

What's Wrong With Immigration? Anything?

(El Dia de los Muertos)

October 31, 2010

Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley

The Rev. Judy Welles©; Gisela Roethke, Worship Associate

Opening Words

Gisela Roethke

“El Dia de los Muertos” is one of my favorite services in our UUCV church year. Why? I love the colors and the cheerfulness of this way of commemorating our dead, following the Mexican and South American traditions and thus one of the U.S. immigrant ones. How wonderful to be celebrating our dead with colorful decorations, flowers, ways of making light of death, and inviting the spirits back into our middle to commingle with us. What a lovely way to overcome morbid thoughts, grief, and depression.

Some of you know that last year, I went through a difficult time with my mother dying in Germany. Part of it was my being so far from her, not being able to help her, and feeling guilty about it. Part of it was my feeling of helplessness at her having decided that it was time for her to be dying, probably due to a deep depression that she refused to get treated for.

It took me months of grieving before I was able to listen to her voice on the recordings that I had taken during my last visit before she died. The breakthrough finally came nine months later, when for Christmas my brother-in-law had prepared a DVD from old 8mm films which he had taken over the course of forty years of family get-togethers and celebrations. And there she was, my mother, surrounded by her husband and children and family and friends, at coffee-and-cake parties on the garden patio, horsing around in the garden, dancing with my father at New Year's, strutting proudly in her long dress at my sister's wedding, playing with the grandchildren. There she was back again, in her ghostly

film version, full of life and laughter, colorful and joyous, feasting and celebrating life.

Finally, I could listen to the recordings I had made with her. And now she lives within me, closer than for most of the forty two years that I was the daughter who had left and gone to a far away country as if it were nothing. El Dia de los Muertos is one of the opportunities which I cherish to celebrate my mother's life and think about what she has meant for me and continues to mean for me.

Come, let us worship together!

Celebrating El Dia de Los Muertos

When someone we love dies, we miss them very much. Wouldn't it be nice if we could have them back with us again, even if only for a little while? Wouldn't it be nice if they could visit us now and then?

In Mexico, there is a holiday which is based on that very idea. It's called *El Dia de Los Muertos*, or the Day of the Dead. On this holiday (which is actually celebrated over three days) people go to special efforts to welcome back the spirits of their dead loved ones. The first of these three days is October 31, which is today. So that makes today a good day for us to have an experience that's a little bit like the way Mexican families will be celebrating for the next three days. What we're about to do will give us just a taste of what it might be like to be a family in Mexico, or a Mexican family living somewhere in the Southwest of this country.

There are several different traditions that are part of the celebration, and the traditions differ from city to city and from region to region. But there is one part of the holiday that is always included, and that is creating a beautiful altar in the home. And that's what we are going to do today. Yesterday Duane and Gisela and I made a head start on setting up this altar, and before I ask you to help me finish it, I want to tell you just a little bit about what is up here already.

First Reading Remembering all the Boys¹

Elvia Bautista, twenty-two, lives in Santa Rosa, California, where she works as a caregiver for the elderly and mentally handicapped. Bautista stayed after her brother's murder even though the rest of her family moved away. A high school dropout, Bautista now speaks to young people about the dangers of gang life.

I believe that everyone deserves flowers on their grave.

When I go to the cemetery to visit my brother, it makes me sad to see graves — just the cold stones — and no flowers on them.

They look lonely, like nobody loves them. I believe this is the worst thing **in** the world — that loneliness. No one to visit you and brush off the dust from your name and cover you with color. A grave without any flowers looks like the person has been forgotten. And then what was the point of even living — to be forgotten?

Almost every day my brother's grave has something new on it: flowers from me, or candles from the Dollar Store, or an image of the Virgin Maria, or shot glasses. There's even some little Homies, these little toys that look like gangsters.

Sometimes, when I bring flowers, I fix the flowers on the graves around my brother's grave. Some of the headstones have birthdates near my brother's; they are young, too. But many of them, if they have any little toys or things on them, those are red.

All around my brother are boys who grew up to like red, making them the enemies of my brother. My brother was sixteen when he was shot by someone who liked red, who killed him because he liked blue. And when I go to the cemetery, I put flowers on the graves of the boys who liked red, too.

¹ From *This I Believe*, Vol. I.

There is no one but me and a few of my friends who go to both graves. Some people think it's a bad idea. Some people think it's heroic.

I think they're both being silly. I don't go to try to disrespect some special rules or stop any kind of war. I go because I believe that no matter where you came from or what you believed in, when you die, you want flowers on your grave and people who visit you and remember you that way.

