

Welcome to the Borderlands

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small
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Just under two months ago, on July 28, I flew to Phoenix, Arizona, to stand on the side of love with immigrant families.

SB 1070, an unprecedented crackdown on undocumented residents, was set to go into effect the following day, July 29, which had been declared a National Day of Noncompliance with the new law. Immigrant justice advocates in Arizona issued a call to Unitarian Universalists to come and bear witness against SB 1070 and for the inherent worth and dignity of all people. Heeding the covenant we recited here this morning, several other First Parish members and I answered the call of love.

What happened in Phoenix was thrilling, disturbing, and transforming. You will hear more about it from me and others—about the politics of fear, the bullying tactics of Sheriff Joe Arpaio and his many allies, the struggles of immigrant workers trying to make a living, and the nonviolent civil disobedience that landed 29 Unitarian Universalists in jail.

This morning, though, I want to talk about borderlands.

Arizona is a borderland.

When Mexican-Americans protest, “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us!” Arizona is one of the places they’re talking about. Three-fourths of its territory was taken from Mexico by conquest in 1848, the rest purchased for the railroad just six years later. And long before the United States or Mexico existed, indigenous Apache, Hopi, Navajo, O’odham, and other peoples farmed and hunted there.

Borders are lines on a map. They are also boundaries, walls, membranes that separate nations, cultures, and human beings.

Borderlands are where the boundaries break down, the walls crumble, the membranes become permeable. They are places of danger, uncertainty, and power. Borderlands are holy ground.

Arizona taught me about borderlands.

Here in New England I feel at home. I grew up here. I know my way around.

In Arizona, I was a stranger—disoriented, tentative, even afraid. As a white European-American, I felt I was trespassing on both Indian and Mexican land. As a liberal Easterner, I knew I was anathema to the far-right reactionaries who have seized control of the state’s government. Even the climate was hostile, as temperatures over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit wilted the strongest among us in minutes. Although I knew my light skin and class privilege protected me from the worst abuses of law enforcement, I was still on edge, ill at ease, wondering if I might be targeted by Sheriff Arpaio or some of his ardent admirers.

But Arizona also showed me the magic of borderlands.

Early in the morning of July 29th, we gathered for an interfaith service at the Episcopal cathedral. As we entered the sanctuary, a rainbow appeared in the sky, followed by a rainbow of people in the pews, every shade of brown, tan, black, and white.

For 104 days, seven Latina women had stood vigil at the State House protesting SB 1070. When a federal judge struck down most of that law the day before, they saw their prayers answered. They and their families (Cadenas, Rosas, Rufino) led a joyous procession into the cathedral, some wearing t-shirts that said: “I ain’t running no more.”

United Methodist Bishop Minerva Carcano proclaimed: “Dios tiene la ultima palabra” (“God has the last word”).

A Catholic bishop called Jesus an illegal immigrant, whose family had fled for their lives into Egypt.

Michael Nowakowski, the Latino Vice Mayor with a Polish name, offered a prayer.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix declared, “This is where God is found: where we see ourselves in a stranger.”

As our worship ended, we sang together “We Shall Overcome.” It was the first time I’d sung it since I was a child that I felt the occasion worthy of the song’s history.

We stand, all of us, on the border of safety and danger, security and opportunity, past and future.

By the year 2050, nearly one in five Americans will be an immigrant. The Latino population will triple in size to 30% of the U.S. population. While the percentage of African-Americans will increase slightly, the proportion of Asian-Americans will almost double. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic white Americans, currently 75% of the population, will fall to 46% by 2050.

White people can try to escape the borderlands, seeking shelter in gated communities, social clubs, segregated churches, and reactionary movements that preach intolerance and xenophobia—as if we were actually better off in 1952, or 1848, or 1781 than we are today.

Or we can explore the borderlands, learn from them, and thrive in them.

Two decades ago, in her classic bilingual meditation *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the late Chicana lesbian poet and essayist Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledged that borderlands are hazardous terrain. “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe,” she wrote, “to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”

But it is in these borderlands, Anzaldúa argued, that we learn to transcend borders. Grappling with our plurality, we discover our unity. She embraced a hybrid culture of mixed heritage, *una cultura mestiza*.

“The new *mestiza*,” she wrote, develops “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . . She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out . . . nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. . . . It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs.”

Even as she raged at the multiple oppressions she and so many others endured, Anzaldúa was optimistic, even joyful: “*En unas pocas centurias* [in a few centuries],” she declared, “the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By

creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—the *mestiza* creates a new consciousness.”

The future Anzaldúa foresaw has come more swiftly than she imagined. The global economy, global migration, global communication, global music, even global warming have made everywhere the borderland. In these times, all of us, whatever our color, culture, or class, must cultivate the consciousness of the *mestiza*.

