

Sermon, March 17, 2019
Borderless Crossing
Rev. Linda Simmons

As most of you know, Gary and I just spent 3 weeks in Pine AZ and one week in Tijuana, Mexico doing immigration witness work. I will tell you so much more about what we learned in Tijuana as these weeks pass.

Gary and I neglected to check the weather for Pine, mountainous Pine at 5, 500 feet. We brought our trekking shoes, light jackets and summer pants and shirts. When we arrived after our 5 and half hour flight and 2 hour drive north to the Arizona pine forest, it felt chillier than we expected. Oh well, we can always layer, we quipped.

As we have been doing now for several months, we woke every morning in our tiny, lovely cabin and meditated on beads that were gifted to us in India last year and then listened to Pema Chodron's class, "The Sacred Journey: How to live and die fearlessly."¹

Part 4 of Pema's talk is called, *Styles of Imprisonment*. Okay, what else is a ministerial couple to do on vacation but consider how we are imprisoned?

According to Tibetan Buddhism and Pema Chodron, a popular Tibetan Buddhist nun who was married and had a child before she became a nun, there are 6 realms that the majority of us spend our lives imprisoned within. These realms can also free us but only if we watch closely, tell the truth about our habitual patterns and stories we tell over and over and with compassion and humor, let ourselves and others off the hook. Tall order when it comes right down to it. We like our stories!

There are 3 lower realms and 3 upper realms. In all of these realms, we work to hang onto pleasure and avoid pain. And we can believe it can be done, that we can fulfill our desires and hold onto that pleasure, because sometimes it works.

Sometimes we order a pizza and the crust is perfect and the topping has everything we love on it cooked just right, and for a few moments, we are happy. Until the dissatisfaction peeps its head around the next corner, like when we forget that 4 slices gives us belly aches or when the delivery person comes late and it's all cold, or like when the internet does not work or when it snows 36 inches when you thought it would be 70 degrees like last time you were in Pine, AZ!

Pema encourages us to learn that nothing is permanent, and happiness and unhappiness are but cycles on the wheel of life.

¹ <https://courses.shambhala.com/this-sacred-journey/>

The 3 lower realms include the hell realm, where you feel that everyone and everything is against you. This realm has a lot of anger. It is a reactionary realm where we lash out when our expectations or needs are not met the way we are sure they should be.

Then there is the hungry ghost realm where we have a poverty mentality, an insatiable hunger for something that cannot be satisfied. In this world, we experience ourselves as victims, and often feel left out.

The last of the 3 realms, the animal realm, is about the need to want everything to stay the same, to be predictable. When things are unpredictable, we get anxious and numb out with whatever our substance or activity of numbing is.

The second day Gary and I were in Pine, the snow started and would not stop, I went into the hungry ghost realm where I felt victimized. I wanted warmth; I needed warmth; I deserved warmth. Right? And when the snow kept coming and the quarter mile uphill crushed red rock driveway that led to our little cabin became impassable, the animal realm took me over, or my need to have everything be as expected. What if one of us got sick, broke a leg, had a dangerously high fever? How would we get out?

Each morning, Pema would incite us to notice our story lines and the suffering they caused us. And each morning Gary would rekindle our fire and make us some tea as the dawn rose lazily over the mountains and the elk came, walking gracefully with high steps as if their feet landed each time in something sticky, and they lifted their heads to reach higher to find food and the birds landed on trees beside our window and flapped their wings dry.

And so, we started walking. We put plastic bags inside our shoes and threw on 2 pairs of pants and 2 sweaters and our light jackets and we started walking.

The snow on the driveway was up past our knees. I started calling it the Hell Path. It was so painstaking to push our legs through the snow, to keep our eyes up from the glare of sun, to breathe slowly and remain still while our lungs pumped and our hearts beat through our thin jackets.

We walked up and down that hell path drive and then ventured along the snow and ice covered back country roads into the little, conservative, town of Pine where the tiny grocery store sells white bread and batteries and the trucks in the lot have Make America Great Again bumper stickers and gun racks.

As Pema got under our skin and we realized that we could still enjoy this trip, we walked into town every day, up and down the mountainous roads and over streams that came up over the tar for 30 feet across and were too deep for our plastic bags to handle.

When we'd come to these bits, we'd wait for a truck to come along, and usually one full of dogs would stop, and we'd pile in for the seconds drive over the water and then pile back out, smelling like golden retrievers.

