

**Stories We Tell
Rev. Linda Simmons
Sunday, March 12, 1**

This month is about story telling. In the Weathervane, at the top of the month's sermons, I used a quote from Thomas King, "The truth about stories is, that's all we are." Thomas King is an American-Canadian writer who is also Cherokee who writes about North America's First Nations and storytelling. In his book, The Truth About Stories, he writes, "Want a different ethic? Tell a different story."¹

Gary and I were in Arizona for several weeks in February, as many of you know. And for 3 days we decided to go the Tucson and work with the Tucson Samaritans in the desert and at the border. It was a life changing experience, though as Maria Ochoa, who was our guide and a 15 year volunteer for the program told me, "Don't think because you walked in their footsteps you know what it's like to be them Linda. You don't."

Our first day with Maria with spent in the Federal Court in Tucson to observe Operation Streamline, which is a joint initiative of the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice and started in 2005.

Under Operation Streamline, those caught in the act of crossing the United States border without authorization are rounded up and subject to criminal prosecution. Under Operation Streamline, crossing the border at unauthorized

¹ Thomas King, The Truth About Stories, A Native Narrative, (Minneapolis: Dead Dog Café

check points without papers became a felony and migrants are processed under the *criminal* justice system.²

There were 35 or so immigrants there that day, all men, none of them spoke English. They were lined up 10 or so at a time, with their lawyers, chained at their feet and around their waists and hands, and asked:

- 1. Do you understand your right to trial, right to remain silent, right to testify/not to testify, right to counsel, right to appeal?**
- 2. Do you understand the terms of the plea agreement and have you discussed it with your lawyer?**
- 3. Do you wish to give up your right to trial and right to appeal?**
- 4. How do you plead? Culpable, culpable, culpable...it rang in my head. Culpable.**

And they were sentenced depending on whether this was their first offense or if they had any prior misdemeanors or records. There were no sentences handed down that day for felonies committed in this country. The only felony, now commuted by waiving a right to a trial, was crossing the border without papers.

There are many criticisms of Operation Streamline, including that people are processed en masse and not given due process as individuals, and that it makes the claims to asylum difficult to hear and process.

Also, any system of zero tolerance creates desperation and a willingness to take risks that one might not take

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Streamline

otherwise; risks that put one's life in danger. According to human rights groups, since 1994, 11,000 people have died crossing the border.³

What I saw was a room full of men looking for work and to make a better life for their children, to live in a country where they could work and offer their children an education away from violence.

Were these men bad hombres, criminals, gang members, drug runners or likely to become so if the path to citizenship was made easier? Analyses of census data from 1980 through 2010 show that among men ages 18 to 49, immigrants were *one-half to one-fifth* as likely to be incarcerated as those born in the United States. Figures from the Justice Department show that about 5 percent of inmates in state and federal prisons are noncitizens.⁴

According to The National Academies Press, created to publish the reports issued by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council, in their document entitled, *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*, "Among men age 18-39, the foreign-born are incarcerated at a rate that is one-fourth the rate for the native-born"⁵ this country.

The stories we tell, the names we use to tell them create policies, ethics, reactions, actions, laws.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant_deaths_along_the_Mexico%E2%80%93United_States_border

⁴ <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/us/trump-illegal-immigrants-crime.html>

⁵ <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society>, sum

⁶.

Gary and I learned more about the stories of the recently deported as we met so many of them after they were dropped at the Arizona border and walked to El Comedor right across the border on the Mexico side where we too spent some time. We'll tell you more about that during the slide show after service. There were other names we found: father, mother, provider, protector, child, hope, despair, longing, contributor, grateful, afraid.

There are other stories too.

In the desert in Tucson, there is a mountain, Baboquivari Mountain. Baboquivari Peak is the most sacred place to the Tohono O'odham people who are indigenous Native Americans and reside primarily in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona and northwestern Mexico, which of course used to all be part of Mexico until the Mexican-American War, which began in 1846 and ended in 1848 in which Mexico lost 55% of its national territory, including what is today California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Overnight, people became Mexican or American and who was immigrant and citizen was redefined.

The migrants coming across the desert look to this peak to help them navigate north. Heading north, it is always on their right.

In this desert, we traveled with the Tucson Samaritans for 8 hours and walked rough footpaths made by the feet of immigrants passing through. We found water bottles and

discarded backpacks and blankets and pants and sweatshirts and empty medicine packages and energy drinks. The path was rough. We had on our EMS boots and hiking gear and I tripped twice and bruised my knees.

Maria said the migrants have on sandals when they cross, or sneakers if they are lucky.

I wrote stories in my mind. I touched the backpacks and blankets, old and worn through now by weather and time. We left bottles of water. Maria wrote *bendiciones en su viaje*, Blessings for the journey. I imagined the hands that would hold those bottles, find water here. I hoped their pain would not be too great.

During the town hall meetings when they were voting to see if Phoenix would become a sanctuary city, a woman stood up and said, They chose to come here. They do this to themselves.

We saw what those people risk, what they leave behind, sometimes their very lives, the lives of their loved ones, their children. Imagine what one is running from to make this decision. What kind of choice is this?

The stories we tell to shape the choices we make to love or hate.

I have been taking an online course with Dr. Sharon Welch called, “Nonviolent Resistance.” She asked us to read a paper she wrote called, *The Persistence of the Prophetic*.⁶

In her paper, Welch talks about the work of social psychologist, Dr. Albert Bandura who writes about how easy it is for moral clarity and absolutism to lead to cruelty to and violence. Bandura names 7 practices of what he calls “moral disengagement”⁷ – what Welch calls ways that genuinely decent human beings commit and justify behaviors that they would otherwise recognize as morally repugnant.

