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## Introduction: Welcoming the Stranger

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## INTRODUCTION

### WELCOMING THE STRANGER: ESSAYS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

**jonathan g. silin**

*Stories allow us to break through barriers and to share in another's experience; they warm us. Like a rap on the window, they call us to attention. Through literature and people's stories we discover a variety of situations that make people feel like strangers. We discover what strangers have to teach us.—Virginia Shabatay*

This issue of *Occasional Papers* is filled with stories by and about “strangers”—people of all ages who perceive themselves or have been perceived by others as outsiders either because of who they are, where they have come from, or even how recently they have arrived in this country.<sup>1</sup>

Successful educators know that the ability to welcome the stranger into the classroom, indeed an entire group of strangers each September, is essential to building a productive, caring community of learners. They know, too, that, from the point of view of students new to the school or society, the culture of the classroom may feel very strange. Welcoming teachers are willing to step outside of their own cultural frames to see the school from the student’s perspective.

Common purposes and goals emerge in classrooms only when there is a genuine sharing of the things that really matter to everyone present, not just when the rules and routines are posted. In classrooms where students can tell their stories, they come to feel safe, to know that they will be heard, and to recognize that they can legitimately hold on to parts of the past even as they move into the future. Students also learn that difficult emotions—uncertainty, ambiguity, loss—can be managed, contained, and shared rather than ignored or silenced.

Beyond the school itself, greeting the stranger is at the heart of the demo-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Linda Levine, Brooke Nalle, and Fran Schwartz for their close readings of early drafts of this introduction.

cratic experience. In the post 9/11 world, that experience carries great ambivalence. Americans both welcome strangers and are fearful of the changes they may bring. Many political leaders, for example, talk about the need for tolerance and respect while simultaneously promulgating new restrictions on immigration, student visas, and travel.

Immigrants have played a foundational role in the demographic and economic expansion of this country. Less often noticed is the symbolic function they perform as well. Every new immigrant reminds us that America is a good place to be, a place that people choose to come, often at great peril and making huge sacrifices to do so.

Ironically, even as fewer and fewer people vote each year—and voting is the moment when we express a commitment to the consensual nature of our government—more and more immigrants take the oath of citizenship. In this way, they enact their commitment to the democratic ideals and practices that those who are already enfranchised neglect in shocking numbers.

The significance of becoming a citizen is brought home to me whenever I re-read Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* with my Bank Street graduate students. The description of his family's flight across Europe in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide brings with it a renewed understanding of the suffering that is caused by the displacement of whole populations. It also strengthens my appreciation for the rights and privileges of citizenship in a democracy. Balakian writes movingly about his father's transit to America during the 1920's:

*My father's Aunt Astrid recalled that as the Balakians boarded the Berengaria in France for America, my father was complaining about the wrinkle in his woolen trousers. He was shouting, "Il faut repasser mon pantalon." He was making a commotion. Because my grandfather had gone ahead to set himself up in the practice of medicine, my grandmother was alone with her three young children and a family passport from a country that no longer existed. Republique Armenienne in flamboyant script. A ten-by-twelve-inch piece of parchment with a three-by-five-inch photo of the family. My father with a Beatle haircut wearing a*

*sailor suit. His eyes dark and playful. It's the spring of 1926. I think of him, not yet six, annoyed by the crease in his trousers. Trying to create order. The name of his birthplace has disappeared from the map, and the meaning of that map, too, has disappeared. I picture him leaning over the railing of the Berengaria, the Atlantic Ocean in the background.*

How many students and their families bring with them experiences of being stateless, outsiders without recourse to any polity? What does it mean when your country of origin has been expunged from the map, and its peoples slaughtered and dispersed across the world?

The authors in *Welcoming the Stranger* all recognize the need to incorporate the histories and ways of knowing that students bring with them, along with assuming the responsibility for inculcating in them the knowledge and skills that will insure full participation in society.

Sladkova, Viladrich, and Freudenberg refer to “social inclusion” as the process through which the newly arrived find their voice in an already complex, cacophonous society. They describe an approach to social inclusion for adult immigrants that melds learning English at the same time as learning to negotiate our often-Byzantine health care system. They highlight programs that work and a new perspective on how to maximize the effectiveness of limited adult education opportunities.

Erika Duncan, an experienced essayist and memoirist herself, has taken on a commitment to helping adult woman write their own stories for the first time. The border crossings to which she refers in her title are geographic and cultural, interior and exterior. Her lessons about telling a story that will draw the reader in are as relevant for six-year-olds as they are for sixty-year-olds.

Elizabeth Park, a middle school ESL teacher and adjunct faculty member at Bank Street, draws on her Master’s research done at the College to describe how she learned to work with three challenging students. Park brings to life her passion for her subject matter, for knowing her students, and for learning while teaching. These are the foundations of an effective progressive pedagogy.

Together, we believe that these essays will give our readers fresh ideas about

welcoming the stranger in our midst. Whether you are drawn to the mature women taking the first steps to writing their own lives, the recently arrived immigrants struggling to provide basic necessities for their families, or the young teenagers learning to acclimate to a new language and the culture in which it is embedded, we think that everyone will be changed for having read these stories.

## **BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN ADULT EDUCATION,**