Each day, we'd eat at the Tavern we never even thought of eating in before. Gary got a salad and I got fish and chips. Oh, how I love fish and chips and I did believe, until the bellyache an hour later, that this happiness could last forever if I just put more tartar sauce on it! And we started talking to people.

The first of the upper 3 realms, called so because their suffering is less intense, is the Jealous God realm. Here, we compete. We look to see how others are doing and we want to do better or for them to do worse. We can only feel whole when others are not shining too bright.

The next realm is the God Realm, when we are so secure in what we think and believe that we come from a position of superiority without even knowing it. Those of us in this realm think our taste is good taste. We give to charity, do the right things, read the right books, while quietly convinced our way is the right way. We don't risk anything. We like comfort and we fight to keep it.

I think many of us in America and in Unitarian Universalism spend too much time in this realm feeling like how we see it is how it is and sit easy inside that comfy story too often.

To shake us out of our realm, which ever one we were trapped in that day, as we became known, at the Tavern, as those two with mismatched piles of clothes on and bags on their feet, we started listening and talking and learned about Pine and how people take care of one another there, how they hope for a sense of place, home, dignity, and possibility for their children.

We made a few friends and one invited us to a Baptist church on one Sunday and we went, even took our plastic bags off at the door and learned about how this love of god and Jesus can be one that makes people better, more compassionate, more able to see themselves for who they are. Turns out Jesus can be a realm buster sometimes! Who knew!

The last realm is the Human Realm, where we believe if we could just get xy or z, that new car or new partner or new house or if we could just attain that last bit that we lack, then we would be happy.

Pema tells us that as we admit we are in one of these realms, well, sometimes the snow melts and the plastic bags get thrown away and the drive is plowed after 5 days, just in time to get to Tijuana and do immigration justice work.

Part of me was hoping the driveway never got plowed. They needed a back hoe to do it and these were all working day and night to clear the off grid mountain pathways of Pine. For all my travels, I was really afraid of this trip to Tijuana. All the violent conversation and literal violence of the border got into me. The fear was deep in me.

And then we watched the next session of Pema and she said that staying in the comfort zone only creates more unhappiness because all comforts are so temporary and it is in the challenge zone where we not only grow by watching our habitual patterns and stories come up, but learn some peace too as we slowly, heartbreakingly, and with life giving clarity, come to accept that everything changes and clinging to any of it is folly.

And the back hoe came the morning we were to leave. It just showed up and worked for a few hours and there we were, plowed out! Sometimes the only path can be the one right in front of you!

After 8 hours of driving, through mountains and deserts, we parked on the American side of the border and walked across, with passports this time! There were throngs of people crossing. The Mexican border patrol did not detain us or anyone too long. They asked a few questions, checked our passports and sent us on our way.

We got a taxi and even in the taxi I was afraid, worried that the driver would not take us to Casa del Migrante but cause us some harm. Some of this was simply white privilege. The idea that anyone that looks or speaks differently than we do must be dangerous is rampant in our culture. It is of course a form of racism. I am usually awake to this in myself, but I could not get ahead of it this time.

Oh and Casa del Migrante! It is a structure built around a courtyard that is open to the sky. There are huge rooms for meals and games and a school in the back where classes on parenting, marriage, English, Spanish, computers and art are taught. There is a social worker, a lawyer and administrator and Father Pat, the dry humored priest born in Brooklyn who heads up the mission and offers a place of compassion for over 150 migrants, who wait for a reason to hope.

The day we arrived had been long. After our tour of the facility, I asked if we could be shown our room so we could rest. Our room was 2 single beds and a little bathroom that smelled of urine. It was dank and stark with a single light bulb above the bed and bars on the small window that opened to the busy street.

The street below our window was noisy as was the Casa, so we stuffed our ear plugs in deeper and sought sleep. Suddenly, another noise began, one that felt like the bed was shaking. It was grating and persistent and we tossed and turned as the night went on and the street and the Casa quieted but the grating noise did not.

It must have been 10pm when we went to find Father Pat, dear, patient Father Pat who was thankfully still up and we asked if we could change our room, there was a rattling, shaking sound that would not abate. He agreed and when we went back to get our pillows and blankets, I listened more closely to the sound and put my ear up to the tall, flimsy dresser in between the 2 beds and started opening drawers. And there in the middle drawer, rattling the whole dresser, was my electric tooth brush vibrating away!

That was it for me. Awakening comes in many forms, including running electric toothbrushes. I was given a short reprieve in which I stopped grasping and turned away from fear.

