

Handout 6.1 - We Are One by UUA President, Rev. Peter Morales

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The hilly countryside of Chiapas is dotted everywhere with milpas, patches of corn. These milpas look nothing like the vast ocean of hybridized, fertilized, industrialized, subsidized corn that stretches from Nebraska to New York State. In Chiapas, the corn plants are farther apart, and the corn is mixed with beans and squash in an ancient, sustainable combination that produces a diet with all the essential amino acids. The corn is tended by hand, in little plots worked by individual families.

Chiapas is Mexico's southernmost state, bordering Guatemala. In both regions, impressive Mayan ruins dot the landscape and draw tourists. The descendants of that great civilization live today in abject poverty. The children are malnourished. Many cannot afford milk. Mayans are on the margins of society, living today, as they have for the past five hundred years, under an oppressive regime that denies their basic human rights.

My wife Phyllis and I traveled to Chiapas as part of a delegation sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. We met with people running nonprofit organizations, and we also met with Zapatista rebels struggling, with limited success, against centuries of oppression. They taught us about the intimate connections between the industrial corn of Iowa and the native corn in the milpas. Since the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), U.S. corn has been changing the Mexican economy. The corn tortilla, the staple of the Mexican diet, especially among the poor, is now typically made with U.S. corn. As demand for ethanol for U.S. gas guzzlers inflates the price of U.S. corn, the price of tortillas has skyrocketed. A little-known part of those NAFTA agreements required Mexico to change its laws that permitted ejidos, large areas of land owned communally for generations. The moneyed classes can now buy up land long owned by peasant families.

The richest man in the world is a Mexican, Carlos Slim. Slim is in fat city, worth more than Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, and getting richer at an amazing rate. He enjoys his wealth in a country where millions of children have insufficient food, a woeful education system, and no health care. It is an old story, little different from that of Europe or the United States. With rural families living on small plots of land being forced to leave, Chiapas is now a leading exporter of people. As thousands of economic refugees flee Chiapas, others from Central America cross Chiapas on their way north. They are heading for jobs at luxurious beach resorts filled with Americans and Europeans, or for the slums of Mexico City. Some of the most adventurous risk takers head for la frontera, the newly militarized border that tries to separate desperate Mexicanos from jobs in the United States. Hundreds die trying to cross the desert, and now there are Anglo vigilantes

on the border attempting to “protect” America from the frightful prospect of more illegal immigrants. U.S. citizens are afraid, and their fear is stoked by reactionary ideologues and political opportunists in both major parties.

The illegal immigrants who are already here are afraid, too. There are about twelve million of them. They don’t know when a raid by federal authorities will break up their families. Children don’t know when their mother or father will be taken away. It happened not long ago in Greeley, Colorado. It is happening all over the country, and it is madness.

We live in a new America. My colleague Stan Perea calls it the America of the moo-shoo burrito and the Korean taco. California now has more people from minority populations than it has whites. Our country is now home to more Hispanics than African Americans. In most cities, the children entering the public schools speak more than seventy languages among them.

America was once defined by the movement of people who came to the east coast and moved westward. The new American story is of people moving north from countries to the south and moving to the west coast from countries in the Far East—such as Vietnam, Korea, and elsewhere.

In the case of the recent rapid increase in immigration from Mexico and Central America, most U.S. citizens tend to think we are somehow passive victims. These aliens are pouring over our border and must be stopped.

The truth is very different. Our economic policies, which disproportionately benefit the wealthy, are helping to create wrenching economic dislocations in Mexico, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Many of the people trying to sneak into the United States were pushed out of their homes by U.S. policies.

I am not suggesting that our country does not need to control its borders, and I do not pretend to have all the policy answers. I do know this: We cannot pretend that we had nothing to do with the creation of this problem. I also know this: We are all connected. We are in this together.

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Let us take a moment to get some historical perspective on our situation. Let us look at some major demographic events of the past five hundred years: The arrival of Europeans started a horrific pandemic in the Americas. It was worse than the plague in Europe and many times worse than AIDS. Native Americans had no resistance to the new diseases such as smallpox. Entire populations were wiped out. It was easy for Europeans to move west across North America because the Indian population had largely died off. The Native American population was a tiny fraction of what it had been in 1491.

Another major demographic move, of course, was the importation of African slaves. Slavery became the basis of an economy producing cotton and tobacco for an

international market. The legacy of slavery, racism, and oppression still casts its shadow across America.

