

Readings for “Through Eyes That Have Cried”

Sandra Elizabeth Borja Armero

My name is Sandra Elizabeth Borja Armero. Before I was deported, I worked with the Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras (Day Labor Theater Without Borders). My husband and son still live in Los Angeles. My son is five. We named him Barack, I would love to show you his picture. He is such a beautiful boy.

His name is ironic. Like many people I thought the election of the first black President would bring a better life for undocumented immigrants. Instead President Obama has deported more brown people than any of the white Presidents who preceded him. He has deported more than two million people.

I just want to be with him son. His name, Barack, it is ironic.

The Bus Driver

I am a victim of gang violence. I used to operate a bus with two of my friends. I was the driver. My friends tended to the passengers and collected fares. One day some gang members boarded the bus and killed the fare collector. I was allowed to live. They let my other friend live as well. Soon the gang members changed their minds. They let it be known that they planned to kill us, they did not want any witnesses to the murder. The gang murdered my friend while he ate dinner at a neighborhood *pupuseria*. That’s when I decided to leave the country. I just called my mother to let her know that I am back. She told me it was not safe to come home. I have no idea what I am going to do next.

Through Eyes that Have Cried

It was the martyred Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero who said, “There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.” Unitarian Universalist theologians Forrest Church and Rebecca Parker offer us similar advice. Church claimed that the core of our universalist theology was “to love your enemy as yourself; to see your tears in another’s eyes; to respect and even embrace otherness, rather than merely to tolerate... it.” Parker, meanwhile, wrote, “There is no holiness to be ascertained apart from the holiness that can be glimpsed in one another’s eyes.”

As many of you know, last month I spent a week in El Salvador as part of a delegation organized by the National Day Laborers Organizing Network, also called NDLO. Our goals were to better understand the reality of migration from Central America to the United States, the reasons for migration, and the experiences of deportees. During our week in El Salvador we met with academics, representatives of the Salvadoran government, and a popular education organization. The most visceral parts of the trip were our conversations and interviews with deportees and stories we heard about migrants.

I invite you to see through their eyes. I have already shared with you two stories that we gathered while in El Salvador. Let me share with you two more, one from a deportee and one from a migrant.

Imagine you are a nineteen-year-old Salvadoran woman. Your parents are dead. Your grandparents raised you in dire poverty. The home your family shares is on the outskirts of San Salvador, the country's capital and largest city. The floor is dirt. There is no running water. Growing up there was not enough food to eat. You rarely had your own bed. As you grew older you wanted to find a job to support your grandparents. They were getting old. Your grandfather had heart trouble. You searched for months. You found nothing. Finally, you decided to set out for the United States. You have a cousin who lives there. He sends your aunt and uncle money each month, more than enough for them to live on. You want to provide the same kind of support for your grandparents. Your grandmother has arthritis. It is difficult for her move.

Your grandparents and your other relatives raised money to help you on your journey to the United States. They came up with \$2,000. It was not enough to hire a coyote to guide you across the border. But it did help.

You set out. The journey took five weeks. Part of the time you walked. Part of the time you rode "El Tren de la Muerte," the death train. It is a network of freight trains that stretch from Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, to the US-Mexico Border. When you rode it you saw someone slip between freight cars and have their legs severed. You can still hear the screaming. You and several of your fellow migrants tried to ford a flooded river. You saw two young men die, drowning when the rising water swept them away. You barely made it across ahead of them.

You made it to Los Angeles. You found work, illegally, in a laundry. Your wages were enough that you could send back a couple of hundred dollars a month, provided you lived in a cramped apartment with several other migrants. You did not mind. The money was a small fortune for your grandparents. After five months there was an immigration raid on your workplace. You were caught and carted off to a detention center. You were told that if you agreed to be deported voluntarily you could return to El Salvador immediately. You refused and tried to fight deportation. So, you spent five months in a privately run deportation center in Texas before you lost your case. Every morning you woke up early to work in the facility's laundry. You made a dollar a day. The corporation who ran the center charged you that much to make a local phone call. If you wanted to buy a bag of chips from the canteen it was \$2.50. After you lost your case you were manacled, chains were put around your ankles, wrists and waist, and put on a plane back to El Salvador.

