

***Border Crossing:
Unforgettable Generosity and Immigration Stories
from a Continental Bike Ride***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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Rick Beckel with Rev. Paul Beckel

Welcome

Rev Paul Beckel: Over the past several months we've been talking about our relationships within and beyond these walls. In light of recent executive orders regarding immigration, the significance of these relationships has become both more complex and more urgent.

Rick Beckel: As an educated white American citizen, with a financial safety net (thanks Dad) I can't fully understand the complexities and the urgency that many of my neighbors feel in response to these executive orders. And when I say neighbors I mean both those nearby, and those I've recently met in Mexico and Central America.

I can't fully understand, but I want to begin to understand. I've recently had an opportunity to listen to some moving stories from our southern neighbors, and I've directly experienced some incredible hospitality as I biked from Washington to Panama. I'd like to share some of these stories with you today — stories of deportees and returnees — and then reflect just a bit on how these fleeting relationships have shifted my perception and pushed me to ask how I might interrupt some ongoing cycles of ignorance, fear, and resentment.

Gathering Song De Colores #305

Children's Focus *Whoever You Are*, by Mem Fox

Children's Blessing *From you I Receive, to you I Give*, #402

Summary: Children all around the world look different but have the same fears and hopes.

Introduction — Paul

Jane and I have been incredibly fortunate as parents. Because of a wild combination of accidents, we've been able to provide an environment out of which education and adventure seem like natural lifelong pursuits. But not everyone who pours themselves into parenting experiences outcomes proportionate to their efforts. Just like traveling, parenting can be a humbling process. Rick's stories today represent just a small sample of the generosity and the tragedy he encountered on his southern pilgrimage. Why did random people take him into their homes for 2-3 days at a time, show him how they operate their small farms and businesses, and take him hiking on volcanoes? How much more important stuff has he learned that his parents couldn't begin to teach?

But even though we've been lucky, I'm confident that our children's openness to life and learning is due in part to some choices we have made. Engaging in religious exploration and supporting our Unitarian Universalist congregations has been one of these vital choices. From infancy they've

had a community of loving adults who have sought to think globally while acting locally. They've been taught about religious and cultural traditions from around the world...and have received comprehensive sexuality education. These are first world privileges, but they are possible because generations of commitment to progressive ideals have made it possible for Unitarian Universalist congregations to thrive, and be here for us. Jane and I have volunteered and made a financial pledge to our local congregation since we first met in the UU young adult group in Minneapolis 27 years ago.

It's a bit of a risk to put out time and money in a non-transactional manner like this. We're never guaranteed a tangible return on our investment. But we're confident that lives will be changed for generations to come if more and more people are nurtured and challenged in a liberal religious environment. So if someone calls you this month to ask for a pledge to BUF, please respond generously. If no one calls you, then call us. Take the first step into an adventure that may open new vistas for yourself and for those you love, who you don't even know yet.

Message — Rick

I never expected my journey to take me this far. When I began pedaling with Eli in Mount Rainier National Park last October, I knew I would go as far as San Francisco with him, and perhaps continue on to Santa Barbara or San Diego on my own.

Several years ago, Eli inspired me to set out on my first bike tour, from my home in Central Wisconsin, through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and over the Mackinaw Bridge, to a Biological Station where I would work that summer. This trip was relatively short compared to my recent ride, a week long and under 400 miles. Yet it turned out to be one of the most rewarding and memorable weeks of my life. From the pastoral scenes of Northeastern Wisconsin to the fantastic dunes on Lake Superior, my days were full of gradually changing tranquil landscapes. I was also blessed, in many circumstances, by the generosity of strangers. Gifts of quickly eaten boxes of cookies, half a dozen eggs from a guy on the side of the road who was raising chickens. One of my favorite stories was being rescued from my overconfidence after being stranded with a broken inner tube valve. In my youthful optimism, I had packed no replacement tube on my first bike tour. Not 10 minutes had passed when Paul Fritz, a lifelong Peshtigo native, threw my bike in the back of his pickup and took an hour out of his day to bring me to the nearest bike shop.

Within the week, I had fallen in love with bike touring. Bike touring, for me, represented a perfect combination of natural splendor and human connection. When driving, we are insulated from the terrain we move through and often are moving too quickly to connect with people along the way. On a bike, you feel the wind and the rain, curse the hot sun, and bask in the fresh air. You take in all the smells of a place, from burning garbage to sizzling streetside taco stands. You can quickly hop off your bike to appreciate a vista or grab a cold horchata. And you always have time for a conversation with people you meet along the way.

