

Border Witness Part 1

Rev. Roger Jones
November 2, 2014
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: “Coffee, Coffee, Coffee” (tune: Nicaea);
“De Colores”; “This Is My Song”
Other Music: Guitar: “Immigration” (written/played by Ross Hammond). Piano: Four Latin Sketches No. 4 (M.D. Smit),
“Sakura” (Japanese traditional).

Sermon:

Tragedy has come to our neighborhood, and it relates to the tragedies I witnessed on the border. A week ago a man and his wife were arguing in a parking lot near our church home. The husband became more violent and angry as they argued. As they yelled, Sheriff’s Deputy Danny Oliver approached the car, and the angry man turned a gun on the officer and killed him. The man fled, leaving a trail of injury and murder— he shot a man who resisted his carjacking attempt, and he killed Placer County Deputy Michael Davis, Jr. The man and his wife have been charged with murder.

Two families are bereft. This experience reminds us of the risk that police officers assume every day. It reminds us that under the surface of our society, many of us live with violence and instability.

Other lives have been scarred by this crime. Those who knew and loved the officers, those who know the couple accused of the killings, and those people who fit the immigration status and ethnic background of the accused man.

The news media report that he was deported twice to Mexico, after drug convictions. To those of us concerned and confused about the immigration crisis, this adds another layer to wade through. Some people will use this violent man as a poster child, to exploit our confusion, and further demonize immigrants. A local Mexican immigrant friend said to me, “This has put all of us Mexicans under the spotlight of suspicion.” I hope this crime can help us to shine some light *also* on issues of domestic violence and control, our drug laws, and easy access to handguns.

As I grieve the shattered lives of the victims of this episode, I also wish to bear witness to the shattered lives I saw on my recent visit to the Arizona/Mexico borderlands. Today and in future sermons, I’ll take you along with me, and with seventeen ministers and a few Unitarian Universalist lay professionals as we go on a human rights delegation to learn about immigration. (Our trip has been organized by the new UU College of Social Justice, whose executive director was on the trip.) Our guides and hosts for the week are the staff of Borderlinks, an organization in Tucson. They feed us and shuttle us around in two large vans. Our *teachers* are the ordinary people we converse with in Tucson and in the Mexican city of Nogales. (The Sonoran Desert covers both cities.)

In the middle of the desert, standing at a shrine for a dead migrant traveler, a local volunteer offers a quote from Haiti. “What the eye does not see, cannot move the heart.” *My eyes are seeing, and my heart begins to understand.*

One thing is this: The U.S. government has militarized our border and criminalized migration. Policing our borders has become a massively armed, high-tech, and highly expensive endeavor. On a daylong visit in the Mexican city of Nogales, my colleagues and I look through the border wall into the United States. The wall is a thick fence, 21 feet high, with columns of rust-colored steel posts sealed into the ground with ugly cement.

There’s enough space to stick your arm through into Arizona, to shake hands with the people who used to be your across-the-street neighbors. You can see their houses, cars, lawns, and garbage bins on the curb, but you can’t stroll over for a cookout. You’d have to drive to the border station, sit in line in your car for 15 minutes, or an hour, show your passport, and explain your reason for entering the U.S.

In white spray paint, several columns of the fence display images of lighted candles in a row, as if at a vigil. In front of this high fence, on the Mexican side, we see a sculpture of flat metal, painted brightly. Graffiti on the cement condemns the U. S. Border Patrol. We walk a block to the corner of a wall along the street. Posters on the wall

proclaim: “*Justicia!* Justice for Jose Antonio!”
Who? A boy of 16, not a migrant but a resident of Mexico, Jose Antonio was killed by the Border Patrol. He was alleged to be throwing rocks up at the patrol, on the other side of the fence. The fence and the hill look too high to me, even for a teenager with a good arm. He was shot 14 times in the back and the head. This was two years ago, and in spite of all the surveillance cameras and lights on the fence, the U.S. Government has released little information to the public about the shooting.

The rust-colored border fence dominates city streets and rolling hills. High towers hold cameras, lights, and motion sensors. According to residents who live near the fence, their neighborhoods are lit up at night like a stadium. If the light streaming in doesn’t keep you awake, the noise of constant helicopter patrols will.

Even with all this intimidation and surveillance, migrants find their way here, or they die trying. Why do they come here? First, it’s important to remember that not all of the 12 million undocumented immigrants now living, working or going to school in this country came from Latin America. Not all of them slipped across a border. Many were brought here as children; they have grown up here. Many others came here on a temporary tourist, student or work visa, and stayed beyond its expiration.

In Tucson we meet with a young activist for undocumented college students. He says, “You hear the slogan, ‘Get in line, immigrate the official way.’ My mother did that. She applied. It’s been 14 years, and she’s still in line. She may never get to the front of the line.”

Why *do* they come here? Some are seeking a better life or a job. One Mexican immigrant here in Sacramento told me, “We love this country.” Some are hoping to join loved ones already living in the States. And some are desperate.