I'm not any kind of traitor or any kind of hero. I am the sister of Rogelio Bautista, and I say his name so you will hear it and be one more person who remembers him. I want everyone to remember all the boys, red and blue, in my cemetery.

When we remember, we put flowers on their graves.

Second Reading The New Colossus
Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glowed world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Homily What's Wrong With Immigration? Anything?
The Rev. Judy Welles

I'm sure that many of you were as caught up as I was last spring and summer with the news about Arizona's SB1070, the bill that would have cracked down *hard* on people suspected of being in the country illegally.

Legislators in Arizona were astonished at the passionate reaction that ensued when the bill was passed and subsequently signed by Arizona governor Jan Brewer in April. Both supporters and opponents of the bill across the country and even around the world were vehement in their arguments that the bill would (take your pick) encourage racial profiling in a way that could violate people's civil rights and human rights **OR** enhance efforts to protect the U.S. population from the crowding, crime and violence that have been attributed (probably wrongly) to illegal immigrants.

It was a huge issue at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly last June, because the 2012 G.A. was scheduled to be held in Phoenix. All over the country, people opposed to the bill were calling for a boycott of Arizona, with many city governments and sports organizations hastily canceling plans for upcoming conventions and other events in Arizona. At G.A., there were doubts expressed that a Unitarian Universalist boycott, moving a relatively small convention to another location, would really make any difference, and concerns expressed that withholding our business from the hotels and convention center in Phoenix would do the most harm to the very people whom we wanted to support—the hotel employees and service workers. Some serious issues of accountability were raised: are we accountable to the convention industry and the people of Arizona? Or are we accountable to the UU's of color who said they wouldn't feel safe at a G.A. in Arizona? Where does the responsibility of our hearts and conscience lie?

Eventually the decision was made to go to Phoenix in 2012, but for an event that would be radically different from any other Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. The gist of this decision

was that it be a “Justice-Oriented General Assembly” with a business agenda limited to the minimum required by the bylaws. The rest of the time will be spent in solidarity with local social justice groups doing advocacy work, voter registration and so on. Last summer’s G.A. delegates also selected “[Immigration as a Moral Issue](#)“ as the four-year Congregational Study/ Action Issue for 2010–2014 and approved an Action of Immediate Witness [denouncing Arizona SB 1070](#) and similar legislation in other states.

Later in the summer, on the days before July 29, the day the bill was scheduled to go into effect, hundreds and hundreds of UU’s — lay and clergy both — poured into Phoenix to stand alongside the local people who were most likely to suffer from the provisions of the bill. UU’s were by far the largest number of religiously-identified groups at the huge protest that day. Many were arrested, and it’s my impression that Unitarian Universalism gained a lot of credibility as people who really mean it and put our bodies behind it when we say we are “standing on the side of love.”

Peter Morales, President of the UUA, was arrested and sent to jail that day in Phoenix. (He’s out now, and I remind you that he will be the speaker at our local Association Sunday service in York next week — remember that there will not be any service or children’s program here.) Rev. Morales wrote in a recent essay

As a religious people who affirm human compassion, advocate for human rights, and seek justice, we [Unitarian Universalists] must never make the mistake of confusing a legal right with a moral right. The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal. The importation and sale of African slaves was legal... The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal. The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal. Burning Michael Servetus at the stake for his unitarian

theology was legal. The fact that something is legal does not cut much ethical ice. The powerful have always used the legal system to oppress the powerless. It is true that as citizens we should respect the rule of law. More importantly, though, our duty is to create laws founded on our highest sense of justice, equity, and compassion.²

So I speak to you today out of a sense of justice and compassion for those who have pinned their hopes on finding a better life in this country. I'm concerned that other people who just happened to get here first, in their xenophobia and fear of change, are forgetting the long history of hope and courage that lies behind the American immigration story.

We have just experienced a religious observance together — an observance whose origins aren't from the United States. This observance acknowledges the interconnectedness of life and death, and invites us to undertake the religious task of coming to grips with the reality that we all will someday die. It is a worthy challenge, one that is shared by all self-aware human beings regardless of their cultural heritage: someday we will die.

And by borrowing this ritual that invites us to remember our beloved dead and encourage them to reappear in our lives, even if only briefly and ephemerally, we have experienced a glimpse of a possible answer to that profoundly religious question: how shall I live my life, knowing that I will die? By naming those we have loved, and expressing out loud what they have meant to us, maybe even reminding ourselves what aspects of them live on in us, we are engaging in the work of finding meaning, and that is religious work.

