

A Visit to the Border

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I thought I knew the story, but then I took a journey to the border.

In January 2011, along with a group of other seminary students, I went to the Arizona-Mexico border. I wanted to learn more about the issue of immigration. I had been at the General Assembly in 2010 when it was decided that in spite of and because of our opposition to Arizona law SB 1070, we would have our General Assembly in Phoenix in 2012, but not a normal General Assembly: a Justice GA focused on the issues involved in immigration. This was the General Assembly that was held in June 2012. It was an incredible, moving, and inspiring experience. But it didn't compare for me to my experience of that January of 2011.

Before I went to the border, I read articles in the newspapers and dutifully listened to NPR, but it seemed that the more I looked into it, the more complex immigration turned out to be. I'm not usually scared off by complexity. I'm a good student, I do the reading — most of it — I pay attention, and so, really, despite its complexity, I thought I knew the story. But then I went to the borderlands of Arizona and Mexico.

I thought I knew the story. For example, I thought I knew the desert. Before I went, I thought, I'm going in January to the desert down south! This will be a nice break from the northern winter! But southern Arizona and northern Mexico is something called the "high desert." I went to the high desert in January. And they were having a bit of a cold snap while I was there. It was regularly getting down into the teens at night, and some of the places we were sleeping were not heated, just my sleeping bag on bare linoleum, and I froze my ... It was very, very cold. And I wasn't sleeping out in the desert where it was colder. I had to rethink what the people walking through the desert were facing. In the summer, they face dying from the heat and from dehydration. In the winter? Hypothermia.

This is a rugged, dangerous land that they are trying to cross. And what with the fences and Border Patrol and whatnot in and near the border towns, it's this dangerous land that migrants are funneled to. We funnel them there on purpose. The enforcement at the border is predicated on deterrence. It was believed that if we forced people to go through the desert, where many people would necessarily die on the journey, people would stop coming. But that's not what's happening. Due to the recession

in the U.S. and other factors, we think fewer people have been crossing. But death tolls are still staggering. Last year (2013) there were 183 deaths. In 2012 there were 179 deaths. The year before (2011), the remains of 183 migrants were recovered.¹

The threat of death doesn't seem to be deterring people.

I knew that on this journey, I'd be meeting with migrants, people on the move. And I thought I knew the story I would hear. I assumed that the story I would hear is that of people leaving their homes where they can't find work to look for work in the U.S.

On my first full day in Nogales, Mexico, at a dining hall run by a Jesuit priest, I did get a chance to talk, through a friend who could translate, to a migrant. But he didn't give me the story I had expected to hear.

The people coming to eat dinner at this particular comedor were coming from just being deported. The man I talked with, Isidro, had not only been deported, however. It was the second time that the Border Patrol had caught him and so this time they had held him for 45 days before deporting him. More deterrence, I suppose. He was reluctant to describe what it was like. When they deported him this time, they told him that he had to wait twenty years now to begin the process of legally applying to come to the U.S.

I asked Pedro where his home in Mexico was and what family he had there. He said had a mother and a brother in a small town outside of Mexico City, but that there was no work there. I, of course, understood this. This was the story I expected to hear. But then I asked him if he had spent any time in the U.S. He said, yes, he'd been living in the U.S. for 18 years. In North Carolina. He worked in construction there. He said he had a wife in North Carolina, a wife who is a U.S. citizen. And that they had four kids: at the time they were 12, 9, 8, and 4 years old. All U.S. citizens. I felt my heart break as I listened to Pedro and looked into his eyes. He's been separated from them ever since he was stopped for a traffic violation. This was not the story I was prepared to hear. We have told him he must be separated from his wife and family for at least twenty years. And then he can get in the back of the line to immigrate by the book. I tried to put myself in his shoes. He's not going to back to his relatives in southern Mexico. I bet that, since the time that I met him, he tried again --

¹ See <http://derechoshumanosaz.net/projects/arizona-recovered-bodies-project/>

perhaps again and again -- to return to his family in North Carolina. I pray he is safe and reunited with them.

I thought I knew the story.

I did get a chance to hear the story that I thought I knew when I went to Altar.

Altar is a small town in northern Mexico about 50 miles or so as the crow flies south of the border with Arizona. It used to be a very sleepy little town. But it's become a major jumping off point for migrants wanting to cross the border. The Catholic church in Altar runs a shelter for migrants who, even by the time they reach Altar, are often tired and hungry and out of money. They offer people up to three nights lodging and they feed them. I had dinner with a man there who, like Isidro, is from a small town in southern Mexico. He was leaving his wife and children behind in that town to find work in America. His brother is in New York City and he himself had worked for two years at a chinese restaurant in New York City. He had returned home to be with his family. He told me the land where he is from is very beautiful. I could feel him yearning for it. But, he said, there is no work there. I said it's too bad that beauty can't feed us. I asked him, if he could make a living in his home town doing whatever it is he would like to do, what would that be? He said that he would like to grow corn. That's what he used to do and he wished he could do it now.

Now, I knew that one of the things that NAFTA did was flood the Mexican market with cheap U.S. corn. The U.S. government subsidizes corn production in order to keep the price low. Mexican farmers can't meet that artificially low price, and, because of the now deflated price of their own crop, they can't earn enough to support themselves. I knew that. But it was quite another thing to hear someone share with me his wish of growing corn. His dream has been taken away by our economic policies. Now, despite our policy of deterrence, he's hoping to get back to that restaurant job in New York City so that he can send money back to his family so that they can eat. He didn't seem deterred.

I thought I knew the story.

