

Character and . . .

Courageous Compassion

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Introduction

ANNALEE R. WARD, *Courageous Compassion and the Other*

Articles

JONATHAN M. BARZ, *Outsiders and Insiders: Courageous
Compassion and the Immigration Crisis*

ROGER P. EBERTZ, *Courageous Compassion in a Time of Terror*

CHRISTINE DARR, *Courageous Compassion: Cultivating Virtue
in a Complicated World*

BONNIE SUE LEWIS, *Courageous Compassion and Interfaith
Friendship*

Response

L. RIPLEY SMITH, *Courageous Compassion: A Response to Barz,
Darr, Lewis, and Ebertz*



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Courageous Compassion: A Response to Barz, Darr, Lewis, and Ebertz

L. Ripley Smith

I was making my way through my university's dining center, surveying the lunch entrees, when one of the men behind the counter recognized me as the men's soccer coach.

"How's your team look for next season?" he asked in a heavy East European accent.

"Oh, pretty good. You never know until you get all of the players into camp what sort of team you'll have," I replied.

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, I have a friend that will be moving here from Bosnia soon. He was a top player in Sarajevo, a very good coach. You should meet him."

That was my introduction to Voja and his family, refugees from Bosnia in the mid-1990s. Voja's wife was struck by a combatant's bullet in their home on Christmas Day several years earlier, and consequently she and their two children received expedited refugee status and were quickly resettled to the United States. Voja, however, was not granted refugee status and was subsequently conscripted into the Bosnian army where he served on the front lines digging combat ditches. He once told me he

would ask God every day to get him through the war and back to his family; “I will be content to eat grass every day of my life, if only you will reunite me with my family” he prayed. Leaving behind his home, auto repair business, soccer club, friends and extended family, he eventually was able to join his wife and children the spring I met him. That spring was also the beginning of my education on the plight of the 45 million displaced people around the globe, an uncomfortable journey grappling with what it means to have to flee the security and safety of all that is familiar in your daily life and literally rely on the mercy and compassion of others for survival.

This special issue on courageous compassion could not arrive at a more critical juncture. The very salt and light of our nation are being decided amidst the torrent of vitriolic political rhetoric, and the immigration conversation could very well be the litmus test. Will we become a nation of walls and division, or as Barz (this issue) reminds us, will we continue to lift the welcoming lamp of liberty to “the tired... poor... homeless... wretched refuse” of other lands? The essays in this journal offer unique perspectives on what courageous compassion looks like in relation to the changing immigration dynamics in our country, but Barz, Darr, Lewis, and Ebertz all agree that a shared Judeo-Christian ethic does not allow the option of detachment.

Each of their essays provides insight on both the source of compassionate engagement and courageous solutions to real dilemmas. All of the authors do so without shying away from the complexities of the underlying issues. Any conversation about immigration involves thorny push and pull factors like conflict and poverty in the country of origin, improved employment opportunities, safety, quality of life, and access to resources, as well as family and social network dynamics. Add to that equation the fact that most of these factors operate on two distinct policy levels: first, immigration policy deals with the size and composition of the immigrant population, with the Department of

State prescribing entrance levels and quota objectives, and; second, immigrant policy outlines how migrants are treated once they arrive and the levels of service to which they are entitled. From national government offices to local communities, the immigration conversation has implications for who we are, and will be, as a nation.

Underpinnings of Compassion

Barz interrogates the meaning of compassion by way of illustration from the novel, *The Outsiders*, and in the process reveals some of the underlying qualities that characterize not only acts of compassion, but compassionate lives. It seems that compassion is not a root-level behavior or virtue. Rather, it is the fruit of a set of experiences and values, incubated in such a manner as to produce a self-transcendent, as opposed to a self-serving, individual. Self-transcendent behavior is marked by a universal concern for others and benevolent action that is constantly at odds with our competing hedonistic desires for achievement, power, and success (Schwartz). Clearly, the trail of life experiences had turned Johnny's and Ponyboy's lives from self-interested gangsters to heroic rescuers, which provides hope that any of us can turn the corner toward a more compassionate lifestyle. However, turning that corner requires that we face the fears that keep us from living lives congruent with our values. Barz identifies three common fears that often keep people from responding compassionately to immigration issues, and he argues that this is where courage comes into the picture.