Rev. Jacqui Lewis, African-American Senior Minister of the multiracial and multicultural Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, calls the borderlands “a place of empathy where we can have power and strength. There is wisdom and theology on the margins, and we have to go there to get it.”

At the Pentecost, according to Christian scripture, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and empowered them to speak in other languages. But Lewis insists that the Pentecost “is not a Christian moment—it’s a border moment.” She invites all of us to be “multivocal,” to learn and speak each other’s languages, figuratively and literally, including the language and culture of young people.

Multivocality is nothing new for people in the borderlands.

Jacqui Lewis’s husband, Rev. John Janka, who is white, points out that people of color in the United States have always had to be multivocal, dwelling simultaneously in multiple cultures, in what W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness.” Now that all of us live in the borderlands, all of us must develop the same awareness.

Chicano theologian Virgilio Elizondo argues powerfully that Jesus himself was a *mestizo*, a borderlander, constantly crossing frontiers, shaped from childhood by cultural crosscurrents in the Roman-occupied territory of Nazareth in Galilee. This border consciousness shone in his ministry to the marginalized and the breadth of his welcome to women, sinners, tax-collectors, the sick, and the poor.

Now, I invite my white brothers and sisters to notice that there’s nothing in border consciousness about shame or self-hatred, any more than traveling abroad or learning a language other than English makes one anti-American. The borderlands expand our horizons. They call us to be more curious, more agile, and more adventurous. Feeling bad about ourselves doesn’t help anybody. I cherish my English, Scottish, and Irish heritage, even as I acknowledge white privilege and work for justice and equality.

Scientists who study ecological borderlands, the transition zones between ecosystems called “ecotones,” have discovered something they call “the edge effect.” Wetlands, tide pools, even the places where fire or clearcutting has leveled a forest—ecotones give rise to extraordinary biodiversity, with greater numbers of species and greater population densities than the communities on either side.

This congregation can be an ecotone, a borderland. We have been many times before in our history.

Two hundred years ago, during the Unitarian controversy, this church was a transition zone, a bridge, between the harsh Calvinism of our Puritan ancestors and the spirit of scientific inquiry and humanism that flourished in the nineteenth century.

In 1915, when the racist motion picture *Birth of a Nation* premiered in Boston, First Parish in Cambridge collaborated with African-American activists to organize against the film. They threw open the doors of this church for a public meeting, where our minister Samuel Crothers called *Birth of a Nation* “a deliberate and skilful bit of treachery.” Charles W. Eliot, a retired Harvard president and First Parish member, joined

representatives from African-American congregations and the NAACP in denouncing the film.

Just within the last decade, when First Parish became a Welcoming Congregation affirming the rights and dignity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, when we hung a banner over the church entrance proclaiming our support for marriage equality, we became a borderland where people of diverse sexual identities could worship together and learn from one another.

Today we are summoned once more into the borderlands.

The Third Principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to “acceptance of one another.”

We must ask: on whose terms?

Do we celebrate diversity so long as everyone conforms to our culture—eating the same food, listening to the same radio stations, speaking with the same accent, graduating from the same schools, worshiping in the same way? Do we extend our authentic welcome only to those my grandmother used to call “PLU”—People Like Us?

Or do we push ourselves beyond our comfort zones to welcome not only the stranger, but the stranger’s strangeness—with humility, curiosity, and respect?

Our Fourth Principle affirms “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We must ask: whose truth?

The truth of the victors, who write the history books and make the laws, and for whom the spoils of war have become a legacy and a birthright? Or the truth of the vanquished, the dispossessed, the refugee?

As Unitarian Universalists, we know there are many truths, many stories, and we want to hear them all.

We believe every life has inherent worth and dignity. We understand that reality cannot be reduced to a slogan, a billboard, or a creed. Reality is a tapestry of infinite variety and subtlety, beautiful precisely in its contradictions and imperfections.

And so the borderlands beckon us with their haunting promise of beauty and danger, risk and reward, multiplicity and unity.

We enter them not recklessly, not without trepidation, but with faith in ourselves, in each other, and in the power of love to cast out fear. We know our journey is a pilgrimage, a spiritual practice, that will lead us home to wholeness. We enter the borderlands singing anthems of joy.

Born in Los Angeles, the Chicana poet Gina Valdés grew up on both sides of the US-Mexico border. She’s also lived in Japan, where her husband, the artist Tadashi Hayakawa, was born. Gina Valdés knows the borderlands.

She writes:

*Hay tantísimas fronteras
que dividen a la gente,
pero por cada frontera
existe también un Puente.*

*There are so many borders
that divide people,
but for each border
there exists also a bridge.*

Welcome, my friends. Welcome to the borderlands.
Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction:

Every increment of consciousness,
every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing.
I am again an alien in new territory. . . .
Knowledge makes me more aware,
it makes me more conscious.
“Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens
I can’t stay in the same place
and be comfortable.
I am no longer the same person I was before.
—Gloria Anzaldúa