

“I Was a Stranger”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania
May 6, 2007
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First Reading

“...y no se lo trago la tierra”
 (“...and the earth did not devour him”)
Tomas Rivera

This driver that we have this year is a good one. He keeps on going. He doesn't stop for anything, Just gasses up and let's go. We've been on the road over twenty four hours. We should be close to Des Moines. Sure wish I could sit down for just a little while at least...Just before I fell asleep on my feet it felt like my knees were going to buckle. But, I guess your body gets used to it because it doesn't seem so hard anymore. But the kids must feel real tired standing like this all the way and with nothing to hold onto. Us grown ups can at least hold on to this center bar that supports the canvas. And to think we're not as crowded as other times. I think there must be forty of us at the most. I remember that one time I traveled with that bunch of wetbacks, there were more than sixty of us...

When we get there I'm gonna see about getting a good bed for my *vieja*. Her kidneys are really bothering her a lot nowadays. Just hope we don't end up in a chicken coop like last year, with that cement floor. Even though you cover it with straw, once the cold season sets in, you just can't stand it.

When we arrive, when we arrive, the real truth is that I'm tired of arriving. Arriving and leaving, it's the same thing because we no sooner arrive and...the real truth of the matter...I'm tired of arriving, I really should say when we don't arrive because that's the real truth. We never arrive.

Second Reading from “The Solitude of Latin America”
Gabriel Garcia Marquez

This reading is excerpted from a speech given by Gabriel Garcia Marquez on his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature in December, 1982. One of Marquez's better-known novels is One Hundred Years of Solitude. In this speech, he discusses the kind of solitude experienced by Latin Americans as their culture and their social problems are evaluated using non-Latin standards.

He begins with a sorrowful litany of loss in Latin America (Marquez himself lived in involuntary exile for most of his life), citing wars, military coups, dead and disappeared children, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of political rebels, and the high numbers of those who have fled for political reasons, concluding with these words:

Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all

creatures of that unbridled reality [*that is, all this loss of life*], we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.

And if these difficulties, whose essence we share, hinder us, it is understandable that the rational talents on this side of the world [*Western Europe, where he is giving this speech*], exalted in the contemplation of their own cultures, should have found themselves without valid means to interpret us. It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.

I do believe that those clear-sighted Europeans who struggle, here as well, for a more just and humane homeland, could help us far better if they reconsidered their way of seeing us. Solidarity with our dreams will not make us feel less alone, as long as it is not translated into concrete acts of legitimate support for all the peoples that assume the illusion of having a life of their own in the distribution of the world.

Why is the originality so readily granted us in literature so mistrustfully denied us in our difficult attempts at social change? Why think that the social justice sought by progressive Europeans for their own countries cannot also be a goal for Latin America, with different methods for dissimilar conditions?

[*He ends his speech on a note of hope*] ...we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.

Sermon

I Was a Stranger

Last Fall on the eve of a very important Mexican holiday, The Day of the Dead, I offered to you some of my thoughts about the issue of illegal immigration. In preparing that service, I realized that there was a great deal more that needed to be said about this immense challenge, and I promised a second service on the subject.

So today, immediately after *Cinco de Mayo*, another important Mexican holiday, I am coming back to the subject for a broader look. And despite the fact that we've just celebrated a Mexican holiday, I want to look further than just focusing on the plight of undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America. Immigration is an international issue.

Jesus said “The poor will always be with you.” I say “The immigrant will always be with you.” We live in a nation of immigrants, founded and shaped by immigrants in many successive waves over the centuries. I’d like to have you raise your hand if you have a parent or a grandparent who was an immigrant to this country. Take a look around you. Look at how many of us have been deeply affected by the immigrant experience in our families.

And this is ongoing. This didn’t just happen in the past. Our families are still being touched by issues of immigration. Duane and I are about to acquire a Vietnamese son-in-law when his daughter Michelle gets married in June. How many of you have family members who are from other countries? There is a constant moving flow of people from one country to another (not at all limited to the United States, I might add — I will come back to that later), especially now when economic globalization and political unrest make living somewhere other than home look so appealing, and when worldwide travel makes another country so accessible.