There are many fears associated with increases in immigrant populations, fears that are shared around the globe in the face of "immigration crises." I was speaking to a graduate school in Stuttgart, Germany, shortly after Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that her country would receive 800,000 Syrian refugees. That is an astounding number of refugees to resettle for a nation of 81 million people. The United States, with a population

of 320 million people, only resettles 75,000 refugees annually. Understandably, the decision provoked many fears. How will the introduction of that many people affect existing German cultural patterns? Will the demands placed on the social welfare net adversely affect those currently dependent on government support? Will migrants take work opportunities away from legal citizens? Will there be an increase in crime and terrorism? Facing our fears surrounding identity, economy, and security takes courage, as Barz rightly points out.

In reality, most of our fears surrounding immigration are unwarranted and fueled by ignorance. The average American citizen has at best a vague understanding of the various legal classifications of immigrants, the annual percentages entering the US, the process of becoming a legal permanent resident, and the actual benefits immigrants are entitled to receive. For example, the economic fear commonly attributed to undocumented migrants is that they are taking jobs away from legal Americans and burdening the social welfare system without paying taxes. The reality is that an estimated three out of four undocumented immigrants *do* pay income taxes. The catch is that because they are usually employed using falsified social security documents, they will never benefit from the social security taxes they have paid into the system. Furthermore, because they do not have valid social security documents, they are actually ineligible for social welfare programs like Earned Income Tax Credits and state health insurance programs like Medicaid; “No undocumented immigrant... can legally receive any cash benefit from the government” (Soerens and Hwang 42). In fact, most immigrants, even those with legal status, must wait until they are eligible to apply for citizenship (a five-year wait) before they can qualify for public benefits.

Biblical Instructions on Receiving the Stranger

Sadly, our fears surrounding immigration often override our ability to see Christ in the stranger. If we are able to see that God is at work in the life of the stranger, and somehow we have crossed paths with God's plan for that person, then we become part of that salvation or sanctification story by our grace-filled response (Pohl 97). Certainly there is no question about how we should respond to the stranger if we look to scripture for counsel; God's concern for their welfare can be seen in numerous passages like Exodus 22.21, "Do not mistreat a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in Egypt." And just to make sure we understand the importance, it is reiterated in Exodus 23.9, "Do not oppress a sojourner; you yourselves know how it feels to be sojourners because you were sojourners in Egypt." God's direct care for the stranger is made clear in Deuteronomy 10.18, "He defends the cause of [executes justice for] the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing." Our own care for the stranger in our midst is assumed in texts like Leviticus 25.35, "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would a stranger or a sojourner, so he can continue to live among you." Clearer still is the instruction in Leviticus 19.33-34, "When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The stranger living with you must be treated as one of the native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

Christian identity is less about demographic alignment than it is about quality of behavior.

The Biblical expectations of our care for the stranger go beyond charity, however, and speak to our underlying fears. We see sub-texts of work-provision in Leviticus 19.10 and 23.22 where the

Israelites were not to over-harvest their own crop land, but rather leave sufficient work opportunities for the poor and stranger to provide for themselves. In Deuteronomy 24.14 there is an implied employment relationship, when the Israelites are counseled to “not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or a stranger living in one of your towns.” We also see clear instruction on legal standing in Leviticus 24.22 in which the Israelites are told “You are to have the same law for the stranger and the native-born.” Discriminatory practices were not condoned. And Job models an advocacy role when he says, “I was a father to the needy, and I took up the case of the stranger” (Job 29.16). In like manner however, the stranger “living among you” who wanted to participate in community institutions and practices needed to “do so in accordance with its rules and regulations. You must have the same regulations for the stranger and the native-born” (Num. 9.14). And according to Numbers 15.15, this was a “lasting ordinance,” not just a temporary stop-gap measure.

