

NO MORE DEATHS:  
REFLECTIONS FROM THE BORDERLANDS

A Sermon By  
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We live in the borderlands. Here in Arizona, we don't just speak of the Latino influence; we are the Latino influence. This land was Latino before it ever became a part of the United States, and the imaginary line that created the southern boundary of Arizona less than a hundred years ago divided more than two countries. It divided families and tribes as well. But it could not divide our heritage or our traditions.

Those of us who live in the borderlands travel back and forth across that border, some many times, some a few times a year. We go to Puerto Peñasco, otherwise known as Rocky Point, every October to celebrate the full moon and play on the beach with other Unitarian Universalists. Some of us UUs have been gathering together there since the late sixties, but about three years ago, attendance began to fall away. People were frightened by the news reports of increased violence in our border cities of Juarez, across from El Paso, and Tijuana, across from San Diego. I discounted the reports, because people are always saying that travel in Mexico is dangerous, when I know it is just as risky as travel anywhere else. But when we got back from our Luunitarian Weekend in Rocky Point three years ago, I heard that banditos had held up tourists along the road between Nogales and Hermosillo, and that got to me! We cancelled the following year, and then have been holding small gatherings the last two years, hoping we're not wrong in daring to travel to our Mexican home.

Drug smuggling has been part of border life for a long time. It is as insidious as people trafficking. I would think the Border Patrol would have no way to distinguish between them, and they aren't supposed to, anyway. As much as some of us would wish for the border to be freer for migrant workers, it's not. Instead, they have built the wall higher, formed vigilante patrols, and hired more agents to stem the tide of humanity that sneaks across, flows across our borderlands.

I have always been aware of the coyotes and the migrants. In the eighties, the Sanctuary Movement formed here in Arizona to protect those fleeing the U.S.-sponsored wars in Central America, especially Nicaragua and El Salvador. Both our UU congregations in Tucson and Phoenix were active in sheltering refugees. I participated by translating for the sanctuary lawyers while I lived in San Francisco, and after I moved back to Phoenix with our two babies, I researched and wrote a novel about sanctuary that took place in the hills by Patagonia.

The reality of the numbers of people who come across our borders today, for mostly economic reasons, didn't hit me until Curtiss and I went camping in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife

Refuge one March a number of years ago. We set up our tent on a ridge above a wash under the full moon. We were struck at how beautiful and quiet the land was out there, without a single human light in the night. In the morning we hiked down into the huge wash beside our camp only to find a long trail in the sand made by many, many feet. Empty plastic water bottles littered the area, along with sacks from food left behind. I wondered at the time if they had snuck by us that very night while we slept.

As we walked down the wash, we came across a mound of dirt tucked under a palo verde tree. The dirt was not too old. We didn't dare dig to find out if a body lay underneath.

One of my colleagues told me about when he had lived in Three Points, along highway 86 which travels the lands above the southern border to Kit Peak and crosses the Tohono O'dham reservation through Sells to Why. My colleague and his wife lived in a trailer out south, and people would come by to beg for water or to use the phone. These people were migrants, border crossers, and sometimes they were in dire straights, especially in the summer months. My colleague, whose name will be unmentioned, left water out, and care packages that people could just pick up, and word spread that there was a place people could go for help, if they could make it that far. I won't mention his name, although those of you who know him, know who I'm talking about.

We have to be careful. After all, it was just a few years ago, in February 2008, that a man was given a ticket for placing water bottles in a wash west of Arivaca. The man, Dan Millis, had to wait seven months for a judge to rule that his citation was valid and that bottles of water left in the desert to save lives really are litter. Millis, who is a volunteer for the organization No More Deaths, had found the dead body of a 14-year-old girl from El Salvador, Josseline Jamileth Hernandez Quinteros, just two days before his citation. He said on the No More Deaths website that, "had we found her sooner, or had she found our water, she would have been celebrating her Quinceñera just last week."

I think about that mound of dirt and wonder who is missing their baby, their child, their sister, their grandfather. There are empty graves down in Mexico, decorated by grieving families every year on Dia de los Muertos with marigolds and candles in the night.

When you travel in the borderlands, you begin to see more clearly, and to care more deeply. My colleague, Rev. Diane Dowgiert, is working with the UU Church of Tucson to help with the No More Deaths organization. She told me about going with a group into the desert near author, Byrd Baylor's house, this side of Sells. They saw people traveling by, hurrying, hiding, wary of anyone, but needing someone. It had a profound influence on her and her ministry.

