

Who We Are and Why We're Here

A Sermon by Rob Keithan

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READING

Our reading today is an excerpt from a personal reflection posted January 27th on the Unitarian Universalist Association website.ⁱ It's from UUA President Rev. Peter Morales, writing about his recent trip to the Mexican-American border.

A thin blanket lies crumpled on the ground in the Arizona desert. I am with fellow Unitarian Universalists walking along on a trail known to be used by migrants from Mexico. Our guide was part of a group that attempts to save lives by leaving water along the migrant trails.

This blanket cannot have given sufficient warmth in the cold desert winter night. Was it used to wrap a small child? Why was it left on the ground? Was the owner apprehended by Border Patrol? Did the migrant with a smuggler (a "coyote") succeed in evading the heavy security? Perhaps his or her lifeless body was somewhere nearby.

Last year 252 migrants died in the Sonoran desert. That is the most ever.

Earlier in the day we had gone to Nogales on the Mexican side of the border and visited with migrants who had not eluded capture. I helped serve a meal at the simple "comedor" (dining room) run by a Jesuit ministry. On a typical day they serve one hundred to three hundred meals to migrants who have been deported in the previous few days.

Their stories reveal the human reality that statistics and abstractions obscure. All of the stories sting; the stories of the children break your heart. Flor, 12, was at the comedor with her mother and younger brother. Flor has lived in the U.S. for eleven years and speaks fluent English. Flor, her parents and her younger brother had returned to Mexico to be with her grandfather in his final days. Her grandmother in Mexico has cancer. On their way "home" back to the U.S., the family was captured in the desert. Her father was separated from them and taken to a different city. They have no idea where he is. This is no accident. It is policy. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) separates families as a matter of course.

SERMON

When you hear the word “immigration,” what happens in you? What do you think? What do you feel? If what I know about language and cognition is correct, the word “immigration” is an emotional and intellectual and perhaps even spiritual lightning rod for nearly everyone in this room. Like Holocaust, Negro, or Vietnam, simply hearing the word changes the atmosphere.

The first feeling I have is generally anxiety. If I’m not worried about what the person is going to say about immigration, then I’m worried about the issue itself. How is our nation going to work this out? And in the meantime, how many more people will die in the desert? How many more families will be separated? How many more thousands will we have living in the shadows?

Whether your primary concern is economics or enforcement or human rights, it’s easy to get mired in negative scenarios. This is a problem without easy solutions. That said, the future is not set and there are many ways forward. There are also many choices to be made about what kind of people we are going to be.

My focus this morning is mostly on the circumstances related to the mass immigration of brown-skinned Mexicans and Central Americans across the United States’ southern border. If the time comes that thousands of Canadians are crossing from Saskatchewan to Montana each day, I will definitely talk about it. And, it’s kind of funny to picture.

Now, however, I’d like to start with some imagination. One of the reasons I think we get stuck in negative scenarios is that we haven’t really thought about the positive ones, so I want to do that.

What would it look like if the United States was a thoroughly welcoming, inclusive, and egalitarian place? Imagine, if you will, what life might be like in this version of the US—say 40 years from now. Imagine a nation where multiculturalism is fully embraced and celebrated. Imagine ethnic foods and heritage festivals in public schools. Imagine children and families being excited when someone from a different culture moves in to the neighborhood, because you get to learn and experience new things. Imagine that most Americans have learned to speak at least one language other than English, because it’s both helpful and fascinating. Imagine that appreciating and respecting each other’s customs is simply the way we live.

I want to give you a minute now to reflect silently on your own about this positive future. What would it look like to you if the United States was a strong, healthy, multicultural nation?

I wanted to do this imagining for the simple reason that trips tend to go faster when you know where you are going. So how do we get there? How do we get there?

My attempt at an answer begins at the big picture level, and it starts with this premise:

How we see the world, how each one of us sees the world, is not how the world really is. It is only how we see the world. Our views; our opinions; are highly, highly conditioned by our identities and experiences. The old aphorism is true: where you stand really does depend on where you sit.

Consider, for example, that according to a 2009 poll from the Washington Post 22% of white people see racism is a large societal problemⁱⁱ. The percentage of blacks with that view is double: 44%. And, whereas only 3 in 10 white people reported that they had been discriminated against, 7 in 10 black people had. Not surprisingly, the group suffering more is significantly more likely to see racism as a problem. We are having radically different experiences of living in the same country.

Factors like race and class have a tremendous impact on how we think the world works. If we're seeing the world from only one perspective, we risk being seriously wrong. And the more power and privilege we have, the more likely it is that our being wrong will have harmful consequences for other people.

That's why it is so important, so incredibly important, that we strive to understand the world from other people's perspectives.

This responsibility; this commitment; is particularly important for us Unitarian Universalists.