To the point of these Biblical instructions, Barz reminds us that Christian identity is less about demographic alignment than it is about quality of behavior—demonstrating compassion, humility, kindness and patience makes one more Christian than attending a specific place of worship. We see God’s heart toward the refugee, immigrant, and stranger clearly in scripture. He loves and cares for them. He wants us to demonstrate charity toward them in our actions. He will not tolerate discriminatory practices in employment or legal contexts. And He ultimately expects us to resonate with their cause as fellow strangers and work toward justice on their behalf. Ernest Hemingway famously wrote to his friend, F. Scott Fitzgerald, that courage is grace under pressure (199-201). Barz admits that demonstrating grace in the face of shifting cultural tides, economic uncertainty, and even concerns about personal and community safety is not easy, but if we are to embrace God’s heart in these matters, our path is clear.

The Question of Social Responsibility

Darr makes the immigration question very personal, “I cannot live an abundant life if my abundance is gained at the expense of others...” She connects the foundation of the Christ-follower’s call to compassion to a recognition that her blessing, the good fortunes she finds herself experiencing, is not for personal enjoyment alone. Rather, as children of Abraham, we are blessed in order that we can be a blessing to others; “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing’” (Gen. 12.1-2). It appears clear enough that Abraham, and by extension we as his children in the faith, are blessed by God in order that we can extend that blessing to others. This anchor point for compassion is distinct from the self-transcendent motivators Barz identified in that it recognizes that compassion flows from our own state of happiness (blessedness) combined with an inherent need for personal meaningfulness. But making the issue personal cuts both ways. At the same time Darr recognizes her personal abundance, she also realizes how small she is in comparison to the scope of the problem.

One of the most debilitating obstacles people face in choosing to get involved in compassionate caring is confronting the question, “but what can I do?” Darr attributes part of the dilemma to the unique quality of our digital, Facebook generation. We are exposed to such an overwhelming global range of concerns and injustices for which we might show compassion that the effect can be to shut us down to them all. The implications are that, left alone as individuals, we are relatively powerless and ineffectual against the mythical size and complexity of the “enemy.” The problem is compounded by Darr’s observation that we cannot simply privatize our involvement either. We cannot simply pay

forward our own personal blessing, because some of that “blessing” may be ill-gotten gain. Instead, we need to examine our naïve participation in societal structures that contribute to the causes of inequity. She suggests the uncomfortable proposition that our engagement often means confronting the structures of injustice - the same structures that might offer us comfort and security, unaffected by the injustice. It takes a special kind of courage to ask oneself, “how am I responsible for the Syrian refugee crisis or undocumented immigrants?” If we’re honest, the “enemy” is often a policy at its root. And policies are initiated and shaped by the polity.

One example of policy creating an immigration problem on our own border has to do with the restricted paths to legal immigration in the U.S. There simply are not many options. Some of my friends who have emigrated from East Africa have humorously said that it is easier to get into the kingdom of heaven than it is to enter the United States. Unless you have an employer that has petitioned on your behalf, are reuniting with family that already possess lawful permanent residency (LPR), find yourself persecuted in your home country, or win what is known as the diversity lottery (a special classification to admit applicants from previously underrepresented countries—capped at 55,000 per year), there really aren’t any other avenues toward acquiring a U.S. visa for LPR. Even with family connections in the U.S., it is a long shot for most migrants with limited education and few financial resources, and it can take up to ten years to complete the process. The undeniable policy fallout is thousands of people entering the country without proper documentation (Soerens and Hwang 95). Soerens and Hwang, both professionals in the refugee resettlement field, state, “While we need not necessarily condone any violations of the law, such as living in the United States illegally, we should recognize that our complex and inadequate immigration system has made it impossible for many of the hard-working people that our country needs to enter or remain legally or to be reunited with family members” (111).

