

“Bearing Witness Beyond Borders: The New Sanctuary Movement”

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“The priest laid his altar cloth and his chalice on the rock, and said mass among the prickly green plants, the canyon walls rising up behind him.” Journalist Margaret Regan recalls, “As he broke the Communion bread, he intoned...’Do this in memory of me.’”<sup>1</sup>

Father Bob Carney’s memorial mass was unusual, not only because it took place in the desert - with the unforgiving landscape serving as a sanctuary – but because the person remembered, Josseline Jamileth Quinteros, was so young, her death so tragic.

A petite teenager, Quinteros had traveled with her younger brother and a guide – a *coyote* - through the desert to cross illegally from Mexico into the United States. Their destination was California, where their mother already lived. Like a good luck charm, Quinteros wore sweat pants emblazoned with the word “Hollywood,” the place of their eventual destination.

These pants helped identify her body when it was found weeks later. She had become ill on the long walk; it was not possible for the group to stop and it was too dangerous for her brother to stay with her. So she agreed to let the group go on without her and sat beside a boulder to rest. That January night, Josseline Quinteros died of hypothermia before she could recover and before Border Patrol – *la migra* – found her. And, so, her family and friends, including people she never met in life, gathered amid cactus and foreboding cliffs to grieve and to remember her through community and Catholic ritual.

The strangers who gathered as friends at this memorial mass under the desert sky were migrant advocates. Some call these migrants “undocumented,” some call them “illegals.” By any name, they are people who find countless ways to travel without immigration papers into the United States.

As President Trump has stated, some enter the US to conduct illegal activity, like drug-trafficking. And many enter the country for economic survival. With the passage of NAFTA, Mexican farmers could no longer make a living off their crops, prompting an increase in illegal migration. Long before the Trump presidency, the United States built a formidable wall to prevent unauthorized crossing, relying on the harsh terrain of the Arizona border to serve as a natural wall to repel undocumented travelers.

But, in answer to the question posed by artist Debbi McCullough, “How far would you walk to feed your children?”<sup>2</sup> migrants continued to brave the dangerous temperatures and terrain to

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<sup>1</sup> Regan, Margaret. *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands*. Beacon Press; Boston, MA, 2010. Xvii.

<sup>2</sup> [https://books.google.com/books?id=sB92MDu\\_OK8C&pg=PT20&dq=%22the+death+of+josseline%22+%22feed+our+children%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewifk8PS7ZXWAhVB7iYKHbVqDMUQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=%22the%20death%20of%20josseline%22%20%22feed%20your%20children%22&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=sB92MDu_OK8C&pg=PT20&dq=%22the+death+of+josseline%22+%22feed+your+children%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewifk8PS7ZXWAhVB7iYKHbVqDMUQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=%22the%20death%20of%20josseline%22%20%22feed%20your%20children%22&f=false)

keep crossing at this unwall'd part of the border, leading to a significant increase in migrant fatalities.

Josseline's funeral mass was just one of many for Father Carney; it was commonplace in his ministry to bless groups of dead migrants in the county morgue. But Josseline's death hit him hard: "We called her our sister, our daughter, our child," Father Carney recalled. "Every migrant is dear to us. But she was everybody. She was all of those people who suffered and died."<sup>3</sup>

Father Carney was not the only religious leader affected by Quinteros's death. Dan Mills, a volunteer with No More Deaths – a coalition of humanitarian and faith-based organizations, currently led by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson – found Josseline's body while distributing bottles of water in the desert. He had shouted their standard greeting in Spanish – "Hello, brothers! We are friends from the church. We have food and water" – when he saw her bright green shoes against the brown sand, poking out from behind the rock. But there was no movement, no response to his call.

No More Deaths brought a white cross, decorated with flowers and ribbons, to Josseline's funeral mass. Father Carney anointed the cross after the service and, in a private prayer to Josseline's memory, named how sorry he was "that we as a nation, as a people, would do this."<sup>4</sup>

"How far would you walk to feed your children?" Perhaps, like Josseline's mother, you decide that your family's future depends on finding work as an undocumented migrant in the United States and you decide to cross the desert. Perhaps you turn to the charity and welcome of faithful people along the way to cross safely, stopping at the Catholic cafeteria and dormitory in Altar, built to serve migrants passing through. And maybe you survive the indignities and the dangers – the brutal temperatures, border patrol, corrupt coyotes. If you are a woman, perhaps you avoid or survive sexual assault. You enter the United States illegally. You arrive. You have survived. But you are not safe.