The first is being convinced one is fighting a just cause against an ruthless oppressor, saving the world from subjugation.

The second is using language that is metaphorical: collateral damage rather than death, professional interrogation rather than torture, etc.

The third is comparison: our violence pales in comparison to theirs.

⁶ Sharon Welch, “The Persistence of the Prophetic: Honoring and Engaging the Work of Marc Ellis,” *Academy of Religion*, San Francisco, CA, Nov. 21, 2011.

⁷ Welch, 3.

The 4th and 5th are the diffusion and displacement of responsibility- one claims they were following orders, or that an atrocity is the responsibility of one or two misguided individuals, not the system. In the case of Abu Ghraib, the early outrage of Tony Blair was quickly replaced by a displacement of responsibility on what were seen as a few ill-trained and misguided soldiers, and the policy decisions by government officials that not only allowed but fostered such abuse have even yet to be thoroughly investigated.⁸

The sixth practice is the disregard or the distortion of the consequences of one's actions on another. If one can minimalize the harm their actions are creating on another, which is facilitated by not seeing the result of one's actions in our age of faceless warfare and also in our age of distraction and separation, then one can imagine that there really is no terrible consequence to an action. Before I heard the stories of bones in the desert and saw the graves of those who came to the road side hoping ICE would find them in time before they died of hunger and thirst...the effects of these policies didn't touch me either, didn't reach my moral barometer.

We can go on making claims about right and wrong, legal and illegal and not need take in the moral calamity that is wrecked all around us and through us.

⁸ Welch, 4.

The last practice of moral disengagement that Bandura mentions that allows us to engage in and/or support actions that are or lead to cruelty is dehumanization and/or demonizing of the victim. Bad hombre, criminal, rapist, killers, illegal. How can a person be illegal?

Welch tells us, if you see it and know it for what it is, a story told to enable immoral action, then you can name it, be prepared for it, and speak and act against it.

During our Indivisible Meeting last week, someone stood up from the Latino community and told us that there is so much fear in her community. She could hardly speak when she said, "What they are saying about us." People in the good and well meaning gathering responded immediately, "How can we help?" The woman speaking said, "There is no trust among our people for you."

At that point, so many of us responded with ideas for potlucks and dinners and rides and meetings and joint projects and if I had had the capacity then, I would have said this:

Can we take a moment of silence and sit with the feelings that we of not being trusted? Please, breathe, and be still and be quiet and tell me, What are you feeling? I was feeling so inadequate and sad.

I told some people later that I wished I had taken this moment of silence and asked this question and they said they would have answered that they were feeling responsible, guilty, worried, scared, angry, helpless and foolish that before this crisis they had not worked to build trust.

At the border wall where we drove after our day in the desert, which is 6 miles long in Sasabe Arizona, we stopped in our 4 wheel truck and had lunch on a big rock, right where the wall ended.

It is built along the less rugged terrain to force those that would cross into the rougher territory.

The border patrol rides up and down the large dirt road on the US side in their trucks. The dust is always flying up. As we were eating from our brown bags: nuts and yogurt and peanut butter and banana sandwiches, Maria told us that the road is swept with huge tires dragged behind trucks each night so that if anyone climbs over the wall at night, which is not hard to do, their footprints will be left.

People crossing make booties from blankets or rugs and tie them over their regular shoes and they hardly leave any prints at all so they cannot be tracked.

To be invisible. To leave no prints. To erase oneself so that one does not.

When we were driving away that day, the long rust colored wall to our right, there was a Latino man in the hills on the US side to our left, looking lost. Maria told Peter, her other Samaritan volunteer to stop the car. She got out and yelled over the cascading hills covered with scrub and cacti, “Necesitas ayuda?” Do you need help?

“No, he replied, “busco a mi caballo perdido.” I’m looking for my lost horse.

After I smiled, I started to weep quietly as we drove on, dust settling on our skin. What we have done if he did need help? You cannot put anyone crossing in your car. It is against the law. You can only give food, medicine, water. We would have walked that ½ mile over that forbidding terrain and given him what we could. We would have affirmed his humanity. Bandaged his feet. The feet get so terribly wounded we learned at El Comedor in Mexico. We would have wished him luck, buena suerte. Good Luck. Lo siento. I am sorry.

Buena suerte. Lo siento.

At the end of the three 8 hours days that Maria spent with us, I thanked her with tears in my eyes. She said to me, “Linda, I have often wondered how to reach your part of the country. You have a pulpit. And now you have a responsibility.”

I have told you now. It’s part of your story now.

It does not have to mean that we all become immigration rights’ activists. It can mean that we all consider how we

tell stories, use words, repeat events, speak to our children, our co-workers, our friends.

It might mean that you and I consider that we have begun a journey together, a migration of sorts, into terrain that is unmarked. It can be scary. I like to stick to marked roads myself. I was afraid when the roads we traveled in the desert did not come up on the GPS.

What is marked is this knowing we have that this is our country, our time, our people, our history, our story and this chapter my friends is being written right now. Take out your pens, turn the page. What would you like to say? Let's listen with more care and speak with more intention.

As the poet John O'Donohue writes,

**May you listen to your longing to be free
May you find a harmony between your soul and your life.
May the sanctuary of your soul never become haunted.**

**May there be kindness in your gaze when you look within.
May you never place walls between the light and yourself.
May you allow the wild beauty of the world
To gather you, mind you, and embrace you in belonging.⁹**

Amen

⁹ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Spae Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 44.