

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The Defiant Birds and Grasses

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING**I want to build a wall***Diana Poulos-Lutz*

I want to build a wall that's part of your home,
that blocks the cold
and rain while you rest.

I want to build a wall
with a window tall and wide
so you can gaze out as the
sun rises and sets and
see all the beauty in the ordinary—
a window that you can open
to hear songs of birds
and feel freedom and possibility
on your skin with each warm breeze
or cold gust of wind that visits you.

I want to build a wall
with a door that can lock out your
fears, or open wide when you're ready
to face them.

I want to build a wall
sturdy and safe on the outside,
a blank canvas on the inside,
so you can paint the rainbow
of your spirit
or hang photographs of people
and places that make your heart dance.

I want to build a wall
that you can lean on if you need
to weep or hide in silence—
and then one day place a mirror
on that wall that shows you
what your smile looks like
when you're in love with life or another,
or the success in your eyes
after a long day
or as you're dressed
in courage and strength.

I want to build you that wall.

SECOND READING

There is many a living thing...

Gil Hoy

There is many
a living thing
That doesn't love
a wall.
Like hunters, rabbits
and yelping dogs
Like the pine trees
and apple orchards
Like human beings—
Who are not cows—
And quirky elves don't
like them much either.
The frozen-ground-
swells beneath can crack
Even the strongest stone.
And there are many gaps
Between the stones
nonetheless. You can
Rub your fingers rough
and raw by placing
and replacing
The fallen stones.

Mr. President:

I see you walking in the darkness.
An old, rough savage-stone
Firmly grasped in each
armed hand.

Like an aged hypothermic man
who is lost
and cannot find his way
Like your crotchety, stubborn
neighbor beyond the hill.

Mr. President:

Spring is coming.
Let's walk the lines:
Remove the walls
separating pines
and trees bearing fruit.
Pull up the stakes,
fill in the ditch, until
not a trace remains.

Mr. President:

Forget your father
He was so very wrong.
Good walls, like selfish men,
make bad neighbors.

THIRD READING

Hymn (excerpt)

from Sherman Alexie, winner of three PEN awards and the National Book Award. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

Why do we measure people's capacity
To love by how well they love their progeny?
That kind of love is easy. Encoded.
Any lion can be devoted
To its cubs. Any insect, be it prey
Or predator, worships its own DNA.

Like the wolf, elephant, bear, and bees,
We humans are programmed to love what we conceive.

But how much do you love the strange and stranger?
Hey, Caveman, do you see only danger
When you peer into the night? Are you afraid
Of the country that exists outside of your cave?
Hey, Caveman, when are you going to evolve?
Are you still baffled by the way the earth revolves
Around the sun and not the other way around?
Are you terrified by the ever-shifting ground?

I'm an atheist who believes in grace if not in God.
I'm a humanist who thinks that we're all not
Humane enough.

So let me ask demanding questions:
Will you protect the poor?
Will you welcome the lost to your shore?
Who will you be? Who will I become
As we gather in this terrible kingdom?
My friends, I'm not quite sure what I should do.
I'm as angry and afraid and disillusioned as you.
But I do know this: I will resist hate. I will resist.
I will stand and sing my love. I will use my fist
To drum and drum my love. I will write and read poems
That offer the warmth and shelter of any good home.
I will sing for people who might not sing for me.
I will sing for people who are not my family.
I will sing honor songs for the unfamiliar and new.
I will visit a different church and pray in a different pew.
I will silently sit and carefully listen to new stories
About other people's tragedies and glories.
I will not assume my pain and joy are better.
I will not claim my people invented gravity or weather.
And, oh, I know I will still feel my rage and rage and rage
But I won't act like I'm the only person onstage.
I am one more citizen marching against hatred.
Alone, we are defenseless. Collected, we are sacred.
We will march by the millions. We will tremble and grieve.
We will praise and weep and laugh. We will believe.
We will be courageous with our love. We will risk danger
As we sing and sing and sing to welcome strangers.

The Defiant Birds and Grasses

When we are deported back to Guatemala, we will go on a plane. We will go on Spirit Airline past Ft. Meyers and Miami all the way down. And you will come with us and stay a long time. I know how to get you a ticket on my mom's phone.

These are quotes from conversations I've been having recently with a young friend.

When we are deported back to Guatemala, you will come with us and stay in our house. There will be no snakes to bite you. A pastor in our old place was bitten by a snake, or maybe it was the pastor's son. It was bad, but that was our other pastor, and you will be safe because we will build a new house from cement and no snakes will come in.

