

Border Witness, Part 2: Human Dignity—No Matter What

November 16, 2014

Organ Donation Sabbath Weekend

Rev. Roger Jones, preaching

UU Society of Sacramento

Hymns: *May Your Life Be As a Song, There's a River Flowing in My Soul, Wake Now My Senses.*

Soprano/bass duet: Anne-Marie and Charlie sing *Pie Jesu*, from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem*.

Testimony by Doug, a member who is a liver transplant recipient. www.donateLIFecalifornia.org

Shared Offering: [Loaves & Fishes Sacramento](#).

Sermon

I have a little bit more to say about this Sabbath weekend for organ donation awareness. I can tell you that after years of procrastination, I've just completed the form to be registered as an organ donor. Knowing some wonderful people in our congregation who are waiting for a transplant or who have had one, I realize how much this matters. I would want *my* useful organs to help extend the lives of worthy people like them, so they can go on to bless the world with their gifts.

Yet how can I be sure the people who will benefit from transplants of MY organs will be just as worthy? What if they are selfish, greedy, and unkind? What if they don't believe in climate change? What if they go to the wrong church, or VOTE for the wrong politician? What if they ARE the wrong politician?

I looked at the Donor Form. I could mark off which of my organs I don't want harvested. But I could NOT say: don't put my heart in a man who's heartless. Don't give my cornea to someone who can't see the need for social justice, and freedom for all people.

No, we can't pick and choose who will benefit from these donations, these gifts. This makes joining the organ donation registry a great act of faith. We trust that we are doing a good

thing. We let go of control over whom we are going to help. By signing the Donor Form, we affirm every person's dignity and worth—no matter what.

Human dignity is not only the first affirmation given in our Unitarian Universalist Association's list of [Principles](#). It's also our point of contact with many other people of faith, no matter our differences over theology. Human dignity is the touchstone by which all people of goodwill can measure our personal choices, organizational practices, and governmental policies.

This topic of human dignity brings me back to the stories I learned during a recent journey to the Arizona/Mexico borderlands.

[In my last sermon](#) with you, I recounted the struggles faced by the people who try to migrate here, and the dehumanizing effects, even deadly effects, of the militarized U.S. border enforcement operations. Now I'd like to tell you a bit more, and think together with you about this touchstone of human dignity.

On this journey, from a Tuesday to a Saturday in October, our group of UU clergy and lay leaders learns about the risk and pain endured by many vulnerable people. Day after day, it's hard to bear witness to the indignities they are put through. But every day, we also meet people who show kindness, reach out in help, and advocate for the vulnerable. We see human dignity affirmed by acts of generosity, courage, persistence, and truth-telling. That is what keeps us going, what gives us hope. As an elderly humanitarian volunteer tells us, "Where this is kindness, there is hope."

Refugees or migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico traverse many miles before getting close to the U.S. border. Some of them ride from southern Mexico on a freight train; they call it The Beast, *La Bestia*. Others go all the way by foot, or they hitchhike. Near the border, they have to pay smugglers (*coyotes*) to get them into the United States. Some *coyotes* are

better than others. We learn that as many as 80% of women migrants are abused physically or sexually by smugglers, by the police, or by their own companions. Expecting abuse, some young women start using birth control before they set out on the journey.

Migrants walk through an unfamiliar and unforgiving desert in Arizona. If they are lucky, before they collapse of heatstroke, they may find a jug of water or a zip-lock bag of high-protein food, left by volunteers. Or they may find the No More Deaths medical tent, staffed 365 days a year. Volunteers operate the clinic rent-free, on desert property owned by a woman who writes children's books.

While providing first aid, No More Deaths may call the Border Patrol in case of serious emergency, or if a migrant wishes to give up and surrender to the U.S., hoping to plead their case for asylum. In spite of warnings about the dangers ahead in the desert, many keep going. In addition to first aid, food, water, and rest, the migrants receive a fresh pair of socks and underwear.

Established by several faith organizations in 2004, [No More Deaths](#) is now headquartered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson. The congregation adopted it as a ministry of the church in 2008. One morning our group meets with the Reverend Diane Dowgiert and two dedicated men in their twenties. Tyler coordinates volunteers for the clinic and desert water drops and clothing donations. Rickey is in charge of documenting human rights violations. He does advocacy for specific migrants' cases.

