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Seadrift

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Seadrift

Abstract

This is a film review of *Seadrift* (2019), directed by Tim Tsai.

Keywords

Immigration

Author Notes

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Seadrift (2019), dir. Tim Tsai

This is a documentary feature that everyone interested in immigration issues should see. Oh, the lessons we can learn from this story and this film!

In the late 1970s, South Vietnamese refugees were invited to the United States to resettle. They were distributed among many cities to prevent overwhelming any given city and to aid in assimilation. In one Texas town, Seadrift, the immigrants took up crabbing and shrimping, the kind of work done by many of the citizens of Seadrift. One mistake after another is made by both the citizens and the immigrants. These mistakes (lessons to be learned) lead to the tragic death of Billy Joe Aplin—shot to death by one of the immigrants, Sau Van Nguyen. The death is tragic because it could have been prevented had there been any communication between the citizens of Seadrift and the immigrants. To take a phrase from Cool Hand Luke, spoken by The Captain: “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.”

One character describes the influx of Vietnamese as “fast cultural shock.” And that it is. Wherever significant numbers of immigrants settle there is rapid cultural shock. Because of that shock, the citizens of Seadrift and the immigrants became enemies. But communication would have eased the shock significantly. For example, the Vietnamese did not know where to crab or

shrimp. So, they followed the local fishermen and dropped their traps close to those of the locals. The locals took this to be stealing their own catch. Had anyone helped the Vietnamese, they would have behaved differently and eased tensions in the city. As another example, rumors spread that the Vietnamese were given their boats and welfare by the Federal government. Since the local fishermen had to earn their own way, they resented the Vietnamese. But, in fact, the Vietnamese took out loans to buy their boats and worked hard to pay off those loans and own their own boats. This is behavior the locals would applaud and admire (behavior similar to their own) if they had known that the rumors were false. In another situation, a Viet Nam veteran hated the Vietnamese because he had just seen Viet Cong killing his buddies. Later the veteran realizes that the immigrants “were not the people we had been fighting, but the people we had been fighting for.”

None of these problems were racial in nature. They were problems that any community would encounter when faced with “fast culture shock.” After Sau is acquitted of killing Aplin, the Ku Klux Klan comes to Seadrift stoking racial fear and animus. Interestingly, the locals do not buy into the Klan agenda. They realize that the problems were not racial, but endemic to “fast cultural shock.”

Toward the end of the movie we hear locals complaining that no one helped them understand how to deal with the culture shock. They recognized that what they had needed to prevent the trouble and tragedy was someone to help them communicate with the newcomers. The veteran who finally realized that “these were the people we were fighting for” could have used some help early on in the process and then it is likely he would have behaved differently. Also, at the end of the film we see that some of the Vietnamese who left Seadrift when the Klan came to town to stir up hatred and animosity have returned. They liked living in Seadrift and found themselves now accepted as part of the community.

I think that one message of the movie is captured in the phrase: “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.” This is a message that seems to apply to many of our present immigration issues. Another message is that communication is a two-way street. Communication is not just a matter of talking to someone else. It is a matter of listening and hearing the other. Finally, we should live in and create a culture in which people are encouraged to talk to each other, to communicate with each other.