You arrived at the repatriation center outside the San Salvador airport after spending twelve hours on an airplane in chains. Everything you have with you fits into a standard issue red mesh bag: a couple of pieces of mail, your shoelaces, and a wallet. It is all you bring back with you after five months in the United States. After you are processed by immigration officials, fingerprinted, and told that there are no criminal charges pending against you locally, the woman who runs the repatriation center directs you to the phone. She tells you to call someone to pick you up. You call your grandparents. Your grandmother tells you that your grandfather died while you were in detention. He was a victim of his bad heart. No one

can meet you at the airport. It will take you at least a day to get to your grandparents house. And then what?

You are a fourteen-year-old boy. You left El Salvador after the local gang started threatening kids on your soccer team. They tried to extort money from the players' parents. To make sure everyone knew that they were serious, the gang members killed one of your teammates. They shot him in the middle of street, after school. That was when your parents sent you to the United States. They gave a coyote \$6,000, almost everything they had, and prayed the coyote could get you across the border. The journey was terrifying. You were afraid that the coyote was going to abandon you in the desert. You were afraid that he was going to kidnap you and demand that your parents pay him ransom. You made it to Los Angeles. By the time you received asylum and were safely reunited with family members there, your aunt and uncle, the gang had killed six more of your teammates. Each of them was murdered in public.

When we look through eyes that have cried what do we see? If I were placed in the same kind of situations that many migrants find themselves in, I would make the same choices that they have made. I would stuff a backpack, raise money, and depart for the unknown land of opportunity and safety. What would you do? Didn't many of our parents and grandparents do the same thing?

There are stories about migration in my family. My grandfather Morrie and great aunt Claire fled the Ukraine with their parents in the early 1920s. It was after the Russian Revolution. They were Jewish. Things for Jews in the Soviet Union seemed to be getting worse, not better. Violence was on the rise and religious persecution was increasing. My grandfather, great aunt, and my great grandparents left their home in Odessa with the clothes on their backs and whatever they could put in a small handcart. My grandfather was two or three years old. My great aunt pushed him in the handcart most of the way across Europe until they reached a port where they could sail to the United States. Their story and the stories of migrants from El Salvador vary only in the details.

It should not be hard to see through eyes that have cried. Who has not cried? And yet faced with the pain of others we humans often react fearfully rather than lovingly. We turn away. We try to push people away. Jesus offers us a story in the Christian New Testament that challenges us to greet the tears of others with love rather than with fear. You might remember it; it is usually called the "Parable of the Good Samaritan."

In the Gospel of Luke it reads: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

The Gospel reports that after telling this story, Jesus asked his listeners, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

“The one who had mercy on him,” someone replied. To which Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

There are many interpretations of this parable. One I particularly like comes from the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. He observes that the Samaritan in the story crossed the road to help the man in the ditch. The wounded victim of the robbery was not initially in the Samaritan’s path. The Samaritan made a conscious choice to aid him. Reflecting on this, Gutiérrez writes, “The neighbor... is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself, the one whom I approach and actively seek.”

This is an important lesson for Unitarian Universalists, especially Unitarian Universalists in overwhelming white and affluent congregations like this one. Many of us have the privilege to close our eyes to others. We can choose to ignore things that make us uncomfortable. We can choose to be ignorant of the violence that exists in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The majority of child refugees who have fled to the United States this summer have come from these three countries. They have some of the highest murder rates in the world. In 2012, the most recent year for which data is available, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras all ranked amongst the planet’s five most violent countries. Since 1995 El Salvador has topped the list at least five times and Honduras has topped the list at least four times.

I did not understand how violent El Salvador was until I went there. In a good year the whole country has a murder rate equivalent to that of Detroit or New Orleans. In a bad year, the murder rate can be two or three times that found in the most violent cities in this country. The communities that migrants are fleeing have murder rates significantly higher than their country’s average. If I lived in such an unstable society, I would leave it too.