They are just now publishing a report called "[Shakedown](#)." In the past three years, No More Deaths has pursued nearly 1,500 requests by migrants for help in recovering money, cell phones, and other personal property that had been taken away from them by the authorities during detention or arrest. On deportation, if their money is returned at all, it comes in the form of an American check, which is useless once they are deported. The loss of what little they had makes it hard to travel home, hard to contact their families, hard to buy food.

On its website, No More Deaths has published a set of [inter-faith principles and recommendations for immigration reform](#). Its preamble says: "[D]eath and suffering diminish us all. We share a faith and a moral imperative that transcends borders, celebrates the contributions immigrant peoples bring, and compels us to build relationships that are grounded in justice and love."

There are *many* perspectives on the crisis at the border. Ranchers and landowners can testify to the fears, frustrations and anger they feel at the influx of migrants and refugees. To be sure, their perspectives deserve understanding. Yet for those humanitarian volunteers who bear witness day after day to the desperation and vulnerability of migrants, the first principle must be human dignity. No / More / Deaths--it says it all.

My clergy group goes hiking one morning deep in the Sonoran Desert. Volunteers from Green Valley Samaritans guide us up and down the hills. I try to imagine walking for days under the hot sun, and at night over the rocks and cactus plants. My escort is an older woman, wearing a floppy hat, heavy jeans, and a tee shirt which says "Humanitarian Aid Is Not a Crime." She tells me about the people she's met: women, children, men. She's tended the blistered and bleeding feet of migrants who trek the desert.

Once after treating a man's feet, she checked his shoulders. He had blisters there, indicating had been carrying a heavy pack. She realized this might indicate he was a mule, carrying drugs north. "He probably was," she says. "I treated him anyway. How do I know that he wasn't doing it because there had been a gun to his head? Maybe someday he will have a gun to another's head, but will stop, remembering my kindness. Where there is kindness, there is hope," she says.

Human rights workers tell us that the border wall and the U. S. militarization of the border have devastated the local economies on both sides of the wall. It's no longer a thriving bi-national, bi-cultural neighborhood, but two separate, struggling

towns. One morning we drive across the border into Nogales, Mexico. The city has hundreds of factories, run by foreign owners. The owners put them there to avoid paying taxes and avoid paying the higher wages they'd need to pay in the United States and other industrialized countries. Across the road from these sturdy, gleaming *maquiladoras*, as they are called in Spanish, and way down the hill, we see shantytowns that have risen in the dirt: cinder block homes, water tanks on corrugated roofs. A pickup truck is trolling the unpaved streets, the driver barking through a loudspeaker, selling water and grocery items. There's no public water for the worker shantytowns.

At noon, our delegation divides up, with small groups of us going with several Nogales families. Four of us walk up a narrow street on a hill, then climb stone steps to a worn looking concrete house. The smiling wife greets us, and hugs a woman minister she's met on a previous delegation. The lady's little grandson plays with a remote control car; I laugh when it bumps into my shoe. Grandma is babysitting the boy while his parents are at work.

I meet her husband, who's not working. He was laid off at age 60 by one of the foreign-owned factories. He's been looking a few years for a steady job, and now is learning computer repair with a son-in-law. Looking out the window we can see the border fence and the towers of cameras and stadium lights for all-night vigilance by the United States. The man says the light pours into the house all night long. The noisy chopping of helicopters also inhibits a night's rest.

Sientense! The wife invites us to be seated at a rectangular kitchen table covered with a vinyl tablecloth. On disposable plates, she serves us chicken with mole sauce, rice and beans, tortillas, and sautéed vegetables. She offers us a second helping, and I oblige.

Nogales is not only an industrial city where the Border Patrol drops off deported Mexican migrants. It's also a community. Our host family has never been well off, but when they began seeing

migrants going hungry in the streets, they began feeding them. Human dignity, reclaimed at the kitchen table. Where there is kindness, there is hope.

