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## THE POPULISM ISSUE



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# SEEING MIGRATION THROUGH HUMAN EYES

Brian A. Gallagher

**N**ORTH AMERICA had its Aylan Kurdi moment this summer. Europeans will remember Aylan. He was the three-year-old boy who drowned and washed ashore on the Turkish shoreline in 2015. The photo of Aylan lying in the sand shocked the world, but he was just one of five children who died when a smuggler's boat capsized attempting to take refugees to Greece.

History repeated itself this June when Oscar Martinez drowned with his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, in the river along the U.S.-Mexico border. Oscar and Valeria, fleeing El Salvador, were found clinging to each other along the reedy shore, just shy of American soil. Their final embrace was shown on newspaper covers worldwide.

Photos like these galvanize society for short periods of time. They present stark images that force people

to confront the realities of a crisis. By giving real meaning to the expression "A photo is worth a thousand words," they shock our sensibilities.

Unfortunately, these images have not been enough to make much of the world reconsider its policies and perceptions on migration in the twenty-first century. Aylan, Oscar, and Valeria should haunt us and force us to do what leaders and many in our society currently resist: see this issue through human eyes.

## UNITED WAY

United Way has been examining challenges through human eyes since our founding in the late nineteenth century. In 1887, community leaders in Denver, Colorado met to collect funds benefitting ten area health and welfare agencies. Key to their success was the coordinated and community-led nature of their work. Other cities soon adopted this

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*Leading by example: Brian Gallagher in the field*

successful model, leading to a mass movement that spread across the world aimed at solving difficult social problems.

United Way's initial growth came in response to an earlier form of migration: industrialization. As people moved from rural to urban areas to work in burgeoning factories at the turn of the twentieth century, new socio-economic issues arose, such as inequality and an insufficient safety net. Community-based, non-profit groups like United Way brought people together from various sectors—government, business and private citizens—to solve these growing challenges collectively and sustainably.

As United Way grew, and times changed, our deep connection to the places in which we work allowed us to shift with the needs of communities and donors. Our goal of creating greater opportunity for all by ensuring access to the building blocks of life—health, education and financial stability—evolved with specific needs. We grew big because we stayed small, remaining in touch with the local people and places that form our base of support.

What has been critical over our history is that we fight for everyone. We are not a one-issue organization, nor do we focus on any one segment of society. We tackle the challenges that affect

people’s lives and inhibit success—and that cannot be solved alone.

Today, we view global migration as one of those issues.

**MIGRATION TODAY**

To address the challenges of modern migration and look at the issue through human eyes, we must first understand the factors that lead someone to move or flee. Why would Oscar Martinez risk his life and that of his daughter to try and cross the Rio Grande?

A leading cause of migration is economic opportunity. Oscar left El Salvador because he needed better work. Many refugees are escaping violence or persecution in their home countries. Migrants also travel because they have family in a destination country, holding the dual promise of familiarity and a new beginning.

No situation is clear-cut, but making the choice to leave one’s family and community has to be tremendously difficult. As the CEO of one of the world’s leading community-building organizations, I know that people build deep ties to the places they know, especially in their native countries. For those crossing the Mexican desert or navigating foreboding

terrain in Europe and the Middle East, it takes a strong combination of circumstances to force them to leave.

Migration has been going on for centuries, but fueled by globalization, conflict and other factors, it will continue to swell. A recent United Nations report said the number of forcibly displaced people in the world reached almost 71 million people at the end of 2018—the most since World War II and double the number from 20 years ago. Moreover, more than 36 percent of those forcibly displaced are refugees.

As a society, we cannot afford to ignore the factors fueling twenty-first-century migration. We live in an increasingly interconnected world, where people will move in search of greater opportunity. Globalization and digital technology allow them to stay in close touch and share information and news with relative ease. Modern transportation makes it easier to get from one place to another. And climate change will render certain regions inhospitable or unproductive, driving people to move in a desperate search of basic needs, security, and dignity.

While we cannot predict precisely how the trends will unfold, it is clear that migration will be one of the

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defining issues of our time. It is up to all of us to prepare. We cannot maintain old ways of thinking about migration and hope to succeed. We must open our hearts and minds to ensure that migration benefits everyone—migrants, refugees, and the communities they move to and from. We cannot make assumptions, deny people basic rights, or limit opportunities.

We do not have a choice. We must do better—and that starts with redefining the migration narrative and putting people first.

**SEEING THE ISSUE FIRSTHAND**

I got my start with United Way by meeting community organizers, government and business leaders and religious figures. These folks always understand the issues at a human level. So, while it is important to engage experts, I have learned that making a difference starts with having local conversations and building local connections.

That is why, earlier this year, I traveled to the U.S.-Mexico border and Europe to see what was taking place on the ground. I first went to San Diego and Tijuana in February, then to El Paso and Ciudad Juárez in April and finished with Berlin and Paris in September. I met several parents who would understand the motivations behind Oscar

Martinez’s journey, and I hugged numerous children with similar backgrounds to that of Aylan Kurdi.