Do we close our eyes? Or do we open them? Can we see through the eyes of others? It is imperative that we do. Closing our eyes is an act of fear. Opening them is an act of love. Which do you want as the motive force in your life? Fear or love?

Choosing neighbors who might make us uncomfortable is an act of love. Choosing to live with neighbors who only look, act, and think like us is an act of fear. Which shall we choose? The influx of refugee children forces us to make such choices. Shall we welcome those who are fleeing violence? They are children. They have suffered far too much already. Shall we increase their suffering and fear the changes they bring to this country? They do bring changes. They will make this nation a little browner and a little more fluent in Spanish. They also bring us the chance to see through their eyes. We need to.

The truth, and it is a truth which for many of us does not sit easy, is that this country has significant responsibility for the crisis of violence in Central America. It is a legacy of the region’s civil wars. Those wars began in the 1950s and ended in the early 1990s. The United States government fueled them, sending arms to prop up right-wing regimes against left-wing popular insurgencies. The United States military trained the death squads that massacred tens of thousands. In 1980, Oscar Romero challenged President Carter’s support

of El Salvador's right-wing, saying: "Instead of favoring greater justice and peace in El Salvador, your government's contribution... [sharpens] the injustice and the repression inflicted on the organized people..."

The cycle of deportation continues to sharpen injustice in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America. Over the past few decades the United States has deported millions of people, a small minority of whom have been gang members. When these gang members find themselves back in their country of origin they organize gangs. By deporting gang members, the United States government has exported American gang culture. The governments of Central America lack the resources to control gangs and they have spread throughout the region, bringing violence and instability with them. Immigration will not be stopped by deportation. Deportation will only further destabilize the countries that people are leaving. Deportation is an act of fear. Immigrants need to be met with love. The only way for people in the United States to stem the tide of migrants is to help stabilize the societies that they come from. In the short run, that will be far more difficult than deporting people. In the long run, it is the only solution.

Before I close, let me offer a brief coda. This week the murder of Michael Brown and the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, have made the human cost of living in a white supremacist society clear. This morning liberal and conscientious ministers across the country are focusing their sermons on our society's desperate need to address its ongoing racism. They are expressing righteous rage that unarmed African Americans continue to be gunned down by the police. They are expressing indignation that police departments throughout the United States have been militarized. Many are invoking what Michelle Alexander has called the New Jim Crow, the partially privatized prison system that continues to target, stigmatize, and marginalize people of color. Many are calling for a rejuvenated civil rights movement. A few are going so far as to echo Martin Luther King, who said, "riots are caused by nice, gentle, timid white moderates who are more concerned about order than justice;" and "The judgment of God is upon America now;" and "America too is going to Hell... If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty... she too will go to Hell." King, remember, saw racism, poverty, and militarism as interlinked. He called them the giant triplets. The triplets are born together. We will only be rid of one of them if we are rid of all of them.

The only way we will rid ourselves of the giant triplets is if we learn to see through the eyes of others. Imagine yourself in Michael Brown's situation. Imagine yourself killed by a police officer in broad daylight, unarmed, hands raised. Imagine yourself as Trayvon Martin, gunned down while walking home from a convenience store. Imagine yourself as any other of the millions of black men and women who have been victims of racial violence. Try to see the world through their eyes. You will find your own tears there, whatever the color of your skin.

This is the task of our religious community. If we are, in the words of Micah, "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" then we must learn to see with the eyes of others. We must remember, as Rebecca Parker charges us, "There is no holiness to be ascertained apart from the holiness that can be glimpsed in one another's eyes." It is only by seeing holiness in one another's eyes that we can begin to turn from fear to love. It is only by recognizing someone else's tears as our own that can overcome racism. It is only by seeing

through eyes that have cried can we learn to welcome, and not to fear, the migrants who have come to our borders.

Amen and Blessed Be.