We woke the next morning and started listening and extending our hands and hearts. The stories. Miguel is 32 years old. He lived in the US for 20 years and was deported for missing two child support payment. He was kept in a detention center cell for 23 hours a day for one month in a detention center while his case was processed and then he was deported to Tijuana. I asked him, “You have so much light in you, where does it come from Miguel?” He told me, “Linda, it is from loving God and being loved by God.” “But didn’t your god leave you in a detention center for 23 hours a day for one month?” “No,” he said, “people did that. God’s love kept me sane in there. God set me free.”

Over and over, in one way or another, we heard stories of faith and bravery, a bravery that is almost unspeakable, a bravery that put children on shoulders crossing a river up to necks after navigating the Columbian jungle for 5 days without food or water. A bravery that set off from Ghana and Afghanistan and Honduras with so little and arrived with much less as it all got too heavy, too burdensome, too much.

All they could carry in the end was one another.

Beto O’Rourke, the former congressman from El Paso who failed to unseat Senator Ted Cruz, spoke at a march in El Paso designed to counter the pro-border-wall rally that President Trump was holding in town. He spoke of the border as a transnational place.

“Here, in the largest binational community in the Western Hemisphere,” O’Rourke said, speaking of El Paso and its neighbor, Ciudad Juárez, “two and a half million people, two countries, speaking two languages, with two cultures, and two histories, who come together—are joined, not separated—by the Rio Grande river, forming something far greater and more powerful than the sum of our parts...this is a place not where American political imagination ends but where it begins.”²

If India taught me that I know so little about love, Tijuana taught me that I know so little about forgiveness. No one shunned me for being American, for being from the country that not only participated in destabilizing their own, but for being part of a militarized border and racist national discourse.

They thank us, embraced us, cooked for us, included us in their jokes and stories and tears.

We are one people. What we are sorely in need of in this country is humility, forgiveness, and the courage to make sacrifices in the name of what is bigger than our personal safety. What the migrants we met were in need of was a sense of place, home, a possibility of wanting what those in snow covered Pine told us we all want: enough to go on with dignity, and possibility for their children.

² <https://www.newyorker.com/news/current/beto-orourkes-radical-vision-of-the-border>

The border is where American political imagination begins, O'Rourke tells us, not ends. What would this look like? What do we have to let go and learn to embrace to recognize that building walls and militarizing borders keeps us all from being whole? What if we saw one another as embedded in a mutuality that not only asks of us but that makes us human, too.

When we left Tijuana, we walked back across the border. This time, the lines were multiple and long and slow moving. Many were taken aside for further questioning. When it came our turn to be questioned and show our passports, the tall North American Border Patrol Guard said, "What were you doing in Mexico?" I hesitated. I was tired. I was ready to find our car and close the doors and put on some music and let the desert wind carry me effortlessly for a while.

I was ready for comfort, even while knowing that so many needed it more than I did. But as life would have it, Miguel, his belief that what gives him hope comes from something interconnected and holy, entered my imagination and I said, "We were doing immigration justice work at Casa del Migrante." More questions followed. I straightened my back and answered with the heart that grew in Tijuana, eating and sharing space and time with migrants from all over the world. Such a tiny risk compared to what migrants risk everyday but it helped me break out of my belief that I deserved comfort, it interrupted the discourse of my white privilege story line, which Pema would tell me is from the god realm that insists on our right to comfort.

We must learn to comfort one another by risking our own comfort. When we close in around a discourse, when our habitual patterns and stories come to have a force that makes us expect we deserve to stay in them, when our hearts and minds forget what it is to risk something for another who is not part of our immediate circle, we grow small, walled in, sealed off from the transformative power of love.

Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who works with African Americans on death row, says,

"There is a power in brokenness. It is the broken among us who can teach us the way compassion works. It is the broken who understand the power of mercy. It is the broken who understand the power of justice. It is the broken that yearn for redemption. It is the broken who yearn for reconciliation. It is the broken who need to teach us how we love despite our brokenness. And it's in brokenness that I realized I'm not just fighting for the condemned. I'm fighting for myself."³

³ Bryan Stevenson, lecture, Gadsden State Community College, September 2, 2016.

Let us fight for one another to be not comfortable, not satisfied, not content, but to be awakened to the holy discourse of mutuality, that will not let us stay still, but shakes us and sends out into the unknown to remember forgiveness and love.

Amen.