

## DIA DE LOS MUERTOS: NO MORE DEATHS

A Sermon By  
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We live in the borderlands. Here, 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.

One of those traditions we share is Dia de los Muertos. It began as a holiday called Milcahuipil in the days before the Spanish conquerors, and it was a time when the dead came to visit. Families prepared their best foods for them. With the Spanish Conquest, the Catholic religion did what it is so good at: instead of destroying this tradition, it absorbed it, and added rituals of candles and flowers and the tolling of church bells. As the holiday evolved, the mesoamerican cult of death blended with the Catholic fear of death, but in a new way, and by the eighteenth century, it had taken a comic twist, a sardonic turn, and become the beloved festival it is today.

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 Penasco, otherwise known as Rocky Point, every October to celebrate the full moon and play on the beach with other Unitarian Universalists. This last event, two weeks ago, was sparsely attended, and one reason was due to 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, I heard that banditos had held up tourists along the road between Nogales and Hermosillo, and that got to me!

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, I watched the formation of the Sanctuary Movement here in Arizona to protect those fleeing the U.S.-sponsored wars in Central America, especially Nicaragua and El Salvador. I participated by translating for the 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.

But 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 Nature Reserve one March a few years ago. I wrote about it in my column, how we were camping on a ridge above a wash in the full moonlight, and 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.

I don't think I told you, though, about the mound of dirt we found 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 lived in Three Points, down the 81 (or is it the 82), anyway, its on the highway that leads to Kit Peak and Sells. They 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 only this last February that a man was given a ticket for placing water bottles in a wash west of Arivaca. The man, Dan Millis, had to wait until September 22 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 Quincenera just last week."

I think about that mound of dirt and wonder who is missing their baby, their child, their sister, their grandfather. On this Dia de los Muertos, will there be an empty grave somewhere, decorated 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 local colleague, Diane Dowgiert, is working with her congregation over on 22nd Street to help with the No More Deaths organization. She told me about going with a group out 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 recently 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 are fighting the ruling in the belief that "Humanitarian Aid is never a crime!" 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. I've been curious about No More Deaths for a long time, but never connected with it. 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."

Since 1998 more than 2000 people have died trying to cross the border into our country. Four years ago, 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 September 24,

there were 143 deaths. As of yesterday, there were 183. Forty have died since I went to Rocky Point, since I drove across the reservation past Sells and kept watch out for people who might be hiding, needing help. That day, October 13, we passed five border patrol or police along that road. Forty people died in spite of them.

I read in the paper an update of the people the Border Patrol helps in the desert. It really points out how the agents help as much as, or even more than, hurt the migrants. Rescues are so common, but many 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 of the recent episodes 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. Don't know ours, for sure!

This Dia de los Muertos, 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. Our collective ministry chosen at our all-congregation retreat last month is to be green. We haven't put it into meaningful and simple words yet, but healing the planet is part of that. So is stepping lightly, having green footprints. Helping save lives is a green action, a taking of responsibility for our brothers and sisters in this desert which is our home, 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. Even in this financial crisis, we have to remember those less fortunate than us. Most of us don't even know real poverty. We must not get frightened in the harsh times ahead of us.

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