Coming back to our own shores... despite the fact that a generous attitude toward immigration is an expression of this nation’s ideals and an integral source of its vitality and character, there has also always been some degree of anti-immigrant sentiment (some of it intense and very public, some milder and quieter) expressed by those already here toward those attempting to get here. See if you can place this one (from an article published in *Nation* last summer)...

A noted political figure unleashes a blistering attack against new immigrants who “swarm” into our neighborhoods without regard for our laws, customs, and values. Why, he asks, should we suffer outsiders who prefer ethnic enclaves where they “establish their language and manners to the exclusion of ours?” The painful truth, he adds, is that these newcomers are so culturally different from us that they will never assimilate as past immigrants did, posing a grave threat to the society we cherish.

Sound familiar? That’s because it’s the same old thing, in this case quite old.

...the provocateur was Benjamin Franklin, and his unforgiving pen was aimed at Germans in 18th century Pennsylvania. Franklin was convinced that his home had become “a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them.”¹

Throughout American history, there have been xenophobic movements and organizations designed to keep out immigrants and maintain the purity and uniqueness of American culture (a nice ironic note, considering that American culture has always been dramatically influenced by immigrant cultures). Often,

¹ Tichenor, Daniel, “A Shameful Tradition,” originally published in *Nation* (August 28, 2006) and reprinted in *Utne Reader*, March-April 2007, p. 51.

as is the case today, the anti-immigrant sentiment has been fanned by concerns about national security, as though the country is somehow made more vulnerable to terrorist attack by the presence of Mexicans picking tulips in the Skagit Valley of Washington.

And when emotions run high, the legal status of the immigrant really doesn't play a major role in people's feelings. Much political attention now is going toward people from Mexico and Central America who are in this country without the proper documents — "illegal aliens" as they are often called. But people with all the right paperwork and green cards, and even with full American citizenship, are also targeted by the agents of fear and hatred whose personal unrest and dissatisfaction are fanned by the sight of dark skin, hooked noses, or almond-shaped eyes.

As we engage in the public conversation about immigration, as with so many other hot-button public issues, I think it's very important that we pay attention to language: ours and the language of others.

Duane and I have spoken before about George Lakoff, a political linguist who studies the way language is used to frame public debate. Lakoff points out that words are loaded with triggers or with arrows that point to other words and to full-blown ideas, so that a careful choice of words can invoke complex and multi-faceted associations which the speaker might fully intend, but which the listener is not even aware of. With a few well-chosen words, a single issue can be immediately associated with much broader story lines which are loaded with many meanings and many emotional responses.

This is why I never use the term "illegal alien." The connotations are just too rich, and very provocative, and for the most part negative. Think about it. What comes to mind when you hear the word "Illegal"? ... crime, the Mob, gangsters, lawbreakers, violence. And what comes to mind with the word "alien"? ... totally other, no human connection, invasion from outer space, fear, terror...

So if we are going to talk about people who have come into this country without the proper papers in order to work and send money home, please let's call them "undocumented workers" and not "illegal aliens." There is a world of difference.

And that brings us to another question in this very complex issue: why *do* people come here? For some, perhaps those more likely to be here with the appropriate papers, they come for higher education and the professional opportunities that are afforded by American technology, medicine, and so forth.

Many come for political reasons, as refugees like our son-in-law's family, who were boat people escaping from Viet Nam. Part of the complexity of the issue of immigration is that often these people became political refugees due to this country's foreign policies and our influence in setting up and bringing down governments abroad.

Here is a comment that I found in a blog on-line. where people were discussing an article concerning the religious and moral response to immigration:

I arrived to this country as a political refugee in the year 1979. It was not my intention to abandon my dear Argentina, but the military dictator, financed and guided by the CIA and large capital, ended the dreams of democracy of millions of young people like myself who ended up tortured, imprisoned, kidnapped in the same neo-liberal project that prevented the economic liberation of the people and continued the limitless exploitation.