Darr urges us in closing to consider the question, what are the limits of our responsibility with regard to the immigration crisis? One answer for the Christ-follower is that we are called to use the resources we have (invest the talents) to the best of our ability, not bury our head (talents) in the sand. We see a similar answer in Jesus' admonition to love those "nigh unto you." The executive director of one refugee resettlement agency in Minneapolis is fond of saying, "The Lord is bringing the nations to our doorstep." If that is true, then there are very real and tangible ways we can involve ourselves in the plight of displaced people locally. However, limiting ourselves to local participation might be too restrictive in some cases, and certainly insufficient to meet the needs of global crises that call for our involvement. In these cases Darr is wise to challenge us on the basis of Christian obligation and family—when one suffers, we all suffer. To that end, one practical step for all those called to compassion-motivated activism is to join with an organization that is actively involved in addressing immigration policy issues, both nationally and internationally. Such a step is a courageous commitment to be sure. But Darr reminds us that virtues like compassion are not one-off behaviors, they are enduring attitudes and responses to the plight of our neighbor.


How Far Does Shared Humanity Get Us?

Several of the authors in this volume, Darr included, suggest that our compassion is rooted in our shared humanity and the *Imago Dei* we see in the Other. While bearing God's image provides the basis of human dignity, compassion that observes and appreciates cultural differences requires another level of cultural sensitivity beyond shared humanity.

Interculturalist Milton Bennett draws a distinction between sympathy and empathy that is at the heart of intercultural competence (203-34). He notes that sympathy, however well-intentioned, is grounded in our own experience, evidenced by

statements like, “I know how you feel,” or, “I don’t blame you, I would feel the same way.” A sympathetic response imagines oneself in the same situation as the Other, and Bennett argues that as such, it is a product of ethnocentrism and a faulty assumption of similarity. The most common approach to cultural differences is to minimize them, reflected in the sentiment “once you get past the differences in language, food, and clothing, we’re all really just human at the core.” Over sixty-five percent of the population ascribes to this ethnocentric attitude toward people who are different from themselves (Hammer 482). The problem with this approach is that what we really mean by “we’re all just human” is that, “you’re really just like me.” This type of thinking easily evolves into the related practice of requiring conformity as a prerequisite for acceptance (e.g., 19th Century assimilationist policies).

Empathy, on the other hand, reflects on the differences between self and the Other based upon the assumption that our experiences are not alike (which if we thought about it for even a moment, from fingerprints to brain wave patterns, should be obvious). Empathy does not presume similarity in frame of reference and, therefore, requires some degree of relationship in order to be effective. Bennett defines it as participating in the intellectual and emotional experience of the Other. It entails perspective-taking, not perspective projection. True compassion is borne not from imagining how I would feel in similar circumstances, but is rather substitutionary – by taking the place of the Other, complete with their pain, struggle, and emotions (Hebrews 4.15 may sound familiar: “for we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weakness, but we have one who



True compassion needs to be rooted in empathy, fully recognizing that the Other is uniquely made in the image of God.

has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.”).

True compassion needs to be rooted in empathy, fully recognizing that the Other is *uniquely* made in the image of God. As our next author illustrates, recognition at that level requires some degree of personal relationship

Knowing as the Antidote for Fear

On the evening of October 15, 1962, just under one year before his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a group at Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, on the question of progress in race relations. During this foreshadow of the “Dream” speech, he called on people of good will to demonstrate leadership by ending their silence and interacting with each other on the issue of race: “. . . I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don’t know each other, and they don’t know each other because they don’t communicate with each other, and they don’t communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.” Lewis’ pursuit of shared spaces, where people can speak freely and safely about their faith journeys and learn from others’ experiences on distinct paths, reflects precisely the intent of Reverend King’s comments in his speech at Cornell. Once we know each other personally, it is much harder to hate.

