

**From:** Mark Ranney

## **Big, Bright, Sparkling Brown Eyes.**

After three days “schlepping” around NYC in the late July heat last week for work, I headed to LaGuardia Airport hoping my late afternoon flight would be on-time and get me back home to what has been a glorious summer in Maine.

I was tired, sweaty and uncomfortable in my suit, tie and “grown up shoes.” I was being swallowed up by the Willy Lohman styled self-pity of many business people in America today, you know the saying, “I owe. I owe, so it’s off to work I go.” .

The cab ride out to LaGuardia was surprisingly swift and the car was even air-conditioned! TSA was also surprisingly efficient and I made my way to the gate with no hassle. I found a safe seat away from the maddening crowd and began to catch up on emails and texts. A few minutes later, I had a mini-epiphany.

A refugee family from Somalia, mom, dad and five children, the oldest of which was no more than eight years old. Two girls in headscarves and long dresses and three boys wearing overly large polo type shirts. All of them had sweaters and winter coats as well and the cheap plastic flip-flops we wear to the beach. The only luggage they had was a couple of small plastic bags and one large bag, the type you see in the city markets of many developing countries. To my eye, they all looked very skinny and perhaps malnourished. Their clothes were clean, but somewhat tattered and ill-fitting. Dad was trying to manage the whole thing and spoke a little English. Mom, whose eyes and most of her face were covered, as is their tradition was obviously anxious and watching each of the children with a hawk’s eye. The four older kids had a “dear-in-the-headlights” look on their faces and like their parents they were visibly exhausted, barely able to keep their eyes open. The youngest boy, perhaps two years old was (what I recognized being the father of three boys) on the final stages of a sugar induced adrenaline high. He was dancing to the piped in music in the lounge and fascinated by all the new things to see in the airport.

After about five minutes of sitting next to the family, I watched every one of them except for dad and the youngest boy fall fast asleep. Our flight was then delayed and the dad went to speak with an airline employee. I soon caught the eye of the little boy and he immediately began an enthusiastic wave of his arm and a smile as big as the ocean. His big, bright, brown eyes sparkled with an infectious enthusiasm and an innocence that melted my heart. I waved right back and found a smile on my face as well.

Our flight to Portland was delayed for close to five hours and not once did any of those children complain. They sat patiently with wide tired eyes and I am sure so many unanswered questions mixed with undoubtedly excitement and fear in their hearts. The family had a young man as their “handler” in NY and I asked him if I could offer some water, candy or snacks to the family. He said thank you, but the family would not want to take charity on their first day in America. They

saved up everything they had to join extended family who settled in Maine a few years earlier and want to be like every American and work for what they have.

Most of the business people, families on vacation and kids on summer trips that made up the crowd at the airport that day slowed down and stared at this out-of-place group of refugees as the hours slowly passed by. In today's environment of powder-keg of emotions regarding the safety of our country due to the recent terrorist attacks, I am sure many walked by these refugees and thought less than charitable thoughts, as a byproduct of today's political rhetoric in contrast to Emma Lazarus' poem on the Statue of Liberty, "*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*"

One American family on their way to Maine for vacation had with them a little boy of about four or five years old. Very precocious, very tired and what I am guilty of with my own children very spoiled. He had every electronic game and device you could carry on to a plane. He was annoyed at the plane being late and was constantly asking his parents to go buy something or go get something to eat or yelling out the anthem of many of our children these days, "I'm bored!" It was a sharp contrast to the children of the refugee family, who sat patiently and without a squawk. When this young typical American boy saw the refugee family board the plane and noticed their obvious differences, he asked his mom many questions a child asks when presented with someone different from himself. His mom explained what she could and said they were moving to America, starting over. The little American boy paused, thought for a while and said, "can I give the little boy my Legos." Only if we could transfer that little boy's realization to the adults around us.

When we finally arrived in Portland there was the local family meeting them. They were wearing beautiful traditional Somalian clothes and were obviously healthy and happy. The greeting was very formal with newly arrived children very cautious in contrast to the kids who were already in America. They were excited to have them come to America! The newly arrived mom had tears in her eyes. I don't know if they were tears of exhaustion, relief, fear and hope, or perhaps all of those commonly shared human emotions coming to a crescendo of many hours, months or years on her journey to a strange but new land of promise.

My mini-epiphany was that these were not refugees to question and fear, but a family, just like mine working our way through life to secure freedom, safety and a future without fear. I had many pangs of guilt regarding my accidental placement in my station-of-life as a white middle-class America born in a golden age of my country and for not doing more to help these people and many more like them.

When I arrived home, I immediately made a donation to Episcopal Relief Charities, which I usually do at Christmas. I asked myself why am I waiting, and now, as I wrestle with my good and bad angels in a comfortable and guarded life what more can I do to help?

Those big, bright, brown eyes of a two year old boy with an infectious smile arriving on the shores of the Pilgrims of old, made me hope for him and hope for our country and that his new country can give him the opportunity to keep those sparkling eyes forever.