

**Risking Everything for a Better Life**  
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Love changes us. It is worth the risk.

I am honored and humbled to be here today. I'm used to giving power points, which aren't quite as much from my heart. Inspired by your theme, I want to talk about risks.

First:

The risk to leave your life: your home, your job, your community, your friends and family. Not leave as in "pack up a moving truck"—leave as in RUN, walk a thousand miles, get in an overcrowded boat and risk drowning, pay a smuggler you hope isn't a trafficker to move you secretly. Live for years, even decades, in a camp.

This is the risk that millions of refugees take, every day.

According to the United Nations, we are now in the worst humanitarian crisis since World War 2. Let that sink in.

Yemen, Somalia, Syria.

El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras.

Murder and rape.

Starvation, violence and war.

Right now:

- There are *more than 65 million* displaced people.
- There are *more than 21 million* refugees, almost 5 million from Syria.
- There are *20 million* people being trafficked, and still unidentified.
- There are *11 million* undocumented people in the US without a clear path to living their lives legally.

This risk is one humans have always taken. People move when they are threatened, they move to stay alive, they move to take care of themselves and their families.

I'd like to share two stories from Syrian refugees, first person. These not people I know. They have been translated from Arabic.

*My name is Hussain Mohammad, and I'm from the city of Daraa, Syria. In early 2011, I was about to finish my education of anesthesiology. I was in Damascus looking for a way to help the people wounded in the demonstrations.*

*One of doctors at the hospital where I volunteer, a man who is related to Bashar Assad, supervises the nurses. Several times he told me, "you should not help the wounded, never, because they are terrorists"—even though most of the patients were children and women.*

*I thought I would be safer than others because the medical profession is the cleanest profession in the world, and should be there to help everyone no matter what his community, race or religion. But a few months later, the doctor had me arrested. For six days I was tortured.*

*Then my father paid a large amount to the Syrian army and they released me. I left my job and my family in Syria and traveled to Jordan, where I worked in several restaurants in Amman. I was no longer allowed to work in Jordan, so I decided to travel to Europe.*

*I traveled to Algeria and then Libya, and then to Italy by the sea. It was a very harsh trip, and it took about 40 days. I then came to the Netherlands and was accepted for asylum. I live currently in Amsterdam without my family.*

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*My name is Basil Mohammed Alriabi. I'm 10 years old.*

*My father died by a barrel bomb dropped from the sky. Then I was separated from my mother and my brother when I was hurt by a land mine while we were trying to leave Syria. Both of my legs and my left arm were amputated and my right eye was destroyed. Someone took me to Jordan and now Souriyat and SCM Medical helped me with my physical therapy and psychiatric treatment. I want to keep pursuing my studies.*

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These are two of millions:

- 0.7 percent of the refugees in the world are resettled to a 3<sup>rd</sup> country.
- There are 192 UN member states; 16 have annual quotas for resettlement.
- Refugees don't choose where they resettle, countries choose them.
- Of the 2,290 Syrian refugees resettled in the US through November 2016, 67% are women and children under 12.

Now I'd like to share a bit about my own ancestors.

The Hassetts came by boat from Ireland in the late 1800s. They arrived at Ellis Island, and came to Crittenden, near Alden, to work on the NY Central Railroad, which was being built at that time. My great grandfather, the first generation American, was named Michael.

Michael quickly made it clear to all the family that, after him, there would be no Michaels or Patricks among the baby boys. That was because "Mick" and "Paddy" were slurs. And there are no Michaels or Patricks in my family.

On my mom's side, the Castelvechis, from the north of Italy, immigrated to Ellis Island around the same time as the Hassetts. My grandmother, first generation American, after whom I am named, didn't use the last name Castelvechi though. On arrival, Louis, her dad, quickly changed his name to Castine, so it didn't sound Italian. He had to, in order to find work.

My name, Eva, which was my grandmother's middle name, entered into the Castine family because the richest person in the neighborhood was named Big Eva. Every Castine girl baby had Eva in her name. Louis wanted Big Eva to care for his kids because she had money and he didn't.

All these names were changed to help people survive. Let it sink in. *To have to change your name to survive.* What does that feel like?

What risks are you willing to take to stay alive? To keep your family alive? Would you take these risks? Who would take risks like this if they had another alternative?

Now let's talk about some risks here, in America, in Buffalo.

There is a risk for Buffalo if we aren't welcoming and supportive of immigrants and refugees. It's a risk that will affect all of us.

Data show, undeniably, that immigrants and refugees are good for the region's economy:

- They are the reason *Erie County gained population for the first time in decades* in 2014.
- They drive neighborhood business growth in Buffalo and many other large US cities.
- They *expand the workforce*, which would otherwise be older and smaller.
- They are the *majority of STEM majors* at the graduate and undergraduate levels, attracting STEM employers and creating impact.
- They are professionals in *health care and teaching*, areas with big labor shortages.
- They are *entrepreneurs at every scale*.
- When immigrants work, they *raise wages for everyone*.

If WNY isn't a place that is attractive to immigrants, one that allows them to flourish, our economy will suffer. We will go back to shrinking, at precisely the time when we need population. *You can't have a strong economy without population.* Other cities know this and are working hard to attract immigrants. WNY needs to as well; at the core of this is being a welcoming community.

Let's talk about another risk.