Dan Millis was found guilty of the offense of littering, but the judge ruled that it warranted no punishment, not even the fine. Millis and No More Deaths fought the ruling in the belief that "Humanitarian Aid is never a crime!" and he was interviewed by Amy Goodman on Democracy

Now! in 2009. Millis' conviction was overturned in the fall of 2010. Millis is part of the UU Church of Tucson's No More Deaths ministry.

I'm really proud of this ministry of our sister congregation and my colleague, Diane. Their mission is "to end death and suffering on the U.S./Mexico border through civil initiative: the conviction that people of conscience must work openly and in community to uphold fundamental human rights."

When SB1070 came out, I was appalled. Anyone who has lived here for any length of time knows how difficult it would be for the Border Patrol not to target people based on their race. It's nearly impossible for our police force, and racism is prolific in our penal system. When the UUA General Assembly spoke of boycotting our state, I was one of many who urged folks not to desert us, but rather to join us in making a stand for justice. The UUA Board of Trustees came out to Arizona in January of 2011 to experience the border for themselves. We Southern Arizona UU colleagues joined with No More Deaths to take the board members to Nogales to see one of the places people who are lost can find help.

In the ten years between 1998 and 2008, more than 2000 people died trying to cross the border of Arizona into our country. In 2004, No More Deaths was formed. They keep a running tab of the number of deaths on the home page of their website. When I looked on May 24, the tab said 93 had died since October of 2011. While I was reading about ICE and other articles, the counter turned to 94. As the heat climbs, the danger grows for those trying to cross the deserts of southern Arizona. Does it matter why they are doing such a desperate thing? Should we judge whether they deserve to live or die?

Josseline. That name rang a bell. I got down the book I'd bought last year which the UUA chose as its community read: *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands*, by Margaret Regan. You can read, if you haven't already, about the girl whose body Dan Millis stumbled upon in his humanitarian work with No More Deaths, his work the courts initially deemed "littering."

This May, No More Deaths is highlighted on the Standing on the Side of Love website as having been awarded the UUA's Wilton Peace Prize. Their programs have expanded to include a Desert Aid Working Group, a Summer Desert Camps program, and an Alternate Spring Break Camp in Arivaca. For at least the last six years, their Abuse Documentation Working Group has been reporting human rights abuses by U.S. Border Patrol agents against migrants who are in their custody.

Not all agents abuse migrants, by any means. The Tucson paper sometimes tells about the people the Border Patrol helps in the desert. Rescues are very common, but many people cannot be saved. Dan Millis said in his web article that even the agents were telling the No More Deaths people where to leave the water, where the most deaths seemed to be happening. No one wants our people, and they are our people, to die.

Countries do not divide humanity into us and them. It is our mindsets that do that. Just as our Arizona border was once invisible, even non-existent, our human relationships refuse to conform to political boundaries. With drug runners and banditos threatening lives along our borders, migrants are in even more danger, as are we. If you have ever watched the TV show “Weeds,” you will see that the situation has become one for sardonic humor and poignancy. One episode told about the rape trees and the common abuse of the young women who trail the coyotes into our desert. I doubt they know what they’re facing when they set out.

I doubt even that any of them really understand how dangerous is our desert, how incredibly hot it gets and how quickly you can die of dehydration. Many of these people come from green lands in the south, and don’t know deserts. They don’t know ours, for sure.

As we head toward our Justice GA in Phoenix this month, let’s vow that there be no more deaths. It’s impossible, I know, but we should at least be aware of this tragedy, and consider ways to help. It is part of healing the planet, helping to save lives, to take responsibility for our brothers and sisters in the desert of our home state of Arizona, the dangers of which we are very cognizant. When people enter our homeland in ignorance, misled and abused by coyotes or running before drug traffickers, we should try to find a way to be of help. No More Deaths is one way.

If we cannot place water in the desert, if we cannot drive out in the night to save one young girl, we can still give of our money to help fund those who can. We have to remember those less fortunate than us. Most of us don’t even know real poverty or the harshness of life without freedom.

We all know loss. Death has touched every one of us, and walks beside us every moment. Let us remember those who have been lost, lost to everyone, buried in our own desert under a mound of dirt by grieving hands.

(adapted from *Dia de los Muertos: No More Deaths*, delivered October 26, 2008)