How fortunate we are to know about this ritual, widely celebrated in another culture and gradually making its way into our own — if not into the culture of Central Pennsylvania, at least into the culture of this congregation. This year is the fifth year that we

² Morales, Peter, "We Are All One," found at <http://www.uua.org/leaders/justice/peoplebold/162511.shtml>

have celebrated *El Dia de los Muertos*, and that's long enough that for some of our children, it's simply what we do.

What we have done here together today is a tiny example of how our lives are all enriched by the immigrant experience. Our lives are not diminished because people come here and bring their traditions and their language with them; they are enriched and made wider, deeper.

Let's start with the obvious. I'd like you to raise your hand if you were born outside of the United States. (Keep them up.) Now raise your hand if either of your parents was born outside the United States. What about your grandparents? Now please raise your hand if any member of your family was born outside of the United States.

So even here, in an area of the country that is intensely proud of its pre-Revolutionary War local history and all the American history that came after, we have a population that actually has been intensely affected by the immigration experience. Affected for the better, I would say — since here you are! And I'll bet you could take almost any gathering of 100 people anywhere in the country and get similar results.

In my own family, we have a grandson who comes from both a Vietnamese heritage and a Norwegian heritage. From my Anglo perspective, his eyes and coloring are a giveaway to his Asian ancestry, although his Vietnamese aunts and uncles insist that he looks exactly like his mother, Duane's daughter Michelle. He's not even two years old yet, so I can't tell you how his being of mixed ancestry is going to enrich our lives. But what I can tell you is that, already, he's referred to on the playground as "the Chinese kid." His father, who is an American citizen born in Vietnam, just laughs over this, but it makes me sad. How long will it be before someone says to him, "Hey, kid, go back where you came from!"

There has to be a better way to deal with the increasing number of immigrants coming to this country than to say "Go back where you came from." And when I look for a moral response rather than a legalistic response, one thing that occurs to me is to

investigate the reasons for this surge in immigration — to go back a little closer to the source. (It's like the story of the babies in the river. Let's not put all our energy simply into rescuing the babies from the river; let's go upstream and find out *why* there are all these babies in the river!)

Think back to your own family members who were born outside of the country, and ask yourself why they came here. My guess is that your answer will be some version of “they wanted a better life.” I know that was the case for Duane's Norwegian grandmother and great-aunt, whose father's alcoholism was keeping the family in poverty. They came to New York as teenage girls and made a life for themselves as fine seamstresses. I know it was the case for our Vietnamese son-in-law, who came to California as a four-year old boy with a group of “boat people” who had fled a refugee camp in Laos after escaping from Vietnam due to an unstable political situation.

We are all so very interconnected now. The world is very small, and the politics and economic policies of one country are deeply interwoven with the standard of living and the rate of poverty in another. There's no going back. Until living conditions improve throughout the world, there will always be people who risk their lives and all of their resources to look for a better life someplace else. And trying to keep them out or send them back makes as little sense as saying to a two-year old Vietnamese-Norwegian-American boy, “Go back where you came from,” when where he came from is Portland, Oregon.

Immigration is one of the issues (and there are many) that divide people into those who resist, who want to go back to some *imaginary* past — the good old days that actually never were — and those who welcome and are excited by the potential for a better life *for all of us* that comes with change. You could say the same for gay rights, for racial equality, for the increasing visibility of Islam in American religious life. We are a nation of immigrants. It's in our DNA — it's who we are! There's no going back.

So let's go forward. Let's stand on the side of love with our Mexican brothers and our Saudi sisters, our Japanese aunties and

our Somali nephews. The world is small, and it belongs to all of us equally. Let's make room.

Amen.

Minister's Prayer

Today we have the experience of standing in a place where the veil between the worlds is thin, where we can almost see the dear ones who have left us, almost hear their voices and feel the touch of their hands, their breath on our cheeks.

Loving spirit that informs all of life — you who are always within us, among us and beyond us — we come today in awe and gratitude for all that has gone before us, all that was done to make our way plain and straight.

We come both in sadness and in celebration, for the ones we loved are gone, yet the love they leave behind is as real and present as our own breath, in and out, and the beating of our hearts.

Help us to remember those who need our efforts to make their way easy, too. Give us generosity of spirit, strength for the journey, courage to speak up for what we know is right and true

Keep our hearts open to all who need our welcome and our caring, whether they are far-away members of the world community or close by, sitting beside us.

We are connected, we need each other, we are one.

Amen.

Closing Words

The Larger Circle

Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those that go before us, and the hands of those who come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other's arms and the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance.

And the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.