When we are deported back to Guatemala, we will go on a plane, and you will come with us, and stay a long time, two weeks. And then if I forget something in my room, I can come back with you and get it and go back again. My mom will ride with us, or my sister.

"I'm not sure I can do that," I said, "but I'd like to."

Don't worry about the snakes, he said. I saw a big one once when I was peeing in the woods, when we had no bathroom inside. It was a friendly snake, but still my soul jumped right into my mouth.

"What did you just say?" I said, because I love the sound of that. I love how words and phrases shimmer across the border of our two languages and make everything we try to say, everything we're trying to convey, so much livelier: sometimes hilarious, but mostly beautiful.

My soul jumped into my mouth, you know?

"I do."

When we are deported back to Guatemala, you will visit us. You will sleep in a room in our house like I sleep in your church. You can bring some people. And when I come back to visit you I can stay here. I will come back to go to college so I can be a doctor. And my mom and my sister will visit us. And if anybody in the church is sick, I'll have the medicine.

When we are deported back to Guatemala...

"Wait, what did you say?" I ask him now. "Do you think about that? A lot? When are you going?"

I don't know, he says. Anytime. But you will visit us. And we will visit you in 10 years when I'm 20. It's ok!

"Maybe I will," I said. And, "No, you won't," I thought. "You will not be visiting. If you are deported, when you are deported, you will not be coming back. And it is not ok."

“When we are deported back to Guatemala,” says his mother, “it will be very dangerous.” She is not talking about snakes. “I don’t know how we can live.” Then she smiles and says, “It’s ok. God will show us his plan.” I’m learning from her, as we all are, how to hold it, the uncertainty.

I don’t know what it’s like to watch the news from your bed in a religious education classroom and hear yourself referred to as a national emergency. Our ten year-old friend knows, better than I will ever know, the cruelty of the system, the vagaries and arbitrary whimsy of the system, the ugliness of rhetoric and broken policy. But still he vividly imagines passing back and forth with ease for the rest of his life between these two worlds he loves and knows, north of the border, south of the border, the two homes where he is most at home, between the people he loves, both elsewhere and here, who love him. He’s really smart, he takes everything in, but he can’t quite yet imagine, he’s too young to be convinced that really, he’s not wanted here at all.

And, in fact – I believe that actually he’s not as unwanted as we’re being asked to believe. I think that millions and millions of people on this side of the border know that the only crisis right now is a moral crisis. I believe most people know that murderous hordes of drug traffickers, job stealers and gang members and al Qaida operatives disguised as Mexican women and children are not swarming into El Paso, San Diego and Tucson. The emergency is a moral emergency: what do we do when thousands and thousands of people are forced to flee poverty and violence, forced to leave their homes in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq... ? Millions of us have no clear idea what to do regarding millions of refugees - this is ever unfolding - but I believe most people, or at least many, don’t really to break up families, or keep little kids in jail, or send people back to their deaths, send back beautiful young dreamers who’ve been here since babyhood, since preschool, through kindergarten, elementary school, the middle school band, the high school play and football, and they know no other country, speak no other language, love no other home at all except Aiken, Minnesota. Cloquet. St. Paul. Albert Lea. Bemidji. Blue Earth. Rochester. Minneapolis. Maplewood. Ahtomedi. White Bear Lake- their very own home towns. I don’t believe most people want that wall expanded.

Neither does our young friend, who talked to me this week. He doesn’t believe it, either, not just because he just a little kid, who can’t track what’s going on, what’s being said – he’s smart. He can’t believe America doesn’t want him because he has this large heart, this big loving heart, and he knows his own worth and can’t believe other people can’t see it shining out of him. He is ten years old. If you’ve met him in the hallway here, you know he’s confident. He trusts that everyone can see how likeable he is, how valuable, how rare. He is like a bird, the condors of the desert, the seagulls further west, the sparrows, all the wild birds that soar over that wall down there every day with a radiant and natural disregard, scattering seeds. They carry no papers. They have no Real I.D. All those migrations of life. Their defiance is breathtaking, and instructive.

When I travelled to the border a few years ago with the UU College of Social Justice, we walked on different days along the wall. I have a picture of my own hand through the slats: my one hand in Mexico, taken with my other hand in the United States. People have picnics there sometimes, relatives and loved ones, passing food and drinks between the bars. It’s dangerous, the border

guards don't like it, you can't do that everywhere or all the time, but sometimes it's worth it to risk being simply human, to embrace your brother or your grandma or a stranger with defiance through the bars. I have pictures of my feet on the grass, the stiff, resilient desert grass, each plant along the wall sinking its roots deep in the soil of two countries, seeking the groundwater down below the two countries, plants with no passports, the defiant flowers wrapping tendrils from both sides around those steel columns.