First, one of the defining features of early Unitarianism, which continues to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of Unitarian Universalism today, is that the overwhelming focus of our religion is on life in this world. And so we have a powerful theological imperative to be fully engaged in life on Earth, here and now. To learn about what is really happening in this world.

Second, getting other people's perspectives is important for, well, accuracy. One of the key questions faced by those preparing for ministry, and a good question for all religious people, is: what is your source of authority? On what do you base your beliefs and values?

For many faiths, scripture is a primary source of authority. That's no longer true for us. For many faiths, tradition is tremendously important. What we've done in Unitarian Universalism is drastically increase the weight we give to personal experience as a source of religious authority. Which is a good thing. However, like most good things, it can be taken too far. If we rely too much on our own individual thought and experience, we risk maintaining a worldview that is distorted at best, and at worst narrow,

insular, and even arrogant. I've seen a bumper sticker that captures the necessary corrective action pretty well. It reads: "Don't believe everything you think."

To live fully in this world, to understand how life on Earth is really working—or really not working—we must seek out perspectives other than our own. The more we listen to and learn from people with different identities and experiences, the closer we come to seeing the world as it really is. The closer we come to being one human family. The closer we come, perhaps, to God.

In this spirit, I want to share a story. It is not an easy story. And, unfortunately, nor is it a rare story. It comes from the book *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands*. It's the Unitarian Universalist Association's official "Common Read" for the year, chosen in order to feed into the 4-year study we're doing on what the Unitarian Universalist community should do about immigration.

The Death of Josseline was written by Margaret Regan, a reporter for the *Tucson Weekly*. In an early chapter, she recounts the story of a migrant named Ismael and his cousin Silverio. The promise of work brought them all the way from the highlands of Guatemala, even though they didn't know anyone in the United States and had very little information about where they were going or how to get there. But living conditions were so bad in their village that they had to try. A few hours into their trek across the border in Arizona, Silverio started to feel ill. Even though he was a healthy 23 year old, the blazing desert heat was too much. When they started to fall behind, the group they were traveling with left them behind. Eventually, Ismael picked Silverio up and started back for Mexico. But it was too late. Silverio began having chest pains, and died a short time later. Ismael couldn't bear the thought of leaving Silverio's body in the desert, so he turned himself in.

Speaking with Regan later about the incident, the border patrol agent she's shadowing sighs. "Not to sound jaded," he says, "but I've heard the stories so often I can tell them before they do.' The tales are always the same: 'I just want to work, I want to feed my kids, I'd rather stay home but I don't have a choice.'" (Regan 16).

Perhaps more than anything else, choice is what separates those of us with power and privilege from those at the margins.

When it comes to immigration, we have some choices to make. And they are important choices. So important, in fact, that lives literally depend it.

One choice we have is to acknowledge that morality, legality, and reality are not the same thing.

The United States current approach to immigration, for example, is legal but it is neither moral nor realistic. It is deeply broken, and it is tragically hurtful to some of the most vulnerable people among us. Later in the reflection that served as our reading today, UUA President Rev. Peter Morales recounts more of the stories he heard on the border. One that sticks in my mind, I think because it's so simple in its brutality, is that border guards will routinely throw away the pieces of paper on which detainees have written family phone numbers so that they cannot call anyone. As the *Death of Josseline* makes clear, the US-Mexican border is a militarized zone. Constitutional rights are applied sporadically if at all. Last year was the highest number of deaths ever. Across the country ICE raids separate families, take children from their parents, and routinely send young people back to countries that they do not even know. As Rev. Morales asks, "What has happened to our freedom-loving country, a country that has been a leader in advocating human rights, when we allow this to be done in our name?"

A common response to these concerns, and to the challenges posed by immigration generally, is to assert that none of this would be a problem if migrants simply followed the law. Other people can do it, so why can't they?

Well, here's the thing. No matter who you are, the US immigration process is long, inconvenient, complicated, and expensive. Privileged people who can afford lawyers can reduce some of that, but not all of it. The average wait time for a green card is about 5 years; sometimes it can take as many as 20. My guess is that if many of us here—myself included—had to endure the US immigration process, we would be indignant and frustrated if not outraged.

However, if you're an unskilled laborer, without a job or legal family in the country to sponsor you, the only legal method of entry is to win the visa or green card lottery. Because the demand far, far exceeds the supply, the chances of winning are extremely low. You could try for years and years and never win. So, if you're a poor worker, your options are either trying to stay alive at home in abject poverty or risking the journey into the United States. Even knowing the risks, many thousands, as we know, choose the latter. They do so because, as I heard a colleague say, if immigrants can get by the "Stay Out" signs at the border, they'll find "Help Wanted" signs in many communities throughout the country. Although the recession has significantly reduced the number of jobs available, there is and will continue to be work available to unskilled immigrants.

