

Stories Make the Heart Bigger:
How Empathy Can Combat the Rise of Xenophobia in America

By Christine Phan

On February 22, an Indian engineer was killed as he went for an after-work drink at a Kansas bar. The shooter reportedly called him a terrorist and shouted, "Get out of my country!" shortly before firing. The phrase "Get out of my country!" embodies Dictionary.com's 2016 word of the year: *xenophobia*, which is defined as "the fear or hatred of foreigners, people from different cultures, or strangers." In 2017, the word *xenophobia* is even more apt to describe America's sociopolitical climate. A travel ban has been placed on six predominantly Muslim countries, leaving Syrian refugees stranded. In airports all over the nation, travelers have been detained for the crime of being or appearing to be foreign. This growing intolerance has struck a nerve in Silicon Valley, which millions of immigrants call home. Our diversity had insulated us from anti-immigrant sentiment, and now that bubble has been burst. An attack on an immigrant feels like an attack on all of us. It makes us think, "This could be me," or "This could be someone I know." What we feel is empathy, and I believe that empathy is the key to combatting *xenophobia*, a social injustice that has plagued America since its conception.

Media representation plays a large role in fostering *xenophobia*. As Aziz Ansari noted, you generally only see Muslims in the headlines when they've committed a crime, and when Arabic characters are in movies there's always "that scary-ass music from *Homeland*" playing in the background. But we can also use media representation to combat *xenophobia*. That's why projects like *Humans of New York* are so important - they give you

glimpses into the lives of strangers around the world and allow them to tell their own story instead of having their narrative be written by someone else. I recently read Viet Thanh Nguyen's new short story collection *The Refugees*, which couldn't have come out at a better time. For the most part, Vietnamese immigrants have been limited to being background characters in the American canon. They are presented as others, a statistic, just another nameless face in a sea of boat people. But in *The Refugees* they were given a voice, a chance to tell their own story as they forged new lives in America. I am the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, but I am not a refugee myself. I am a 16 year old girl who has had the privilege of living in San Jose my whole life. I am not a haunted ghostwriter, a stingy supermarket owner, or an aging professor grappling with dementia. I did not have to experience warfare and flee from my home country to make a harrowing journey to a new world filled with culture shock. Unlike my parents, I am not haunted by memories of a past life. But I've experienced loss before. I know what fear and loneliness feel like. By reading these refugees' stories, I was able to feel their pain, because stories communicate universal human emotions. Stories are vehicles that allow you to live a thousand different lives and step into a thousand different shoes. Stories foster empathy, which has the power to build bridges over xenophobic walls. As Ben Okri put it, "Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger."