

It's time for Americans to trust other people

The border struggle and the problem of collective distrust

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Trust and distrust are multilayered realities. They are interpersonal practices, but they are also shaped by culture. Sometimes distrust becomes a general orientation, when we learn to view certain categories of people with suspicion and fear. Such distrust is supported by stereotypes and by shared selective “knowledge” about the high risks of trusting such people. It is also encoded in laws and policies that attempt to monitor or control them.

The effects of this sort of distrust are visible at the U.S. southern border, where people from Central and South America are [arriving in large numbers](#) to seek a home. These migrants have become the targets of categorical distrust—as seen in the very fact that their collective appeal for asylum is framed as a crisis.

The Trump [administration](#) shares this view with some of its [outspoken critics](#): these people are poor, yes, but also undeserving of asylum—and they are disrespecting our laws. While long-standing [asylum policies allow](#) for peaceful entry to await a hearing, our government now tells us it is foolish to adhere to this, given the risks.

The border struggle is part of a larger mission to count, control, and confine foreigners. [This project](#) didn't begin with the current administration, and it won't automatically end when it goes. It isn't even a new strategy—but it is reaching [a high point of dehumanization](#), enabled by collective distrust. I don't think Americans would allow all this to happen—the roundups, the detainment camps at the border, the restrictions on refugees, the ban on entrants from Muslim countries, the separation of family members—if we weren't primed to distrust such outsiders, doubting their merit or morality or both.

My interest in trust and distrust comes out of my ethnographic research among West African Christians in the U.S. For six years in the early 2010s, I was involved as a participant and observer with a church in Chicago, attended mostly by immigrants from Ghana. As I got to know the members, they told me some of their basic survival secrets, the tips they share with new Ghanaians coming abroad: Beware of credit cards. Small driving mistakes will get you pulled over by the police. Don't be surprised when clerks follow you in the store. If you want to check out an apartment, send a white friend first. And the rarely stated but quickly intuited message: being black in America puts you in an untrustworthy category.

Doing this research made me see my own heritage in a new light, how I was taught to distrust black people and immigrants because of the stereotypes, the caricatures, and the statistics. I realized this was visceral: I would withhold trust first, and only then think about what I had just done. Yet once I became aware of this, I also learned I could decide to take risks with people, willfully and knowingly, aware of their needs and their weaknesses and aware of my own. I learned that when you do this, you might lose some things and get mistreated...sometimes. Far more often, your trust is rewarded tenfold.

Some might say trust needs to be earned. We look at the people we trust and we see all the reasons why: their loyalty, their kindnesses, their strengths. We look at the people we distrust and point to the times they failed us.

But when it comes to strangers, there is no personal history yet, and there won't be until we decide to engage them. That initial engagement itself requires some trust. It could be as personal as trusting someone will smile back or take our offered hand; it could also be more general, encoded in laws that guarantee a fair hearing or in policies that give immigrants the chance to live freely and work for pay. Either way, it is trust—not earned but categorically extended.

Such trust runs straight through the biblical narrative. Jesus trusts all kinds of people that "shouldn't be trusted." God trusts the Israelites persistently, even foolishly—defying the evidence of past failure. Peter's vision calls him to trust the invitation of the Roman soldier he has been trained to fear.

These stories show that such trust, by its nature, is rooted in a daily practice of sacrificial hope in the stranger. It values the dignity of the other above self-protection. It looks crazy from the outside, and it transforms us from the inside.

To extend trust to foreigners categorically is risky; to deny it categorically is to inflict a great injury. There is no innocuous third way. I imagine that those who wrote our asylum laws had an inkling of this. They likely saw the risk in allowing entry for asylum seekers, but they also recognized it as a smaller problem for human dignity than the alternative. As people who seek to live in holy truth—who know a thing or two about the risks and rewards of trust—let's not be convinced to rescind this gift, just because some of our leaders want to play up the risk. It is time to trust the stranger; there is no other choice.