I thought I knew the story. Wanting to be a good UU, I try to believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But it was different meeting the priest in Altar, father Prisciliano, who described his calling as that of serving the migrant Christ. He said that immigration is today's slavery, and compared the flop houses where migrants stay in Altar to the

slave ships. It's an exaggeration, but not much of one. He took us around to a flop house where migrants stay. It was all bunks made of steel and plywood. No mattresses. A few pieces of dirty carpet on some of them. He described how the four- or five-room building we were in sometimes had 90 people sleeping there. People would lie cross-ways on the bunks, five or six to a bunk, basically on top of one another.

And the vans that take the migrants to the border, they are set up the same way. The seats are removed and steel and plywood put in for seats so they can pack in as many as possible. I saw the vans parked all along the central plaza in front of the mission church in Altar. The plaza is ringed with shops selling backpacks and tennis shoes and blankets. Nearby, said father Prisciliano, are drug stores that sell the shot that the women take before they cross. It's a contraceptive. And the women take it because they know that odds are good they will be assaulted sexually on their journey, probably multiple times. But they do not seem deterred.

The stories that father Prisciliano told were horrific. Kidnapping and rape and torture. They were hard to listen to. The migrants hire guides — everyone calls them “coyotes” — to take them across the border. Trying to find someone who knows their way through the desert, who knows how to avoid the Border Patrol, who will have a car waiting for them at the end of the desert journey, the migrants put themselves at the mercy of the coyotes. The coyotes call the migrants pollos, “chickens” (cooked chicken, actually). The coyotes often have assistants — they are called chicken wranglers. The dehumanization of the migrant starts early in their journey.

But Father Prisciliano looks in the faces of migrants and sees Jesus. In the faces of the migrants he sees the Holy that he is called to serve.

It can get overwhelming. Even when we know the story, even when the story is right in front of us, we can resist it, push it away. We asked Father Prisciliano how he could go on. He didn't really know how to answer that. It gets hard, he admitted, but he can't help but help. Walking with him around the town, he was amazing. He knew everyone. He would grin and call out greetings by name to the folks on the street. We couldn't have gone where we went in Altar if he hadn't been with us. And even then, we were pushing the envelope of safety. But Father Prisciliano — this is where he lives.

There's one last encounter I want to share with you. I got to meet the Rev. John Fife while I was in Tucson. Now his story I didn't really know. John Fife was a co-founder of the sanctuary movement in the 1980's that gave shelter to refugees from El Salvador and other Central American countries who were fleeing violent regimes, regimes often supported by the U.S. He was the pastor for 35 years of Southside Presbyterian church in Tucson. He is retired now, but still working on border issues, addressing the humanitarian crisis at the border. He is very involved with the organization No More Deaths which has been taken on as the social justice ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson. No More Deaths provides humanitarian aid — water, food, and medical attention — to migrants in the deserts south of Tucson. They also work with deportees in Nogales, Mexico, and document reports of abuse of migrants at the hands of the Border Patrol.

Rev. Fife met with the group I was traveling with. He talked about how abuse of migrants by the Border Patrol is likely linked to their strategy of deterrence. Their strategy is supposed to be one that makes things awful for the migrants. And so it does. But it's also so clear that deterrence as a strategy isn't working. He told us of the kidnapping and extortion of migrants by the coyotes and human traffickers.

Like we had asked of the priest in Altar, we asked John Fife how he keeps hopeful. We had heard so many stories by this point and we had more to come and we felt overwhelmed already. How do you keep hopeful?

John Fife said well, you know, Martin Luther King, Jr., was right. The arc bends toward justice. As a Unitarian Universalist seminary student, I loved this answer because I knew that with those words King was paraphrasing the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Fife had a colorful paraphrase of King's paraphrase. He said, "The bastards don't win in the end!" How does Fife keep hopeful? It's about faith. He said that the church has an advantage here over other organizations. People in it just for the movement burn out. But for a person of faith like John Fife? The arc of the universe bends toward justice and he can't help but help.

Fife has a perspective and attitude that is remarkable. He talked about how we really have important work to do. That the planet is in the balance this time. And here's what Fife said. He said he was so "excited by the urgency"! He was literally chomping at the bit. His eyes sparkled, and

he flashed us a sly grin. He could barely keep in his chair. He lamented that his age might prevent him from following that arc as far as he would like, as it bends toward justice. But he was so excited for us. Clearly envying us, he said, "I hope you have fun with it!"

My friends, I thought I knew the story of there's-so-much-to-do. I thought that story was one of despair or resignation. It can also be a story of joy! There is so much to do, we almost can't help but get to doing it! It's an embarrassment of riches for us, because it's people of faith who are positioned to make the changes happen. John Fife says to achieve real change, we need a global organization that is rooted at the local, grassroots level, an organization that loves the poor and that people will sacrifice for. "That's the church," says Fife. Listen! That's us.

We can start small. Buy coffee from **Just Coffee** dot org <<http://www.JustCoffee.org/>>, which is a co-op of Chiapas farmers. I visited their roasting facility in Agua Prieta. Support the work of **No More Deaths** <<http://www.NoMoreDeaths.org/>> with a donation or by volunteering for an alternative spring break. Go on the UUA web site, UUA dot ORG, and take advantage of their study materials on **Immigration as a Moral Issue** <<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/immigration/index.shtml>>. Find out about the **Michigan Immigrant Rights Center** <<http://michiganimmigrant.org/>>. Get involved with the **Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network** <<http://www.uujustice.org/>> and their campaign to raise the minimum wage.

Just imagine the many ways — big and little — you can help build a culture of respect and reverence. You can build the beloved community and bend the arc of the universe toward justice. There is so much you can do. I hope you have fun with it!

May it be so. Amen.