In Tijuana, I spoke with a man named Raymond, who reminded me that life goes on amid discussions about walls and border security. I met Raymond while he was volunteering at a men’s shelter—a place at which he previously received needed

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services, such as food and vocational training. Raymond’s training helped him get work in the informal economy before taking a job at a hotel. Raymond, who had previously lived in Los Angeles, told me

that he had family in the United States, including his mother and three children. He could not visit them, however, and his voice slightly trembled as he spoke.

The complex nature of migration was also on display in Tijuana. The Haitian earthquake in 2010 created an exodus on the island. Several thousand Haitians ended up in Tijuana. I talked to three Haitians who have been in the city for years and are now helping newer arrivals from Central America. I learned that while some in the community are trying to divide migrants as either “good” or “bad,” it is often the migrants themselves—supported by amazing NGO workers—who are helping people

to make ends meet. The Haitians, of all people, do not see this issue through a political lens. They know exactly what obstacles the recent arrivals will face.

When I went to El Paso and Juárez in late April 2019, it was during some of the largest influxes of migrants and asylum seekers along the border. Our United Way team visited Casa del Migrante in Juárez, where I listened as a mother told her story of fleeing gang violence in Nicaragua. She and her three daughters were stuck in Juárez, waiting to learn whether they could join her husband in the United States or would be forced to return to a dangerous situation in Nicaragua. I will never forget the concern in her voice, the tears in her eyes, and the worried looks on the faces of her daughters. It was only months later that I learned that she and her daughters had received asylum and joined her husband in the United States.

Migrants who make it across the border face similar uncertain fates. Many who arrive in El Paso temporarily stay at St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Church on the east side of town. While there, Father Ed and his team provide health checks, clothing, and medical supplies before migrants meet up with their sponsors. The providers spend their time making sure that migrants feel welcome and have what they need

to continue their journeys to unfamiliar parts of the country. Many will be taken to the airport, where volunteers will explain how to navigate the check-in and security process. For most, it will be their first time on an airplane.

In Berlin and Paris, local United Way leaders and I met with government migration officials, visited integration and job training programs and spoke to individuals and families at a migrant camp at Porte de La Chapelle. I learned that organizations in both Germany and France are focused on alleviating the condition of migrants and helping them gain critical new skills. Two experiences struck me the most.

In Paris, we toured a community shelter supported by Association AURORE. Situated in a former army barracks, the site hosts a market for both migrants and residents. Typically, migrant shelters and businesses try not to disturb the local neighborhood, but here, integration is the focus. Locals come for lunch at a recently opened café, to get their bicycle fixed, or to buy scented soaps made by a woman whose family hails from Cameroon. There's even someone training locals in woodwork. Instead of separation, the market and support system are building greater social cohesion and teaching critical life lessons.

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U.S. and other parts of the world frustrates me. Many of us, or our previous generations, came from somewhere else. Yet, too often, reports about migrants coming from Central America or the Middle East look at the issue through a strictly political, secu-

met, but for those who do, people are determined to support them, doing exactly what they hope someone would do for them if the situation was reversed.

I wish more people would think about migrants this way. As the son of immigrants, the narrow—and sometimes misleading—debate taking place in the

city, or economic lens. Too often we ask "What's in it for me?" while the better question is "How can I help these people and—in turn—make my community a better place for all?"

**FIGHTING BACK AGAINST DEHUMANIZATION**

How do we get more people to see migration with human eyes? It starts with changing the narrative.

When my parents arrived in the United States from Ireland and Scotland in the mid-1900s, they did not have much. My father possessed an eighth-grade education. He worked hard, but there were long stretches when he was

My tour of Berlin was particularly memorable. We were guided by Nafee, a 23-year-old Syrian refugee who escaped Syria after a bombing destroyed his school and killed many of his friends and teachers. Nafee took us to familiar Berlin locations: the Brandenburg Gate, the Holocaust Memorial, and Checkpoint Charlie. But instead of seeing these sites through the eyes of a typical tourist, Nafee explained what each site meant to him. The Brandenburg Gate exemplified the freedom he long sought, and the Holocaust Memorial served as a reminder that society has not learned from our history, as we continue to terrorize and slaughter one another senselessly. Nafee was the most profoundly human person that I met.

I had several deep reactions to these trips. One was the realization that comes with being smacked in the face with people's difficult lives and the lengths they go to in order to survive. Another was the simplicity of human response to crisis. To the volunteers and community members that I met, responding was as obvious as it was straightforward: someone is arriving who needs help, so let us help them. Not every migrant or refugee arrives facing the difficult circumstances as those that I

unemployed. Yet my parents shared a feature that benefitted them in mid-twentieth century America: light-colored skin. It helped my father get work, and, years later, it helped me, his teenage son, get a union job. The African-American boys and girls who lived on the other side of the train tracks were shut out. They had to work a lot harder to get half as far, something that I did not fully realize until years later.