This stems from not being open minded about immigrants, not challenging others, not seeking good information. From talking only with those who agree with us. From being led more by fear than by love and trust. The risk we take when we refuse to be open minded is that we believe the way we see the world is the way the world is. We believe that our experience is everyone's experience. Refusing to be open minded, to admit we might not be right, prevents us from seeing our bias and also our privilege. It prevents us from enjoying human richness. We all have bias—we are creatures of our specific experience. It isn't a good or a bad thing. But it takes willingness to become aware of bias, examine it and consider how to change.

I am fortunate: my life conspires to keep showing me more about my bias. Working with refugees and immigrants, fighting for the rights of those whose rights are infringed upon, will do that. Ten years ago I never thought about what this place looks like when you don't speak English. I voted, and spoke my mind, and thought about those who didn't—but never thought about those who *couldn't*. I never considered my advantages and bias as a native born, white American.

Not seeing bias can be dangerous, especially when our community is people “like” us, with similar life experience. In corporate settings, they call this “groupthink,” and it’s a destructive phenomenon. Groupthink can be destructive outside the corporate setting too, suppressing dissent, leading to communities that form around hate, where the only thing that binds is negative emotion toward the “other.” Sadly, we see an increasing number of these communities.

The Southern Poverty Law Center tracks and publishes information about hate crimes daily. SPLC has been tracking hate groups and radical anti-government militias since the 1990s. According to SPLC, the number of hate groups in the United States rose for a second year in a row in 2016. The most dramatic growth was the near-tripling of anti-Muslim hate groups—from 34 in 2015 to 101 last year. SPLC recorded a total of 867 “hate incidents” in the ten days following Election Day last fall. Hate crimes against Muslims grew by 67 percent in 2015. The most frequent location for hate crimes? K-12 schools.

Martin Luther King says, “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” So what are the risks around showing love?

- We resist being vulnerable. It’s uncomfortable.
- It’s easier to keep our eyes down, to say nothing.
- We resist being the one to speak out. We don’t like being different.
- We resist acknowledging that we have privilege and bias.
- We resist using our privilege in service of others who don’t have privilege.

Right now we are talking about the foreign born—but love and community are lacking everywhere. And we have opportunities all the time to act. Welcoming the immigrant is a fundamental American value. Our founding fathers were undocumented immigrants, fleeing persecution and a lack of freedom. Welcoming the stranger into our community is core to all faiths. We treat others as we would be treated.

There are 68,000 foreign born people in the Buffalo metro today:

- Refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, undocumented individuals, professors, physicians, engineers, farmworkers, dishwashers and cooks, neighbors.
- Congregation members, grandmothers.
- Muslims, Hindu, Sikh, Christian, atheist, agnostic. Women and men, black white and brown, LGBTQ, old and young.

Immigrants are woven throughout our community and our lives. Every day you see someone foreign born. What do you do when you see them? How often do we connect with people who aren’t similar to us? The trick—and the risk—is to see the opportunity and act, to reach out, to show love. And then to build that habit.

What does taking that risk to reach out and love others, to stand for them, look like for each one of us today? What opportunities do we have to be decisive about this, in the everyday places we are? (One hint: it’s not on Facebook! )

A quick story about small but decisive actions: my friend Patty shops at the Marshall’s in Orchard Park. She, like many of us, has been struggling with the anti-immigrant sentiment we

hear lately. She decided that on her next trip to the store she would do something about it. One of the employees there wears hijab. Patty approached her and told her she was welcome here. They hugged. Patty glowed as she told me this story.

Last week, the International Institute of Buffalo held a potluck for about 60 newly arrived refugees from Syria. It was beautiful. All we did was make a place, say hello, you are welcome, please come in. Seeing new and renewed community made, feeling part of it, was incredibly rewarding - even if all I could do was say *Al Salaam Aleikum*, *Chukran*, and hand out juice boxes to kids.

We can say hello, how are you, you are welcome. We can learn “hello” in another language (I brought handouts).

We can meet another’s gaze. Express love with a handshake, a hug. Say I am glad you are here. Say you are important to us, you are home.

Stand against hate when you see or hear it. Volunteer. Get a lawn sign. Rally.

Just like Patty, when I do this, I feel fantastic. Helping others helps me. I’m pretty convinced it’s the main reason I’m on earth.

*Not* helping others changes us too. There is an effect on us—a feeling, a state—that comes from choosing not to risk, not standing up, not reaching out, not sharing. Not connecting. Not connecting harms people and communities. Technology worsens this decline in social capital—the phenomenon of ‘bowling alone.’

We started out with the risk a person takes to put their child in a boat. They took the risk to do that because they also took the risk to *hope*. And we end by talking about the risk we take to open, show love to others, and use our gifts to help those in need. *Which when we do it, helps us.*

Is it really such a risk? We are role models for each other, even if we don't know it. We all watch each other. There are too many role models for hate these days. People pay attention to role models of love and tolerance.

Let's help each other risk being open to others, welcoming to others; risk stepping out of fear; risk saying “hello, how are you” and mean it; risk offering ourselves in more authentic ways, risk connecting. Risk using our gifts. Risk seeking the truth instead of accepting bias.

The advice of one of the best teachers in my life was about risk. Here is the single sentence she wrote on a piece of paper, that is inside my heart now: “Do the thing that is hard for you.”

Love changes us. It is so worth the risk.

Thank you.