For Immigration and Customs Enforcement is charged with finding and deporting people like you. If your children are born in the United States, they may stay but you must leave. Your family is broken apart. Or, if you carried them across the border when they were young, they could be deported, to a country they do not know, speaking a language they do not understand.

This danger is not new; it has been with migrants for as long as the United States has deported people "without papers." But defense of the worth and dignity of undocumented migrants is also not new. As this morning's responsive reading reminds us, the world's religions call us to love, to serve, to welcome the stranger. Faith calls us – to paraphrase wise words I heard recently – to affirm that borders are not lines between us but places where we meet.

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<sup>3</sup> Regan, xvii-xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Regan, xviii.

This is why a Catholic priest conducts a funeral mass in the desert, close to the place where a young girl died, as a pastoral and prophetic act. This is why Father Carney's fellow Catholics built a facility close to the border, feeding the bodies and spirits of migrants making this treacherous journey. This is why Catholics and Presbyterians and Unitarian Universalists and the "spiritual but not religious" walk through the brutal desert, dropping food and water and calling out words of greeting and friendship. This is why volunteers of many faiths, including a Unitarian Universalist like myself, have assisted "dreamers" – undocumented young people brought to the United States as children – in applying for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status so they can work legally. This is why, when news of an ICE raid travels among those who claim solidarity with the undocumented, the faithful show up as moral witnesses, as companions through the legal process, as embodied reminders to immigrants that they do not struggle alone. This is why there is a new sanctuary movement in the United States.

"No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark," writes poet Warsan Shire, "you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well."<sup>5</sup>

The first sanctuary movement began in the 1980's as a faith-based response to Central American refugees "running for the US border" when their home countries became places of terror through civil war and government-backed torture and murder. Ronald Regan's immigration policies prohibited easy acquisition of refugee status for Central American migrants so three religious leaders in Tucson - Jim Corbett, Jim Dudley and John Fife – began a campaign to lend protection and aid to these refugees when our government would not. Drawing on the ancient tradition of cities and houses of worship serving as safe harbors, Tucson's Southside Presbyterian Church became the first church in the United States to declare itself a Central American refugee sanctuary.

In time, the number of sanctuary communities grew to about five hundred. The movement represented diverse faiths and drew moral authority not only from the religious traditions represented but the precedent of the Underground Railroad. While harboring an undocumented refugee defied federal immigration law, sanctuary leaders were not necessarily radical. Gary Cook, a minister from the Central Presbyterian Church in Ohio observed, "We're a very conservative group of folks politically. But once we encountered the refugees face to face, we couldn't justify not taking them in."<sup>6</sup>

And here we are, thirty years after the Sanctuary Movement, witnesses to people again "running from the mouth of a shark." But now, the home that has become dangerous is the place to which migrants have tried so hard to enter, the United States. After an Obama administration, during which there was an increase in deportations, Trump's anti-immigration campaign platform sent a chill through the undocumented community and their allies.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://wewelcomerefugees.com/no-one-leaves-home-unless-home-mouth-shark/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanctuary\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanctuary_movement)

And, with his election, Trump has made good on his promises. Under his administration, ICE no longer prioritizes deportation of undocumented immigrants with criminal records but pursues anyone outside of legal status. Five days into his presidency, Trump issued orders calling for the hiring of 5,000 more Border Patrol agents, the hiring of 10,000 more ICE officers and the building of more detention facilities. While ICE once refrained from detaining people in courthouses, courthouse arrests are now commonplace.<sup>7</sup> Houses of worship are still considered “sensitive locations,” places where ICE officers do not make arrests. Yet, in Virginia, two men were detained leaving a hypothermia shelter in a church.<sup>8</sup> Immigrant communities are finding a sharp decrease in the reporting of crimes, perhaps because individuals fear engaging social systems and services will reveal their undocumented status.<sup>9</sup>

Most recently, the Trump administration has terminated the DACA program. As reported in *The New York Times*, “Democrats and some Republicans, business executives, college presidents and immigration activists condemned the move as a coldhearted and shortsighted effort that was unfair to the young immigrants and could harm the economy.”<sup>10</sup> As soon as I heard this news, I recognized that my efforts to support the young “dreamers” of our nation by assisting them with their DACA applications contributed to the Trump administration now having a database with the names and addresses of undocumented immigrants, all vulnerable to deportation.