When it comes to refugees and migrants, U. S. law follows United Nations definitions. A migrant is a person who lives or works in another country by choice. A refugee is a person who is fleeing death or danger and who avoids returning home because of a well-founded fear of persecution.

The United States has not applied these definitions consistently. During years of dictatorship in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, we *denied* refugee appeals by people fleeing genocide *in those countries*, whose dictators we supported. Yet we granted refugee status to people fleeing Cuba, whose dictator we opposed.

Now many children and parents flee mafia or cartel violence in Latin America, fueled in large part by United States consumption of illegal drugs. The drug pipeline is both violent and lucrative, thanks to our failing War on Drugs. Some people are fleeing starvation, brought on by economic dislocations. After the North American Free Trade Agreement in the 1990s, millions of rural people lost their farming jobs, and the losses rumbled through the Mexican economy. Not all, but many people are fleeing for their lives. Unfortunately, many die along the way.

For decades, many folks came across at urban centers like San Diego and El Paso, Texas. Some went back and forth for work and home, but many stayed. Then, the United States walled off the migrant crossing points at the urban areas. The intention was to “funnel” migrants into the Arizona desert, as a deterrent. Former President Clinton’s Immigration and Naturalization Service director has said, “It was our sense that the number of people crossing the border through Arizona would go down to a trickle, once people realized what it was like.” (Regan, xxiii)

One morning we drive south of Tucson, into the desert, and up rocky hills for a long, bumpy ride. We meet volunteers from two humanitarian groups. They show us a map. With squiggly lines, it shows the desert paths made by migrants, walking. A little flag symbol shows the site of a tent, a medical aid station operated every day of the year by the group No More Deaths. Blue dots show where they’ve left jugs of clean water or small bags of food for migrants to find. Red dots indicate where dead bodies have been found. There are more of the red dots than blue.

Most Central Americans don’t know desert heat; they come from tropical or mountain climates. Ignorant friends or smugglers may say: “Once you

cross the border, it's only a two-day walk to get past the Border Patrol, into Tucson." When the humanitarian workers meet them, they correct this lie: "No, it will take you 4 to 7 days. *You can't carry* all the water you'll need." Some go anyway.

We hike up a hill. A wiry older woman from the Green Valley Samaritans holds my arm with affection and speaks energetically. "Watch out for the spikes, [she warns me]. That's *cholla*. Its thorns will go right through the sole of your shoe, and then your foot."

She used to run homeless programs in Berkeley, she says. "My husband wanted to move to Tucson, so I thought I better come along. Then I got involved with this. I want to keep doing this for as long as I can."

She said, "Our country should be ashamed for what we put people through. There's no excuse. People say, 'They should stay home.' Well, they should hear the stories I hear. When a mother says, 'I can stay, and watch my children starve to death, or see my son get murdered, or I can run.' What would *you* do?"

We arrive at a shrine: a white wooden cross under a large brown ocotillo bush. People have left rosaries, relics, cloth, dried flowers. My hiking friend has carried a single tennis shoe to place there. An older man has carved the words PEACE and PAZ on a dried gourd. "Where shall I hang this?" He puts it high on the plant. We all sing, pray, stand in silence, and hear a poem. "To Those Who Have Died in the Desert...those who went to look for a better life, yet only encountered death...those who risked everything, and lost everything."

Border Patrol jurisdiction extends 100 miles inside any U.S. Border. On our ride back to Tucson we pass through a checkpoint, even though we've not been out of the country. Our Mexican guide and driver shows his work permit and an international driver's license. The agent opens the doors to the van, looks at us, and asks "Everyone a U.S. citizen?" and shuts them without waiting for an answer. In this van, all of us are white, no suspicion. We don't give away what we know about one colleague. He's Canadian.

What some call illegal immigration has in fact been a civil violation for years. Whether you slip across the border without permission or stay in the U.S. after your visa has expired, you can be processed for deportation. The civil process allows you to apply for asylum or refugee status, or apply for a medical visa if you are disabled or sick. But in recent years, in border cities, the government has added imprisonment and criminal processing. In Federal Courts, it's called Operation Streamline. The intention is to scare people from coming here, or from coming back.

In Tucson, here is what we see, and what moves my heart: a large courtroom, spotless stone floors, a high ceiling, walls with dark paneling, and a high place at the front for the judge. Our polished wood benches are uncomfortable but elegant. Farther up on the left, 70 brown-skinned men, short of stature, sit in rows wearing tattered tee shirts of various colors. There are a few young women, too.

The judge says, "It's important for us to know that you can hear the translation of what is said here. Check your neighbor's headphones. Are they *working*?"

He calls them up five at a time, each with an attorney. Their wrists are shackled and chained to the waist. A long chain hangs down to join the shackles on the ankles. The five stand at microphones, next to their attorneys, who have just met with groups of them before the trial. Most of them have been apprehended just a few days ago, after crossing the border.

"You are charged with the petty offense of illegal entry, and the felony offense of reentry after deportation," the judge says to the group. "Do each of you understand the rights you are giving up, the charges against you, the consequences of pleading guilty, ... and the terms of your written plea agreement?"

