



The Visitor and Frozen River

Relational Redemption amidst Illegal Immigration

Ten million illegal immigrants live in the United States according to government estimates. Some suggest the true number is double this. Illegal immigration brings with it poverty and profit, prejudice and pain. Undocumented workers will work for the lowest pay and no benefits. Indeed, working at the most dangerous jobs an illegal immigrant dies every day in an unsafe work place. It is clearly an issue that will not go away.

Last year two powerful low-budget independent movies used illegal immigration as a central plot device. Both were set in New York State. Both had an outstanding, Oscar-nominated performance by the lead actor. But whereas *Frozen River* is a darker drama highlighting human trafficking for profit, *The Visitor* is lighter fare that puts the spotlight on a single individual caught in the middle.

In *The Visitor* Walter (Richard Jenkins) is an aging economics professor in a Connecticut university. A widower, he has lost his zest for life and is simply going through the motions. He is teaching just one class while he “writes his new book” but he is a zombie walking through life with eyes closed. Walter is forced to go to New York City to read an academic paper. When he gets to his rarely used apartment in the Big Apple he finds it is home to a strange black woman and middle-eastern man. Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) and Zainab (Danai Gurira) thought they were renting but had been duped.

After this unexpected meeting, Walter allows them to stay in his apartment while they search for their own and a friendship begins. Walter is a very private person and at first is content to live with brief interactions. But when he comes home to find Tarek in his tighty whiteys playing the African drum, Walter’s defenses come down. He is captivated by this instrument, and Tarek teaches him to play it. In doing so, he

is really teaching him to reconnect with life. As he begins to practice playing this drum, Walter finds rhythm and purpose. Playing together in the apartment there is a sense of grace, of relating even without words.

In a beautiful scene, Tarek meets Walter and they go to Central Park where other drummers gather to make music together. Tarek sits and plays, but Walter is reluctant. Perhaps fearful of inadequate talent, shy and reserved Walter stands on the periphery with the crowd of observers. But his feet are tapping and his hands want to be playing. With some urging from Tarek, Walter steps in and begins to play. He is the only white man in this circle of musicians, but he is no longer worried, no longer self-conscious. He is lost in the joy and simple pleasure of making music. Skin color and gender are irrelevant. The beat and the music are central.

Indeed, one of the themes of *The Visitor* is music. It’s a language. Music has the power to divide, but it also has the power to unite, to calm, to soothe. In the Old Testament, Saul, king of the Israelites, would have David play the harp to soothe him when he was troubled (1 Sam. 16:23). Here, music is the medium for Walter and Tarek to form the bond of friendship. It lubricated the relational gears that had grown rusty in Walter’s life.

But just as the relationship is growing, Tarek is arrested. It is a misunderstanding, but he is an illegal immigrant, in the

United States without papers or permission. He is caught in the middle.

The issue of illegal immigration takes center stage for the second half of the film but it is a little heavy-handed and political. Writer-director Tom McCarthy makes it clear that it is not simply black and white. The immigrants are not all terrorists or criminals. Most simply want somewhere to live and are willing to work to build a future. Yet, the law has been broken. There is a balance, but McCarthy comes down clearly on the side of those trapped in the bureaucratic middle of the detention centers.

The bigger picture of the film, though, is that of the effect of Tarek's incarceration on Walter. And when Walter finally cries out, "It's not fair!" he is acting like a little kid -- full of emotion and passion. This is the new Walter!

In contrast to the warmth of *The Visitor*, *Frozen River* is set in winter, and just below Quebec. Ray (Melissa Leo) is waiting to buy a new double-wide manufactured home but her husband has split with the cash to gamble it away. She is left with her two kids a week before Christmas. Without the money she will lose her deposit on the new home. Having no other cash, this family has to survive on popcorn and Tang for meals until the next paycheck comes in.

When she sees Lila (Misty Upham) driving her absent husband's car away from a bingo hall, Ray follows her to the Mohawk reservation and the trailer that Lila lives in. This ugly introduction brings Ray into the world of immigrant smuggling, Lila's way of earning fast money.

As she and Lila drive over the frozen river separating Canada from the Mohawk reservation and America, their "partnership" is tense and untrusting. Ray's value to Lila is her car; Lila's value to Ray is her connections. Different in

You can have **media software** as powerful as the **message**

media Shout[®]
EXPRESS *Now easier than ever.*

MediaShout[®] EXPRESS empowers ministry leaders whose only option has been PowerPoint[®] to now access the media, Bibles and song lyrics that are at the core of modern worship and communicating life's most important message. With an amazing suggested retail price of only \$229.00, **MediaShout EXPRESS** makes moving up to full multimedia presentations a simple choice!

When you are ready for more, you can easily upgrade **EXPRESS** to the additional enhanced media features of **MediaShout[®] v3 Standard** edition. You will be able to continue using all of the presentations you created in **EXPRESS**.

www.mediashout.com • 1.888.829.7168

many respects, Lila and Ray have more in common than Ray first thinks. Both have lost a husband. Lila's has drowned in the river and Ray's husband has drowned in debt and departed. Lila has lost a child; her son has been taken from her. Ray is losing her children emotionally.

As she descends into this other world, Ray sees people who are worse off than herself. There are Asians and Pakistanis who are paying heavily for the chance to be smuggled into America and their dream of a new life. But even that dream is sullied by the fact that most will have to serve in

sweatshops as little more than slaves to payback the smugglers the \$50,000 or more that they are being charged. What price freedom?

Illegal immigration is a multi-faceted issue – political, social, economical, and ethical. It is a crime, yet too often those profiting from it are exploiting the victims caught in the middle. When the immigrants have nowhere to go, their hope is gone. What should they do?

Should we become involved in a positive way, like Walter, and try to make a difference? The faceless monochrome statistics suddenly take on a colored visage; with a name, immigration becomes real and closer to home. Jesus ministered to the marginalized of society, the lepers, the possessed, the tax-collectors, the prostitutes. Outcasts and criminals, he showed them compassion and treated them with dignity. Certainly, this is better than Ray's approach where her motivation was purely selfish and material. However, the focus of both films on illegal immigration is more of a vehicle for the central story of the relationships of the key characters.

Although *Frozen River* has no happy ending, there is hope and there is redemption. Ray's eyes are opened and she comes to realize that she is blessed with two healthy children, even if her husband has left her for good. And even if the dream of a brand new double-wide dissipates, she still has a home. And the debacle of the smuggling has brought two mothers together in a relational bond that perhaps nothing apart from suffering could do. Suffering has a way of cutting through the dross to show the silver and gold lying below.

Likewise, *The Visitor* is a story of relational redemption. Walter needed friends, relationships. He did not have that at work or at home. He found it in Tarek. The Bible makes it clear that no man is an island; we are to live in relationship with others. In fact, the New Testament is replete with "one another": live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16);

love one another (Jn. 13:34); serve one another (Gal. 5:13); honor one another (Rom. 12:10); instruct one another (Rom. 15:14); submit to one another (Eph. 5:21); encourage one another (Heb. 3:13), etc. We can only do this if we are connected to those in our circle of influence.

In this 21st century world of connectedness where our laptops, cell phones, and iPods are connected to the web, perhaps it's time to unplug and disconnect from technology and reconnect with humanity, citizen or immigrant, legal or illegal. Relational connection is everything!

Copyright ©2009, Martin Baggs
www.mosaicmovieconnectgroup.blogspot.com
 Contact: martinbaggs@gmail.com

CCMag's
**Video
 of the
 Week**

<http://www.ccmag.com/videooftheweek>