I am going to leave you with a commentary that reminds us of Mrs. Rosa Parks. She broke what was the law and sat where she was prohibited to. Today we see that that law was unjust and cost many lives and years of incarceration. The bishops and all of the religious organization is in agreement that the migratory system is broken and needs to be reformed. We might make delinquents where we don't reform the system to represent our values that are human values.²

We must acknowledge the part that the more-developed countries, especially this country, have played in creating conditions which have forced people to abandon their own countries and live in exile.

Jorge, whose words Carla just read, cited political reasons for fleeing Argentina and coming here. Equally significant are the economic conditions in many poor countries which prompt their citizens to leave their homelands in search of better-paying jobs so that they can send money back to their families and improve their standard of living.

The *New York Times* printed a long article two weeks ago titled "A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves." I want to emphasize two important points that I learned from reading it.

The first is that emigrant workers come from many countries and end up in many countries. The issue of immigration which is so volatile here, is even more so, for example, in Great Britain and Germany, where guest workers are a much higher proportion of the population than immigrant workers are in the U.S. There are a million "Overseas Filipino Workers" in Saudi Arabia alone, followed (in terms of Filipinos) by Japan, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates and Taiwan. In Greece, the word for "maid" is "Filipineza." About 200 million migrants from different countries are scattered across the globe, supporting a population back home that is as big if not bigger. Were these half-billion or so people — that is, those working abroad and the family members they are supporting at home — were they to constitute a state, it would rank as the world's third-largest nation.

² Quiroga, Jorge, found at <http://www.haloscan.com/comments/godspolitics/116603693578233859/#44589>

The other point has to do with the world's economy. Migrants worldwide sent home an estimated \$300 billion last year — nearly three times the world's foreign-aid budgets combined. One study after another has examined how private money, in the form of remittances, might serve the public good. A growing number of economists see migrants, and the money they send home, as a part of the solution to global poverty.

Despite fears that the money goes to waste, a growing literature shows positive effects. Remittances, as this money is called which is sent home by foreign workers, cut the poverty rate by 11 percent in Uganda and 6 percent in Bangladesh, according to studies cited by the World Bank, and raised education levels in El Salvador and the Philippines. Being private, the money is less susceptible to corruption than foreign aid.

On the other hand, casting migration as the answer to global poverty has some people alarmed. It risks obscuring the personal price that migrants and their families pay. It could be used to gloss over, or even justify, the exploitation of workers. And it could offer rich countries an excuse for cutting foreign aid and other development efforts.³

So... what to do? Here we are with all these conflicting and complicated pros and cons to the immigrant situation. People endure tremendous challenges and the grief of separation from their families in order to support loved ones at home who are living in abysmal conditions. Children grow up without knowing one of their parents; family structures are weakened. But in other ways lifestyles improve, and children can grow up in cinder block homes that replace shanties made of rotting wood or scraps of metal. Remittances sent home mean access to medical care and education that would otherwise not be possible.

Nativists and xenophobes cry out against the influx of foreign workers into this country and others. Like Benjamin Franklin did 250 years ago, they protest that "American values" and customs are being eroded, and our national culture is being weakened.

Schools and social services in some parts of the country are overburdened by the special needs of immigrant families.

Yet many sectors of the U.S. economy depend on the cheap labor provided by immigrant workers; without their willingness (indeed, their eagerness) to work uncomplainingly at well below minimum wage, many industries would crumble.

And it's true that our laws and our borders are being violated. A stable and healthy society needs laws, and the laws need to be enforced. However, perhaps the problem is with the law itself and what it requires. When a large group of otherwise law-abiding people choose to break a specific law, that

³ DeParle, Jason, "A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves," *New York Times*, April 22, 2007.

probably says more about that law than it does about the 'law-breakers.' Jim-Crow laws were on the books for many years and many people advocated a blind loyalty to them. We now see how cruel and inhumane those laws were. Never would we now say that because segregation was law, somehow that meant it was acceptable.