I wonder if the nuances of their rights come through to these indigenous men, herded in by guards, having spent only a brief time with their court-appointed attorneys. Maybe it's as bewildering as the desert in the dark.

The judge addresses one after the other.
“Mr. Delgado, did you enter the United States near Douglas on or about October 19?”

“Si.” Yes, the interpreter says.

“How do you plead to the charges of illegal entry?”

“Culpable.” *Guilty*, comes the translation.

For pleading guilty to the petty offense of illegal entry, each one gets the felony charge dropped, the \$10 fine waived, and credit for time served.

When dismissed, a group shuffles out the side door, saying goodbye to their lawyers. The next group is called up. We see this over and over and over. I want to call out to the people in chains, *God loves you! We love you. We don't agree with this treatment of you.* I want to scream out at this well-rehearsed theater of intimidation. I want to run out of the room.

I bury my distress in writing down their names, their home countries, their dates of capture, and their prison sentences: 30 days, 75 days, 180 days, in federal prisons or in for-profit prisons operated by the Corrections Corporation of America.

Now and then an attorney asks the judge to recommend to the Bureau of Prisons for a man to be held in the same prison as his brother, so they can be deported home together. A friend near me notices that one man's pants are slipping down, and he's helpless in shackles. His attorney pulls them up for him.

How do you plead? The Spanish word for guilty is *culpable*, which looks like our English word “culpable.” *Culpable*. How do you plead? *Culpable*. How do you plead? *Culpable*.

“Mr. Zarate, how do you plead?” A pause. “I don't understand,” says Mr. Zarate, in Spanish.

“How do you plead?” Men around him whisper: *Culpable, culpable!*

He says: “I don't know how to respond. Yes I plead, because I came in without any permits.” The judge says: “I need your plea. How do you plead to the charge of illegal entry?”

Culpable, culpable! they urge. He says, “I don't understand.”

The judge sends Mr. Zarate to the back with his attorney, to talk. I see him. Hunched over, dark hair, brown long sleeve shirt and pants. A short man with a moustache, looking weak and worn. Yet by acting confused, or being confused, he has thrown a monkey wrench into our government's efficient assembly line. He is not going to make it easy for us to move him along.

The rest of the week my friends and I reflect on whether *we* are *culpables*. What about my ancestors, says one, who came over on boats before there were immigration laws? What about mine, asks another, who came for work from an approved racial category while the Chinese Exclusion Act discriminated against other workers? What about Christopher Columbus, Hernan de Cortez, or the Pilgrims? What about our U.S. presidents and generals who pushed the Cherokees west? What about all of us, for letting Operation Streamline waste our tax dollars in that way? *Soy culpable. Somos culpables.*

My takeaway from the week is that I need to learn more, even though it makes me uncomfortable, sad, angry. “What the eye does not see, cannot move the heart.” I hope to talk more with you about what I saw, and learn what you see. We can read a book or watch a video together, and reflect on it in groups. We can learn what local organizations are doing, including groups led by undocumented residents of this area. We can also connect with the UU Justice Ministry of California; it's holding its annual “Walking the Walk” seminar just two week from now.

And we can bear witness.

One example of bearing witness is called Faithful Friends. Along with other Unitarian Universalists in this region, members of our congregation have been visiting people held in detention by ICE, the Immigration service. Currently 150 immigrants are in ICE detention at a jail in our county. They are not serving sentences, just awaiting their fate of deportation, or not. Through Faithful Friends, you can visit a person once a month, just to listen, to let them know they

haven't been forgotten. If you would like to learn about it, you can call me or contact JoAnn, directly or through the church office. She'll be serving soup today during lunch after the service.

After that full day of a desert hike and sitting in the Operation Streamline courtroom my companions and I have been speaking from the heart about what we've seen. A woman says that looking at the shoulders of a young man standing in chains, she recognized the way a tee shirt would hang on the bony frame of her own son when he was 18. Another of my friends on the journey is a man from India. He says he watched the brown-skinned young men sitting there in the courtroom. "I saw one who looked like the son of a cousin. I saw another who looked like my son."

Of course, all of them are indeed somebody's son, or daughter, or cousin or other member of a family.

All of them and all of us—ALL of us—have a story worth hearing and seeing. Each person has inherent worth, no less than any other.

All of us—ALL of us—bear the image and spark of the divine, but in different bodies, with different life stories.

Across the borders which would separate us, through the confusions which would keep us apart, may we see one another, and see us as we are, as one. May we see ourselves as members of one human family. Amen and blessed be.

Citations, Sources, Recommendations

www.NoMoreDeaths.org at UU Church of Tucson

Green Valley Samaritans: www.gvsamaritans.org

UU College of Social Justice: <http://uucsj.org/>

Chomsky, Aviva. *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010.

De La Torre, Miguel A. *Trails of Hope and Terror: Testimonies on Immigration*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.

Regan, Margaret. *The Death of Josseline*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010. Quotation cited in sermon.