The success of the *Children of Abraham* fellowship can be attributed in part to its embrace of the essential elements for positive intergroup contact: 1) equal status among all members; 2) a shared sense of purpose; 3) a sense of cooperative dependency; 4) sufficient intimacy in communication, and 5) a supportive social climate (Allport). But not only is Lewis on point in her relational bridge-building, she adds an important dimension to our understanding of courage. Normally when we think of

courage we envision people who are bold, strong, and determined in their course of action. However, Lewis insightfully begins her essay on a personal note of cultural embarrassment in her quest to initiate an interfaith dialogue. The embarrassment she admits to hints at one of the basic character prerequisites for intercultural communication—humility. Educator Ricky Lee Allen highlights humility on the part of the dominant group as a critical factor in establishing dialogue with marginalized or underrepresented groups (65). Sometimes it takes more courage to be humble than it does to be strong.

What Lewis is doing in her local community is truly subversive, in the best sense of the word. Using the simple channel of hospitality she is winsomely disarming prejudice, fear, and ignorance. Professor of Christian Social Ethics, Christine Pohl, thinks hospitality is countercultural by nature, in that it pushes back on accepted traditions, comfort zones, and taboos, and creates a space for recognition and *communitas* with the marginalized; “Especially when the larger society disregards or dishonors certain persons, small acts of respect and welcome . . . point to a different system of valuing and an alternate model of relationships” (61). Contemporary uses of the term “hospitality” have drifted toward the idea of entertaining friends and family, but the Greek (*philonexia*) and Latin (genitive *hospitis*) origins of the word referred to friendliness shown to guests generally, and more specifically, *love to strangers*. Lewis resuscitates the original meaning of hospitality as she courageously challenges stereotypes and ideological boundaries.

It is almost guaranteed that this interfaith community will have its detractors as fears grow among the dominant population about alternative God-fearing groups that ascribe to different sets of convictions, convictions that may even seem to be at odds with local laws and statutes (Bailey). But the power of hospitality, writes Pohl, resides in the subtle transformation that takes place in self-perception in the context of social recognition. When

someone who is characteristically marginalized and undervalued is recognized and valued by a respected person in a social setting, it changes how they see themselves as well as how others perceive them in the broader social system. It offers a tangible corrective to societal stratification that, if left unchecked, leads to a variety of inequities and injustices (62). John Wesley once commented on a similar type of transformation that comes through personal contact, “One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them” (Wesley “On Visiting the Sick,” qtd. in Pohl 76). As a result of the Children of Abraham meetings, friendships have blossomed, producing a *shalom* that can weather disagreement.

In the end, Lewis’ focus on the *communitas* available in the margins of faith reminds us of a lesson the evangelical church learned in the early twentieth century when there was a shift toward acceptance of newly-arriving immigrants that appeared to be “the result of increased personal acquaintance with the vilified new immigrants” (Soerens and Hwang 60). It is easy to demonize and discriminate in the abstract, but once a relationship has been formed, empathy becomes possible.

Of Walls or Welcoming

On November 14, 2015, I awoke to a text message from my wife: “Just turned on the news... so sad. I think you will be busy tomorrow altering your Paris plans. I’m so sorry.” I was in Croatia with a group of students, one week out from going to Paris when the coordinated attacks happened at the soccer stadium, Bataclan theatre, and several nightclubs and restaurants. Over the previous two months, in both Austria and Hungary, our study abroad team had become familiar with the waves of Syrian refugees making their way toward Germany and Sweden. We had seen with our own eyes the human fallout of terror and displacement, but the Paris attacks brought a new sense of proximity to the danger of the Other. In both Syria and Paris, the Other was marked by a

particular ethnic and religious heritage. And in both cases, it is all too easy to stereotype all people with those backgrounds as threats. Ebertz's chronicling of Herb Inouye's and Governor Ralph Carr's WWII experience presents us with the same challenge. How can we acknowledge that there are threatening people in the world that inflict harm on others without extrapolating those cruel intentions to all who share a similar ethnic or religious identity?