Politicians attempt to make capital out of showy but ineffective actions against undocumented workers; occasional raids on highly visible employers like Wal*Mart and Swift & Company get public attention, but do little to stem the tide of immigrant workers even when many are deported. Those deported are sometimes nameless and faceless, not recognized for the full human beings they are. It was this inhumane attitude that incensed Pete Seeger when he read of the plane crash in 1948 at Los Gatos Canyon near Fresno, California. News reports gave the full names of the four white people who were killed (the pilot, co-pilot, guard, and flight attendant) and referred to all the others merely as "deportee;" of the 27 men and 1 woman, unnamed, who were killed in the crash, only twelve were ever identified, and they all were buried in a mass grave. Seeger wrote the poem which became the song you heard earlier:

Goodbye to my Juan, good-bye Rosalita
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria
You won't have a name when you ride the big airplane
All they will call you will be deportee.

We currently have a President who understands the immigrant problem better than many politicians, and seems inclined to push for a humane solution, flying in the face of many of his own party members and offering us the whimsical possibility of a political alliance with Senator Ted Kennedy to get a more humane law on the books. It seems that being raised in Texas has given him first-hand experience with Mexicans and migrant workers, so that his sympathy for their plight is genuine and personal.

What are we, as religious people committed to progressive social values — but hopefully also committed to the enactment and enforcement of humane and sensible laws — what are we to do about this very complicated issue?

I see a possible response on two levels. One is the macro level, the national political scene. We can ask questions of those running for office; we can write letters, lobby, and speak up. We can demand fair and humane treatment for those arrested for the crime of working without proper documentation in order to support their families. We can insist that our government acknowledge its responsibility for creating many of the conditions abroad which force people to leave their families and their countries. The reality is that the United States is not completely innocent in this problem. We helped create it, and we need to do something to correct it. Fewer people would leave their homelands if economic and social conditions there improved, and U.S. foreign policy can be instrumental in improving them.

On the micro level, the personal level, we must remember that our lives are touched daily by the hands of immigrant workers. They are cooks and bus boys in the restaurants, they are in the construction and roofing trades, they are child care workers and eldercare providers, they mow our lawns and make the beds when we check out of the hotel. You can't make a meal in your own kitchen without using food that has passed through immigrant hands. Even here in central Pennsylvania, far from any national border, whether we know it or not, we *are* in contact with immigrant workers in many aspects of our lives.

So we must remember our common humanity with them, view the problem as "all of ours" rather than "theirs." Remember our immigrant grandparents, and realize that this situation is no different than that which they faced decades ago.

I remind you of the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez that I read earlier, who makes a passionate argument for understanding the uniqueness of the Latin American quest for identity and the fervent desire to resolve the social problems of Latin America in solidarity with the people of the North. With the proper will and compassion, we can do this, not only in reference to Latin America, but in reference to all of the countries which are bleeding emigrants from their borders, either for political or for economic reasons.

The choir sang "Profetiza, Pueblo mio — prophesy, my people, prophesy one more time. Let your voice be the echo of the outcries of all oppressed. Announce to the people the coming of a new society."

We can do this. We can build for tomorrow a nobler world than we know today. We can continuously ask ourselves, "What is the religious response to this issue?" and really make a commitment as Unitarian Universalists to live and act by the principles that we espouse. Inherent worth and dignity. Free and responsible search for truth. World community. Liberty and justice for all. We say these words week after week; let's live them day after day.

Amen.

Minister's Prayer

We pray today to be renewed in the love that never fails.

We would be renewed in confidence that the long littleness of our life serves no small purpose, that the words and deeds of our days have meaning beyond themselves, that the highest purposes of life may be served even in the humblest of acts.

Spirit of Life, help us to realize that the world of the spirit and the world of the body do not exist alongside one another but within one another; that acts of the spirit are the deeds of our daily lives; that justice is created when we act justly; that mercy is made manifest in merciful work.

Help us to live our lives with a deeper awareness of the meaning and significance of what we say and do; help us to see that even the smallest act done in the spirit of love helps to move the world in the direction of eternal and unfailing love.

Amen.

Benediction

The Mission of Our Faith
William F. Schulz

This is the mission of our faith: to teach the fragile art of hospitality; to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness; and to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.