Not everything is so resilient. In December the Supreme Court issued a ruling to waive 28 federal laws, including the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Air Act, so new wall construction can begin. They were already getting ready for right now. One scientist in Arizona says, "Border walls are death sentences for wildlife and humans alike. They block wild animals from accessing the food, water and mates they need to survive. They weaken genetic diversity, fragment habitat, and trap animals in deadly floods. At the same time, they drive desperate asylum seekers to risk their lives in the unforgiving desert."

Another writes,

Borderlands are special spaces where diverse communities blend within the overlapping edges of two worlds. Where the United States meets Mexico, a 2,000-mile stretch of land bridges the tropical and temperate zones. Here jaguars and ocelots share the landscape with their northerly cousins, the cougar and bobcat. Green jays, Altamira orioles and elegant trogons perch side-by-side on mesquite, ebony, and cottonwood branches with northern cardinals and mockingbirds. The borderlands harbor some of North America's rarest wild species, all of whom predate the United States' existence as a nation, and they contain some of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the continent. More than 450 rare species live here – some cannot be found anywhere else on the planet. At least 700 neotropical birds, mammals, and insects migrate through the borderlands each year. Abundant evidence has shown over the past decade that constructed barriers do not stop people. But they have destroyed and fragmented rare habitats, blocked migration corridors for endangered species, undercut the borderlands economy, and, along with a policy of militarization that dates to the early 1990s, such walls have led to the deaths of more than 6,000 human migrants.

"There is many a living thing that doesn't love a wall," says Gil Hoy, and that's true.

As Sara told you just now, our offering today will go to the organization, No More Deaths/ *No Mas Muertes*, which is housed in the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Tucson. When I went to the border, we walked with them into the desert one day, stopping at a makeshift shrine where travelers had died, of desert heat or desert cold. Every day they place gallons of water all along the trails the people travel, thousands of gallons a year, because the wall has been deliberately designed to force people from the safer routes to the deadlier ones. No More Deaths has assumed two critical roles in the desert: delivering water, and recovering bodies.

This week when I was walking, a great V of trumpeter swans flew over – our magnificent winter swans on their great white wings, and way up in the Arctic, people must say the same thing: our magnificent summer swans. I think of the humming birds and monarch butterflies (our hummingbirds and butterflies) and how way down in Mexico the people must say the same thing about those selfsame animals. No amount of milkweed we grow here will save them if lands

along the border are disrupted and destroyed. And I think of this child we've grown to love, and his family: what will happen to his wings, to his spirit, to his heart, his mind, his very body, when he starts banging up against that wall in earnest, the wall of fear and loathing? I think of this, and my soul jumps into my mouth.

We spent some time this week looking at pictures online of his village, in central Guatemala, the most lovely, lush, green paradise, with a great river running through it and mountains all around, on the edge of a national forest. But the thumbnails on the screen were not all flowers and waterfalls. *Just click past*, he said, *that's a bad one, just click past*, shutting his eyes as we stumbled on pictures of dismembered bodies in ditches, young women who look just like his mother and his sister, young men, old people, children who look just like him, left on the side of the road by gangs at the epicenter of the cartel drug economy. *Just click past*, he said, *that's bad*, he said, as we moved on to soccer fields and lakes. But we really can't click past the interlaced economies of Central America and our own America, the history, which is a corporate history and a colonial history, of that America and this America. Like the land itself, like the air and water, everything's irrevocably interconnected. It's not like we were always here and they were always there.

I found this globe in a classroom here, donated by John and Katie Macke. It belonged to Katie's dad, and was published in 1936 by the George F. Cram Company in Indianapolis. If you look closely, you can make out all kinds of boundaries and borders, countries and continents named and divided: Yugoslavia, Italian East Africa, Belgian Congo, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Rhodesia, Burma, Siam, the Irish Free State, French Indochina, Palestine... These names all mattered once, to generals and presidents, dictators, kings, and to little kids in geography class memorizing all the countries and their capitals. But from the point of view of whales and aspen groves, tiger lilies, clouds, mosquitos, elephants, the grey wolf, prairie dogs, polar bears, forests and thistles, all the defiant birds and grasses, the demarcations on this globe haven't changed at all. From where you're sitting now, it looks just the same as in 1936 when it was new, and 1836, and 2036, and the dawn of time and the end of the earth – the hand-drawn lines all disappear, perhaps allowing other channels of relationship to be revealed and maybe cherished. I love old globes like this that allow you to see how the rays of the sun are warming different parts of the earth when others are still dark, and all around the rim of the stand, the seasons of the year and the signs of the zodiac visible from different places on the so-called ground. Things come back to perspective.

