undocumented. How can a person "appear to be undocumented"? In the debates about this law, some proponents suggested that one could recognize the undocumented "by their shoes," but there's really only one way to recognize them: by the color of their skin. The law's obvious racial profiling

raises tremendous ethical issues for people of faith.

The proposed law says we are supposed to turn each other in. Are we asking children to turn in their parents? Although this law would wreak havoc in countless families, many states are proposing similar laws. Recently Senator Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), among others, has even challenged the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which grants the right of citizenship to anyone born in the United States. Graham argues that the children of immigrants should not have citizenship, and he accuses mothers of manipulating the system. Such rhetoric raises the spectre of gender profiling on top of the racial profiling that already goes on in the inconsistent enforcement of immigration laws. I wonder what our record will be on these laws and how history will judge us. What would Isaiah say to us?

We might ask ourselves if our own ancestors were any different from the immigrants crossing the border today. The Daniel side of my family—which usually didn't get much attention—included migrant farmers who eked out an existence and slowly made their way to the middle class. No one was more surprised than I when a church member did my genealogy for me and discovered that a member of the Daniel family came over on the Mayflower.

I was thrilled to get this news not because I wanted the pedigree but out of a spirit of petty competition with my husband. He has long known that he is related to Captain William Bradford of the Mayflower and has mentioned this many times. So I was breathless as I told him, "I'm related to someone on the Mayflower too! His name was John Howland, he was born in 1599, and he was a cabin boy."

To which my husband responded, "Well, that would be the last time anyone in my family got to tell anyone in your family what to do."

William Bradford is quoted as having called John Howland "a lusty young man." As a cabin boy, he had no encumbrances, no family along for the ride. He had agreed to set sail and to sign his life away as a servant until the age of 25. Only then would he get his shot at the American dream. I eagerly read the last will and testament of Howland and his wife to see what became of them. They offered evidence that the Puritans lived almost as long as we do now, often into their seventies—despite drinking beer for breakfast. Howland, who had become a landowner, wrote his will and testament in his own hand. I was struck by his priorities:

Know all men, to whom these presents shall come, that I, John Howland . . . will and bequeath my body to the dust and my soul to God that gave it, in hopes of a joyful resurrection unto glory. And as concerning my temporal estate, I dispose thereof as following . . .

He goes on to list what he wants done with his fields and his property—almost as an afterthought to his more pressing spiritual concerns—and ends by saying:

I will and bequeath my dear and loving wife, Elizabeth Howland, the use and benefit of my now dwelling house in Rocky Nook, in the township of Plymouth aforesaid with the outhousing land . . . wish her to enjoy and make use of and improve of that land for her own benefit and comfort.

Clearly, he had come a long way since being a young, single immigrant on the Mayflower.

In her will, Elizabeth Howland wrote: "It is my will and charge to all my children that they all walk in the fear of the Lord and in love and peace toward each other, that they endeavor the true performance of this, my last will and testament."

The Howlands wanted the same things that immigrants today want: to own land and prosper on it, to see their children and their children's children thrive. They knew that they were loved by a God who does not see national boundaries, but who would judge them according to their kindness and mercy.

In my church the American flag stands below the cross, as does the denominational flag. That hierarchy reminds us that when we meet our Maker, we will be rewarded not for how well we patrolled our borders, nationally or theologically, but for how gracefully we crossed the divides that separate one group of human beings from another. In Christ there is no Greek or Jew, nor male nor female, nor slave nor free.

Ultimately we will not be judged for how well we followed the changing and sometimes unjust laws of a temporary nation-state the borders of which, from the perspective of eternity, will seem fluid and movable. Instead, we will be judged on how well we followed the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 25:35-36, 40: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome . . . in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."

The spirit that compelled a young Englishman to sign up for duty as a cabin boy and cross the ocean for a better life is the same spirit that compels a college graduate from a foreign country to work as a hotel housekeeper, cleaning toilets and making beds, in order to send money back to her family.

That mighty spirit is a gift from God that is distributed equally and without partiality in the hearts of all God's children. Ultimately it will triumph over cruelty and division, as long as we who believe in it stand up for our brothers and sisters and for their dreams and for their families. Let freedom ring.