One of the answers to that dilemma is evident throughout the narrative of Governor Carr's uncommon love for the stranger, a



Perhaps in order to be most alive, we need to pour out mercy and compassion to others.

love that believed in the uniqueness of every person, always anticipated the best of them, and always stood its ground in defending them despite the personal cost (viz. 1 Cor. 13.7). Carr and Inouye's intersecting story draws our

attention to the question of "who is my neighbor?" To which Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37). Recall that the Samaritans were descendants of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, recipients of a begrudged blessing from Jacob in the sight of the other tribes. The tribes of Joseph had settled in Samaria (also blessed to be the most fertile land in the region) and as a result of conquest and interethnic marriage over the course of many centuries had, in a sense, become multicultural. The Israelites of Jesus' day detested the Samaritans because they worshipped other gods alongside Yahweh and had tainted the purity of Jewish faith and culture. The Samaritans had even resisted the Jews' efforts to rebuild Jerusalem after they returned from exile in Babylon. There was no love lost between these racial, ethnic, and religious divisions.

So when Jesus responds to the lawyer's question in Luke 10, He is making a point that is as relevant today in Ferguson, Dearborn,

and Dubuque as it was in first century Jerusalem. Imagine the people group with whom you are most disaffected, most threatened by, least willing to extend the right hand of fellowship. Now imagine a person from that group as the Good Samaritan in Jesus' story. Ebertz's call for resisting the hateful rhetoric of wall-building requires that we redouble our commitment to preserve the constitutional rights and freedoms of the Samaritans in our communities. That we recognize with merciful compassion the downtrodden immigrant and refugee without regard for nationality, ethnicity, or religion. The two essays by Ebertz and Lewis intersect on this note in that, "the twin moves of universalizing the neighbor and personalizing the stranger are at the core of hospitality" (Pohl 75).

The opposite of wall-building is welcoming, and the resonating joy I felt as Ebertz recounted Herb Inouye's surprise and relief upon hearing the unfamiliar welcome when they reached Colorado was profound. In my work with refugees from places like Somalia, Burma, and Iraq it is not uncommon to hear them exclaim "this is the first time we have been welcomed anywhere" when they are greeted at the airport by resettlement staff and volunteers. But just as profound as my joy was in hearing of the welcome Inouye received, so was my disappointment when our team was in Croatia on hearing of the many state governors that were closing their doors to Syrian refugees out of fear. Ebertz's question lingers in my mind, "How will we restore the world's respect for the United States? How can we restore America to its greatness?" The answer is pretty clear in my mind.

Conclusion

Author Tim Stafford suggests that global migration patterns are part of God's larger plan—a challenge to the complacent church. Our decision is whether to receive the challenge as a gift or not (9). Ultimately, all immigrants aspire to the same dream George Washington shared for his new land of liberty, "Each of them will

sit under his own vine and under his fig tree, with no one to make them afraid” (Mic. 4:4, qtd. in Mayfield). Perhaps that is a hope we can share and advocate for on behalf of our new neighbors.

Each of the authors in this special issue has illustrated courageous compassion in his or her own way, shedding light on its origins and outcomes. And while none of the authors explicitly mentioned the personal benefit one gains from demonstrating courageous compassion, an analogy comes to mind that can clearly be seen in their essays. I haven’t been to Israel yet, but many friends who have visited have shared with me their experiences at the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful, fertile environment, filled with a variety of exotic species and blooming with wildlife. The Dead Sea is completely opposite. The salinity levels in the water are so high that it can’t support aquatic life and the shoreline is desolate. Both are fed by the same Jordan River. But one of the characteristics of the Dead Sea that contributes to its lifelessness is that it has no outlet. The water it receives is not cycled and passed on, flowing out to refresh other spaces. Perhaps in order to be most alive, we need to pour out mercy and compassion to others. And, perhaps most courageously, even to the strangers in our midst.

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