You can't see it from where you're sitting, neither can I from here, but all over this globe right now people are swarming, we move in swarms, in herds, in flocks, like locusts and antelopes and woolly mammoths, always walking toward water, always seeking food, always migrating toward safety for our young, and in our case, the case of our specific species, toward love and home, compassion. This is very old, this longing for welcome and home, almost as old as the longing for life that we share with all the other animals, the plants. *I was a stranger and you welcomed me*, says one ancient holy text. This is our shared experience as human animals. *My father was a wandering Aramean*, says another sacred text, one of the oldest in the Hebrew bible, and

essential: we come from wanderers, all of us: aliens, exiles, migrants, flocks and families. The land belongs to no one, nor can it, in the end.

I'm not saying we should open the border, or abolish it.
I'm saying the wall is a travesty and a tragedy.

We build walls when we're afraid. When we're afraid of memories, we partition them off – and sometimes this is good for us, and sometimes it is not. When we're afraid of intimacy, we throw up a barrier, and sometimes that's a healthy boundary, and sometimes it is not. When we're afraid of getting in too deep, of caring too much, afraid of being overwhelmed by the sorrows of the world or the sadness of someone close by, when we're afraid that there's nothing we can do to help, and worry that we might lose ourselves in trying, wary of drowning in compassion fatigue, we shut down our attention, shut off the flow of love and healing light, dam the channels of compassion. Sometimes that's an act of wise and protective self-care, and sometimes it's not wise at all. Sometimes, for fear of being unheard ourselves, we throw up a wall against listening. Sometimes, for fear of being unseen ourselves, of being invisible, we throw up a wall against seeing another person in their full humanity. This can happen on the smallest, most intimate scale, with a partner, a parent, a child or a friend. We know what walls are: we build them when we're scared, and sometimes we build too high, sink the pilings too deep, use concrete and iron and steel instead of soft tissue, the translucent tiny veins that carry blood and love; we damage the landscape beyond easy repair, and forget sometimes that walls work both ways. To build a barrier is to build a kind of prison, with ourselves on the inside, lost. Sometimes a wall is a tragedy.

*I want to build a wall
with a window tall and wide
so you can gaze out as the
sun rises and sets and
see all the beauty—
a window that you can open
to hear songs of birds
and feel freedom and possibility
on your skin with each warm breeze
or cold gust of wind that visits you.
I want to build a wall
with a door that can lock out your
fears, or open wide when you're ready
to face them.
I want to build a wall
sturdy and safe on the outside,
a blank canvas on the inside,
so you can paint the rainbow
of your spirit
or hang photographs of people
and places that make your heart dance.
I want to build a wall*

*that you can lean on if you need
to weep or hide in silence—
and then one day place a mirror
on that wall that shows you
what your smile looks like
when you're in love with life or another,
or as you're dressed
in courage and strength.
I want to build you that wall.*

A wall, like a globe, is all about perspective. Borders between us are all about perspective.

Brian Bilston is a poet (from England, I think). He has a piece called refugees; I want to invite you to read it with me.

*They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way*

And now I invite you to read it again, this time, from the bottom up.

SILENCE

These words are from Sherman Alexie:

*My friends, I'm not quite sure what I should do.
I'm as angry and afraid and disillusioned as you.*

*But I do know this: we will resist hate.
We will stand and sing will love. We will use our fists
To drum and drum our love.
I will sing for people who might not sing for me.
We will sing for people who are not our family.
We will sing honor songs for the unfamiliar and new.
We will visit different churches and pray in different pews.
We will silently sit and carefully listen to new stories
About other people's tragedies and glories.
We will not assume our pain and joy are better.
We will not claim our people invented gravity or weather.
And, oh, we know we will still feel rage and rage and rage
But we won't act like we're the only ones onstage.*

*Alone, we are defenseless. Collected, we are sacred.
We will march by the millions. We will tremble and grieve.
We will praise and weep and laugh. We will believe.
We will be courageous with our love. We will risk danger*

risk falling in love, and drowning in love,

*We will risk danger
As we sing and sing and sing to welcome strangers.*

Quotes about the ecology of the borderlands:

Amanda Munro, in 'Death sentence': butterfly sanctuary to be bulldozed for Trump's border wall
by Samuel Gilbert in [The Guardian](#).

Krysta Schlyer, *Embattled Borderlands: a story map*
<http://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2017/embattled-borderlands/index.html>