And so, despite the risk, they come. For the possibility of earning wages far below the American norm but far above what they could earn at home, they come. Debbie McCullough, a Tucson-based artist, poses a question that's at the heart of it all. In a piece made with possessions dropped by migrants in

the desert, she asks: “How far would you walk to feed your children?” (Regan xxvii).

The answer to this question is why our current immigration system, and any solution that focuses on enforcement rather than addressing the larger issues, is not going to work:

People are never going to stop wanting to be with their families, and parents are never going to stop wanting to feed their children. And for God’s sake, nor should we want them to.

Instead of blaming the people with the least power in this scenario, the poorest, most desperate people in our hemisphere, I think we need to consider the bigger picture. Specifically, we need to recognize—and take responsibility for—how US economic policies have created and continue to sustain the international poverty which causes immigration. NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, has made some people and corporations very wealthy, but overall it’s been devastating to millions of farmers across Mexico and Central America. In the same way that our national economic system helps keep rich people rich and poor people poor in the United States, the international economic regime maintains the wealth gap between nations. No single country is more responsible for this inequality than ours. It’s a group effort, to be sure, but we have a great deal of power.

We have a great deal of power. I’m not talking about the United States anymore. I’m talking about Unitarian Universalists. I’m talking about this congregation. I’m talking about us, and especially those of us who enjoy relative comfort and privilege based on our race, class, or other factors. We are people with power.

So what do we do? Let me suggest two things. One is about attitude; the other is about action.

First, I invite you to have faith that progress is possible, and I encourage you to see yourself as part of the solution. Let’s believe that the United States can—and should be—a beautifully multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, nation with liberty and justice for all.

Unitarian Universalists across the country are already doing some incredible things to make this happen. In southern Arizona, volunteers from the organization No More Deaths, which is a ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, risk arrest and imprisonment to leave water, food, and blankets in places where unprepared migrants are likely to die.

In Prince William County, Virginia, Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd of the Bull Run UU Church joined with other religious leaders to combat some of the most virulent anti-immigrant efforts anywhere. The story of that county's struggle is portrayed in the award-winning documentary film *9500 Liberty*, which will be screened here at the church after services on Sunday, March 13.

I also want to say a little about next year's Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly. The backstory is this: after the passage of SB 1070, Arizona's draconian anti-immigration law, many human rights organizations called on businesses and conventions to boycott the state. At the same time, some of these groups also invited people who wanted to support their work to come to Arizona to learn and stand with them. Since the 2012 UU General Assembly was scheduled for Phoenix, we had a decision to make. Notably, two immigration groups that we had worked with for years invited us to come anyway—with one major condition. We couldn't just do business as usual; holding our convention like everything was OK. We had to engage with the issues and engage with the community.

Making this decision was not easy. Many Unitarian Universalists who weren't used to disagreeing on justice issues found themselves in serious conflict. And yet, after a great deal of hard conversation, the people who felt most passionately were able to work out a compromise. In the end, the delegates at General Assembly 2010 voted overwhelmingly to radically alter GA 2012 so that it would be justice-centered, with the minimum of bylaw-required business necessary.

Quite honestly, that vote was one of my proudest moments as a Unitarian Universalist. We were asked by people on the margins to make an enormous change; to drastically transform the largest and most important annual gathering of our faith community.

And we said yes. Yes, we will. We will do what is necessary to be there, to be in solidarity, to stand on the side of love. Immigration is the one of the biggest issues of our time, and we will be there. We will be part of the solution.

And so here's the call to action. It is a call to get involved here in this community. Care. Read. Listen. Keep an eye open for opportunities. Support CASA de Maryland, the award-winning immigration service and advocacy organization founded in 1985 by people of faith.

You can also get involved right here at the church. Adriana Brigatti has stepped up to coordinate immigration work here at UUCR. In doing so, Rockville joins a large number of Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Washington area that, I think rightly, have adopted this work as a major priority.

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I don't expect anyone here to drop everything you're doing and dedicate your life to immigration reform. Although I certainly wouldn't that discourage it, either.

However, however, I do sincerely hope that we, as individuals and as a faith community, will take advantage of the great opportunity we have before us. As our nation figures out how to respond to what is probably the greatest civil and human rights issue of our time, we can use our power to help make this country safe and fair for all people. We can choose to embrace diversity; to welcome a future where the United States is even more pluralistic.

And I hope we do. Amen.

BENEDICTION

May we have the love, the vision, and the courage and to be agents of justice in a hurting world. We are powerful, and we are needed. Go in peace.

ⁱ <http://uaa.org/news/newssubmissions/175137.shtml>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/18/AR2009011802538.html>