And this came on the heels of Trump issuing a presidential pardon to Joe Arpaio, former sheriff of Maricopa County made infamous for his targeting of immigrants and fostering systems and a culture of abuse in his jail. In the words of an ACLU report, Arpaio’s department, among other things, “routinely abused pre-trial detainees...by feeding them moldy bread, rotten fruit and other contaminated food, housing them in cells so hot as to endanger their health, denying them care for serious medical and mental health needs, and keeping them packed as tightly as sardines.” Arpaio created Tent City, what he called a “concentration camp” to house detainees. At least one summertime temperature reading in the tents was 145 degrees.<sup>11</sup> Some cruelty towards other human beings can only be forgiven by the holy but Trump has named Arpaio’s crimes against humanity worthy of forgiveness.

But, as I named immediately after Trump’s election, we have not lost our power. We have not lost our moral authority to act, to live out the truth – that we need bridges between us, not walls; that love is stronger than both death and hate.

In these times of profound hostility towards undocumented immigrants, faith communities are claiming and using their power. Congregations are resurrecting the sanctuary movement, publicly committing to offering safe harbor from ICE detention to undocumented migrants.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-administration-six-months-sea-change-immigration-enforcement>

<sup>8</sup> <http://time.com/4674729/immigrations-church-sensitive-policy-concerns/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-administration-six-months-sea-change-immigration-enforcement>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/us/politics/trump-daca-dreamers-immigration.html>

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe\\_Arpaio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Arpaio)

Immigrants who choose to enter sanctuary with a faith community live within the church, temple or mosque building under house arrest, often separated from family. The host faith community, a “level one” sanctuary, provides for all of the migrant’s needs and sometimes for their family members living outside sanctuary. This support is often through partnership with “level two” communities, those who commit to support a “level one” congregation in their sanctuary ministry. The host congregation publicly announces both their decision to serve as a sanctuary and when an immigrant enters sanctuary. The immigrant resident remains in sanctuary until they receive a stay of deportation or until they simply decide to leave.

Congregations across the country have declared themselves sanctuaries, have welcomed immigrants to live in their building. Locally, congregations in Cambridge and Dorchester have declared themselves level one sanctuaries. In the discussion after worship we will hear from leaders from First Parish Bedford, who also voted to become a level one sanctuary, and Epiphany Episcopal, here in Winchester, who have decided to become a level two, supporting congregation. They will join us in our initial discussion and discernment about how we at the Winchester Unitarian Society might choose to participate in the new sanctuary movement in these times.

Commented [HJ1]:

Here we are, thirty years after the first Sanctuary Movement, in a nation founded on principles of liberty but, for this generation of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” is a place that has become like “the mouth of a shark.” In these times, we who believe in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” how do we respond?

As I consider this question, I remember the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly held in Phoenix, Arizona. This was before Sherriff Joe Arpaio left office. As a religious body, we decided to bear witness outside of Arpaio’s inhumane “concentration camp” of detainees, Tent City.

The vigil was in late June. As delegates prepared to board buses to gather outside the tents, organizers strongly advised us to not participate if we had any concerns about the heat. Even though the sun had gone down, the temperatures were well above 100 degrees. Stepping off the air-conditioned bus, the heat hit me as if with physical force. It seemed impossible to endure an entire day under such conditions, never mind living in a filthy, crowded tent over time.

Father Carney had gathered a community of the spirit in the desert in response to the death of Josseline Quinteros. But outside of Tent City, we gathered to answer the call of life. With each candle we lifted into the desert night, we embodied the words of Carney’s prayer. We are sorry “that we as a nation...would do this.” With our tiny lights, we affirmed that we are “bound together in a common destiny.” As a community of faith, we asked with our bodies “Kindred in this, each lighted by the same precarious, flickering flame...how does it happen that we are not kindred in all things else?”

This question surrounds us in these times. The question of our role in the sanctuary movement echoes too. How far will we go to defend our neighbor's human rights? May we hold these questions close and may we choose well.

