Home cooking: Teaching and learning with new immigrants

by Martin E. Marty in the April 19, 2003 issue

Here are three recent headlines about a recent release of data by the Census Bureau:

“Census Says Immigration Is Slowing. The rate of foreign-born people coming to live in the USA has *slowed considerably*, the Census Bureau says in a report out today” (*USA Today*, March 10).

“Immigrants still arrive . . . Immigration has continued at a *steady pace* in the past two years” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, picking up on a *Washington Post* story, March 11).

“Immigrants’ Population Gains Maintain Speedy 1990s Pace. . . . The number of immigrants living in the U.S. continued to *rise at a blistering pace*, suggesting illegal immigration hasn’t slowed from its peak levels in the 1990s” (*Wall Street Journal*, March 10). (In all three quotations, emphasis is mine.)

So is immigration slow, steady or blisteringly fast? It’s all in the eye of the beholder. After these reports set me pondering, my eye was caught by a Rachel L. Swarns story in the March 13 *New York Times*. With bombs bursting in air it was hard to pay attention to a benign story, but this one evokes two-and-a-half cheers for our nation.

Swarns dealt winningly and without condescension with the shock and awe experienced by some Bantu people who will soon be accepted wholesale into our country. I’ve liked the Bantu ever since I heard a saying of theirs years ago: “He who never visits thinks mother is the only cook.”

As Swarns tells it, 12,000 Bantu are in Kakuma, Kenya, learning new cooking in the form of freedom after having been rescued from slavery out of Somalia. On top of all their suffering and poverty, the “Bantu are practicing Muslims,” which means they won’t be welcome everywhere. Yet somehow, in what Abraham Lincoln would have called “listening to the better angels of our nature,” and no doubt with the mixed

motives that go with diplomacy and resettlement, America is receiving them.

Swarns tells of their preparatory education, classes to which these illiterate people, “almost completely untouched by modern life,” now go. They are coming to a nation armed with e-mail Spam, flown over by hawks and doves, besieged by violent movies and songs, defensive about whether it is being just, and more. Swarns says they are learning about such things as the separation of church and state. But I was most fascinated with their fascination with something as homey as a flush toilet.

“Come close, come close,” says teacher Ms. Aden, “Mothers, you sit on it, you don’t stand on it.” And the women nod. “A very nice smell,” they agree, after it has been flushed and washed. “But where does that water go?” The latrine, one man teaches another, is “better than what we are now using.” He who never visits thinks there’s only one way to dispose of waste—in this case, in the bushes.

In short, the Bantu knew as little about our way of life as we know about theirs. And they have questions: “Will Americans be welcoming?” Will their illiteracy or their faith or their ignorance about such things as toilets lead them to be shunned by Americans? It would be easy to be pessimistic. But we have heard cheering stories about church-based resettlement agencies doing their benign “faith-based” thing. As the Bantu learn, they can teach much to us who travel but still often think that mother is the only cook. And we can teach them some of the best words we have learned: “Come close. Come close.”