A hundred and seventy years ago, the slave-based economy with huge plantations growing commodities for export expanded westward across the South, but then it hit a border. What is now southeast Texas is prime land for growing cotton. The trouble was that it was part of Mexico. The border was porous, though, and undocumented Anglos poured across, bringing their slaves. They encountered another problem: Slavery was illegal in Mexico. The Anglo immigrants soon fomented a rebellion aimed at legalizing slavery. This is not radical left-wing revisionist history; this is the standard account of academic historians, and the version told on the University of Texas website. The fact that the white Texan revolt against Mexico was founded on the desire to extend black slavery has somehow never filtered down to what we teach in elementary schools. After winning their quick little war of independence, Texas joined the union as a slave state. Sadly, James Bowie, Davy Crockett, and Sam Houston were not the freedom-loving heroes we were once led to believe.

We need to see our present situation in its historical context. The border between the United States and Mexico was created to make space for slavery. We are building fences and guard towers along that border to keep Mexicans from reentering land that was taken from them. Of course, the Mexican elite, mostly of European descent, were not exactly blameless: The land that undocumented Americans stole from them was land they had previously stolen from Native Americans. It is easy to determine who has a legal right to be here, but who has a moral right to be here?

As a religious people who affirm human compassion, advocate for human rights, and seek justice, we must never make the mistake of confusing a legal right with a moral right. The forced removal of Native Americans from their land and onto reservations was legal. The importation and sale of African slaves was legal. South African apartheid was legal. The confiscation of the property of Jews at the beginning of the Nazi regime was legal. The Spanish Inquisition was legal. Crucifying Jesus was legal. Burning Michael Servetus at the stake for his unitarian theology was legal. The fact that something is legal does not cut much ethical ice. The powerful have always used the legal system to oppress the powerless.

It is true that as citizens we should respect the rule of law. More importantly, though, our duty is to create laws founded on our highest sense of justice, equity, and compassion. Loud voices urge us to choose fear, denial, reactionary nationalism, and racism. We must resist and choose the better way urged by every major religious tradition. We must choose the path of compassion and hope. We must choose a path that is founded on the recognition that we are connected, that we are all in this together.

These are the teachings of every great tradition. At the core of the teachings of Jesus is the conviction that we are all one. We are all God's children, and we are all equal. We are supposed to care for one another. Jesus taught his followers that an act of kindness to the most humble human being was the equivalent of performing the same for Jesus.

The prophet Muhammad taught that the tribal divisions among the Arabian people were wrong. The symbols of those tribal divisions were the legion of tribal gods, and Muhammad told the people that these gods were false, that there is only one God. We are united, and we owe our allegiance to the one creator.

Buddhism teaches that if we stop and really pay attention, we will realize that the things we think separate us are an illusion. Our connections are ultimately real, not our divisions.

We find the same message in every tradition: We are one. We are connected. We are brothers and sisters. If we truly accept that we are all part of a greater whole, that what unites and transcends us is ultimately more important than our illusion of individuality, how might that guide us? If we accept that compassion (literally “to suffer with”) is the manifestation of realizing that we are one, what are the implications? What would our community and our state and our nation do if they were guided by the finest aspirations of humanity’s religions? What would you and I do if we were guided by these very same ideas, as expressed in our Unitarian Universalist Principles? What future might we build if we created policies guided by our notions of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations?

I do not have all the policy answers on immigration or the related issues of public education, health care, and the economy. I do know this: Breaking up poor working families who have lived among us for years does not feel like justice, equity, and compassion in action. Refusing minimal health services to young children does not feel like the way we should treat members of our human family. Having our police forces profile brown people does not feel like breaking down the walls of tribalism. Creating a huge wall, complete with barbed wire, across hundreds of miles of border does not feel neighborly.

There must be a better way, and you and I must help build it. Barbed wire is not the answer. More border guards and more deportations are not the answer. Paranoia and panic will solve nothing.

We must remember that we are all immigrant stock, every single one of us living on this continent. Even Native Americans at one time immigrated here from Asia.

We must also acknowledge that we helped to create the situation in which displaced people look to find a home here. America has already been transformed by the latest waves of immigration. Our children and grandchildren are going to live in a multicultural society—a society of moo-shoo burritos, egg roll tacos, and whole wheat tortillas. We need not be afraid of that multicultural society. Fear leads to violence and repression.

Instead, let us embrace the possibilities before us. Let us be guided by love and hope. Let our actions emerge from the deep conviction that people from Mexico and Korea and Canada and Vietnam are ultimately part of our extended family. Surely, religious people

who have learned to embrace the wisdom of Judaism, Christianity, humanism, Islam, and Eastern religions can lead the way. We are people who have always affirmed human diversity. We have always looked to the future and seen new possibilities. We must do so again. Let us be the people who break down the arbitrary barriers that divide us from them. We are one, and love and hope will guide us. Let us, together with all our brothers and sisters, build a new way.