Riding for several months, consequently, takes you through a vast variety of landscapes along the murky human-natural continuum. I rode through sleeting mountain passes in the Cascades. The popular California Coast ride sent me amongst the redwoods, across the Golden Gate Bridge, along the rugged curves of Big Sur, and through the quintessentially American cityscape of LA. When I crossed into Mexico, I encountered the isolated but stunningly beautiful deserts of Baja

California. Crossing the Sea of Cortez, I climbed the infamous “Espinazo del Diablo” highway from sea level to nearly 10,000 feet. Rural ranch country gradually faded into Mexico City’s sprawling megalopolis. Central America took me from sweltering lowlands to cool highlands, along coffee and palm oil plantations, through rainforest and suburbia.

Through all this diversity — national, geographical, ecological, racial, ideological, occupational — what was the constant? Without a doubt, it was the goodwill and hospitality of those I met along the way. This journey would have been impossible without the positive energy, calories, fresh water, and opportunities for connection that those along my route continually supplied me with. Street food vendors gave me many free tacos, gorditas, plates of gallo pinto. If I was short on water, I could count on someone offering me something to drink. An El Salvadoran guy pulled me off the road to buy me a Gatorade, Panamanian construction workers let me fill up my bottles from their cooler of ice cold water, a beautiful escape from the 90° heat. Many days I woke up not knowing where I would sleep that night. But I took comfort in knowing that I could consult just about anyone in any town, and they would point me in the right direction. I spent several nights at police and fire stations; the officers and bomberos were eager to practice English or hear adventure stories. I slept in churches and abandoned auditoriums. I camped in the front yards of families who would then invite me in for dinner. There are simply too many stories to tell, but I will share a few of my favorites.

In the middle of a long climb from coastal Sinaloa to mountainous Durango in Mexico, I rolled into town looking for something to eat. Someone called me off the street, and then proceeded to buy me three burritos and a coke over the course of an hour-long conversation. The septuagenarian was thrilled to have the opportunity to practice her English — it had been a while, and very few gringos come through her small town. Patricia moved to California in the sixties, married a good-looking Irish guy, and they lived happily together for 10 years or so. When their love began to fade, she started to miss her mother, so she moved back home to El Salto. I understood where she was coming from. There were times on the ride where I, too, began to miss the familiarity of my home. Meeting Patricia was almost like running into my grandmother — good conversation, all in English, being filled up with too much good food. A few weeks later, she called unexpectedly me to ask how I was doing and if I was staying safe.

One of my most memorable nights was with a family off a dirt road in the highlands of Nicaragua. They let me pitch a tent in their front yard, which was a thrill to their 5 year old boy, who had never seen a tent before. Then, three generations sat with me outside for a night of conversation and laughter. They were campesinos who grew beans for the market and corn for their own consumption. The proud patriarch, Ramón, had just carried a huge log up the same hill that I had struggled to climb on my bike. An open fire in their kitchen powered the final step of their corn’s journey from field to tortilla. I ate hundreds of corn tortillas between Tijuana and Panama City, and theirs were some of the best. Following dinner, they helped me with some of the Spanish phrases I was having trouble with and we shared stories. After we had spoken for a couple hours, they confessed what they had been holding back since I introduced myself as Federico that afternoon. I called myself Federico since my given name is Frederick. At this point, they finally laughed and told me that, in Nicaragua, “Federico” was slang for “ugly person.” The next morning, they gave me a few tortillas for breakfast and I left with a full heart and stomach.

On the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, I jumped in the ocean toward the end of a hot 100 kilometer day to escape the humidity and wash off my sweat with salt water. I was joined by a couple of kids who lived nearby, who said I could camp on the beach in front of their house. I asked their parents if this was alright, and they proceeded to give me a coconut, a huge bunch of bananas from one of their trees, a cold shower, and wash my filthy clothes for me.

Though this sort of altruism gave me the physical and spiritual power I needed to continue my journey, there were times when I was conflicted by this hospitality. Sometimes I felt overwhelmed by the generosity of others, and wanted to reciprocate in some way. Considering I was taking months off to travel, I could certainly afford to pay for the carnitas I had just been given. The irony of being a white dude, living “simply” by choice, while benefitting from the charity of those who live with much less power and material comfort than I grew up with, was never lost on me. I wanted to do more than just smile and say “gracias” when I encountered goodwill, and sometimes even wanted to refuse offers. But I realized I did not want to quash the instinct so many people have toward generosity – no matter its source, or where it is directed. Perhaps growing up American has socialized me to think of altruism as forward-thinking selfishness. “If I am nice to this person now, they have to be nice to me later.” Yet I didn’t feel that any of the folks I ran into had this mindset, so I began to reframe this generosity mentally. I let go of considering goodwill a transactional, *quid pro pro* exchange. A smile and a “gracias” would have to do for now. The reciprocity comes later, in a pay it forward type system. Now that I have encountered so much generosity, I feel compelled to live this out in my life. I am newly inspired to share as others have shared with me, to have empathy for travellers and the transient, and to connect with those with backgrounds different from mine. Politically, I am determined to fight against policies rooted in ignorance and fear, and to reject reductionist political narratives that don’t tell the whole story of a people.