Present-day efforts to dehumanize migrants—including referring to them in racialized and dependent terms—keeps migrants down and prevents more people from stepping forward to help.

Today, nativists and nationalists worldwide are gaining power through hateful rhetoric that weaponizes migrants and pits “us” versus “them.” Chants of “send her back” about an American Congresswoman, or references to a “savage Muslim minority” in Burma, provide cover for members of the dominant group to persecute those viewed as different or weak. It is not a new strategy to play up generations-old tropes and stereotypes, but it is a dangerous one. It normalizes bigotry and leads to policies that bar people from certain jobs, regulations that keep people from achieving life-saving asylum, and the creation of gangs and militias that target the weak.

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I know that the history of migration is not linear. The United States, for example, despite the Statue of Liberty’s exhortation for the world to “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free,” has alternatively limited and encouraged migration depending on prevailing

sentiment and the state of the economy. Yet, until we create an even playing field and change the dominant rhetoric, we will never truly create a society with equal opportunity for all.

A new path should recognize that migrants and refugees have basic rights, and that, when

well integrated into new communities, these people are often some of the most productive members of society. Studies show that migrants start new businesses at higher rates than native-born populations, often are net contributors to local economies, and can revitalize moribund towns and cities. It is estimated by Moody Analytics that if the United States’ annual immigration rate remains at its 2018 total of 200,000 instead of its more typical one million, American gross domestic product will be \$1 trillion lower a decade from now. What is more, migrants send critical remittances back to their home communities, creating a valuable lifeline for families and struggling communities.

Successful migration policies require effective and intelligent integration programs and initiatives. When people are sent to unfamiliar communities without the requisite job or language skills, they often struggle, become marginalized, and provide excuses for the language and actions of anti-migration activists. I am proud that United Way is among the many organizations worldwide helping migrants and refugees acclimate to new communities and become productive members of society.

I am a firm believer that opportunities for all can lead to greater outcomes for all, and that great societies are judged by how they treat the least among them. Our world today is too integrated to believe otherwise. Just as a business will struggle when its community is poor, families and nations will struggle when their neighbors are marginalized or suffering. Therefore, more progressive policies—including those that support the home nations of migrants and refugees—will be backed, enacted, and enforced when we see human suffering and need connected to our own moral compasses.

Taking action and changing mindsets are not easy, nor do they occur quickly. Social change requires the building of community-based coalitions

that reshape the conversation one person at a time. Examples range from campaigns for seatbelts in cars to the battle against AIDS. When you create a ground-swell of support, usually starting at the local level, you create the basis for long-term, sustainable change. Changing the narrative around migrants and refugees is no different.

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To be effective, we must tell stories, provide evidence, and advocate for understanding and compassion. In sum, we must call out to people’s hearts and minds. Migration provides an opportunity not only to build stronger commu-

nities for all, but for our better angels to rise up and provide greater opportunity for our fellow human beings.

**A DEFINING ISSUE**

I am a father, a husband, a member of my community and a long-time witness to the social trends that shape our global society. I may not be a long-standing expert on migration policy, but I have seen how people can rally around a cause to help struggling communities. I know that it starts with seeing issues through human eyes.

Putting people first requires what any great social challenge demands: interest, understanding and an open mind.

It should not be difficult to stop dehumanizing migrants and refugees, but it will not be simple to work through ingrained falsehoods about the motivations of migrants and the ramifications of migration.

At the heart of my appeal, however, lies this question: What will we tell our children? When our daughters and sons see images of children their age locked behind metal fences, or when

they see photos of squalid detention camps, what will we say to them? Will we claim that there is nothing we can do? Will we tell them to change the channel or website? Will we say that is just how life is?

No parent, no member of society, no decent human being should think or act this way. I know that many people do not have much. Too many families and communities around the world are already struggling to make ends meet. But what does it cost to treat each other like humans? What does it cost to offer a smile or a suggestion? How much does it cost to send basic supplies, open a door, or be willing to give the

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benefit of the doubt? These actions matter—sometimes profoundly.

Global migration will be one of the defining issues of this century. We do not have the luxury of looking the

other way or relying on outdated beliefs or failed stereotypes. The challenges of today and tomorrow are too interconnected and immense for us to close our minds and our borders.

The next time you see an image like that of Aylan Kurdi lying in the sand or Oscar Martinez face down in the river, know that these are human beings who died fighting for the same basic rights and opportunities that each of us fights for every day. Know that they won't be the last father, mother, son, or daughter to meet such a fate. Know also that they represent the failures of a wider system that limits people's ability to fulfill basic needs and dignity. That failure is on each of us who sees this issue primarily through the lens of political or economic gain, race or ethnicity, or simple insensitivity and neglect.

We can do better. We must see this issue through the eyes and experiences of our fellow human beings. ●