All of us well-fed ministers pack ourselves into our vans and ride back down to the busy center of Nogales. Our next stop: the Kino Border Initiative. Right off the sidewalk we step up through a chain-link fence gate, into a small building roofed with corrugated steel. Long picnic tables and benches fill most of the room, which is airy and bright, though shielded from the sun. This is called the Dining Room (*comedor*) in Spanish, but it's much more.

Thomas, a tall young Californian, introduces himself to us. He is working at the border as he prepares to take vows in the Jesuit order. He explains the [Kino Border Initiative's](#) three-part mission. It documents human rights abuses experienced in the United States or Mexico. It provides advocacy for specific people seeking asylum. And it takes pains to treat everyone with dignity.

In this place, deported migrants can make long distance phone calls to tell their families that they are alive, and where they are. They can get fresh underwear and socks. They can get shoes, but only if their shoes are falling apart. There's not enough for everyone. Because most U.S. Americans are larger, our host says, they always need donations of shoes for smaller people, including men's size 8 or 9. I realize: that's my size. *How many* pairs of shoes do I own?

Shelves are stuffed with donations of men's and women's pants and shirts. This is crucial, as those who've been deported after detention are wearing prison uniforms or clothes that are way too big. This makes them easy targets for the cartels, the Mexican mafia, which tries to lure the men into drug smuggling and the women into prostitution and sexual slavery.

Nogales is a safe city for its residents, but not for migrants passing through. Thomas says the cartels watch the border more than the Border Patrol, and they exact a tax when people cross over.

Numerous migrants have been kidnapped by the cartels, which then extort more money out of a family back home. The United States often deports people in the middle of the night, in the middle of town.

Every guest at this place must have documents to show they've left a Central American country or been deported recently back to Mexico. This keeps out men from the cartels—so they can't recruit, harass or extort the guests. At the two daily meals in the Dining Room, women are seated at separate tables. Nuns and other female volunteers interview them to find out if they have been abused or need to get away from anyone.

In the middle of a concrete wall is a bathroom sink, and on either side of it is a narrow door to a toilet. Painted on the wall above is a mural of the Last Supper. Jesus is in the center of a long table, wearing a baseball cap, turned backwards. Huddling up against him on both sides are women, with men sitting on the other sides of the women.

At the Kino Border Initiative, they pause for prayer before every meal. Thomas says the unspoken emotions of the migrants during these moments create the most sincere and heavy silence he's ever felt at a prayer time, so full of grief, humility, yearning, and hope.

Two of the walls in this dining room are chain-link fences covered by large vinyl-covered posters tied down as curtains. On the posters are photos of people with words affirming universal human rights: "I have the right to work," one says. Another shows a woman opening her jacket to show a tee shirt: "[The right] To be respected physically, sexually and psychologically."

We watch a video they show to all the guests, made by a popular male singing group in Mexico. In cowboy hats, with big smiles, the men say: "No matter where've you've come from or where you are, you have human rights." They list the rights that migrants are guaranteed by

international law. They shout: "Just by being human, you have rights."

Before we leave, two women come to cook the evening meal in a modest kitchen behind the concrete wall. For up to seven days, a migrant guest can receive two hot meals a day. The cooks don't know quite how many to plan for, so they cook a lot. The guests are served at their tables, individually, not in a buffet line. If there is an item they don't like, they are not served it. It may be the first time some of the migrants have ever been waited on. And it's been a long time since many of them have been treated with such kind attention.

A volunteer will ask if they would like seconds, and then bring it to them—as much as they'd like.

The intention, Thomas tells us, the hope, is for people to leave with their heads held a bit higher than when they first arrived. Human dignity is reclaimed—with food and water, listening and advocacy, clean socks, hospitality and kindness. Where there is kindness, there is hope.

The immigration and refugee crisis affects every continent of our globe, and nearly every nation. It's massive in scale and scope, with many factors and causes, and no simple solutions. Immigration policy is not an easy issue, and reasonable people can have different impressions and opinions.

But let us endeavor to keep human dignity and kindness as the touchstone for our thinking, learning, speaking, acting, and giving.

Let kindness be our guide, kindness be our strength, and kindness be our hope. Amen.

Donations:

www.kinoborderinitiative.org

<http://nomoredeaths.org>

www.gvsamaritans.org

Journeys for Learning:

UU College of Social Justice, uucs.org