Interlude: Fuente de Amor/Spirit of Life

“Weren’t you scared?” / “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Since I returned home, I have received many questions similar to these. It’s understandable – for most of us, our conception of Mexico and Central America are largely based on simplistic media narratives. In Hollywood, Mexico tends to only appear in movies about drug trafficking, full of desolate landscapes and despicable people. Newspapers often focus on similar storylines — drugs, government corruption, or our own president’s references to Mexicans as criminals.

Yes, there is crime in Mexico and Central America, and yes, there is an inherent danger to travelling. Did I ever feel unsafe? No. I only ran into goodhearted people, eager to share what they had to give, and hopeful that I would come away with a positive impression of their country and their people. Violence and crime is undoubtedly a problem in Mexico and Central America, but just like in the United States, it is mostly localized to particular areas. The rest of the region is filled with people living their lives in very familiar ways: enjoying a drink with friends after a difficult day of work, kids running around and screaming for no apparent reason, lovers sending text messages to far away companions, an old couple watching the sunset like they do every night. It would be unfair to generalize about the US only looking at places like the South Side Chicago and people like Donald Trump. These are a part of our story, but not the whole story. Likewise,

the countries I pedaled through are so much more than the headlines of gang violence and government corruption.

This is not to dismiss the violence and strife in the region. Crime and poverty are very real, and they affect everyone, directly and indirectly. That includes you and me. Crime and poverty in Latin America are deeply linked to our shared history and current policies. When it comes to the drug trade, cross-border trafficking is driven by American demand for narcotics. When it comes to immigration, border crossers are driven by economic inequality and our demand for cheap labor.

I won't delve too deeply into the discussion of how imperialism, notions of white supremacy, and extractive capitalism have impacted these places and people. We can (and should) read about that elsewhere. What I would like to do is share the stories of a few of the millions of people who are fleeing their homes Mexico and Central America to come to the United States.

I met Alex while walking down the street in Nacaome, Honduras. I was walking back to my tent at the local fire station, when Alex called out, "you speak English?" He was sitting on the stoop in front of his home with a couple of friends, and I stopped to chat, our conversation alternating at first between Spanish and English. We settled on English because it rapidly became clear that his unaccented, American English was far superior to my Spanish. It makes sense - it was the language he practically grew up with.

Alex had been born in there, in Nacaome, around the same time I was born. He was mostly raised by his grandfather after both his parents immigrated to the United States. Like many Hondurans, his life changed dramatically after a massive hurricane in 1998. He didn't talk much about the storm himself, but I read later that Hurricane Mitch was one of the most devastating storms on the continent in memory. Hurricane Katrina killed about 2,000 people; Mitch killed around 20,000. Hurricane Mitch destroyed more than half the country's transportation infrastructure and crops. The Honduran President estimated that the impact of the storm was equal to 50 years of development. In the bleak aftermath — food and water shortages, disease outbreaks, lost topsoil, widespread homelessness — Alex's family decided he should make the long, dangerous trip to join them in the United States.

We have preconceived notions of what this journey looks like: full of environmental and human dangers, driven by fear and desperation. This is doubtless the experience of some. But not everyone. Alex describes his journey north at 8 years old as "the greatest adventure he'd ever have," despite spending several weeks in a Mexican jail. The highlight was a trip down a Guatemalan river in a gigantic truck inner tube. After crossing the Rio Grande, he was caught by American Border Patrol agents, but was let go because Honduran citizens were granted refugee status following the hurricane. Eventually, he joined his parents in Maryland and spent the rest of his childhood and adolescence outside of our nation's capitol. He graduated from high school and was about to enter a pharmacy program at a local community college when he "got in some trouble" and was subsequently deported. The trajectory of his life was suddenly, drastically, and I would say tragically, altered.

When I met Alex, the grandfather who raised him in Honduras had just died. He seemed to be in a spirit of reflection, and wanting to connect with some idea of "home," which is perhaps why he shared all that he did with me. Despite a "tough" exterior, he clearly misses friends and family

who he grew up with very deeply. The conversation didn't revolve around this story exclusively, we also talked about hip hop and the Beatles, jobs and bike rides. It was a conversation we could have been having back home, if only he had the luxury of American citizenship.

A couple of weeks later, I heard another heart wrenching story from another immigrant – one who had gained American citizenship but was visiting his hometown for a few weeks. Ernesto was born in the Nicaraguan highlands of Jinotega, a very poor region and thus a prime recruiting ground for the revolutionary Sandinistas as well as their C.I.A. backed rivals, the Contras. Ernesto was drafted into the Sandinistas in the 1980s at the height of the Nicaraguan civil war. His brother was drafted into the Contras. Ernesto was in his late teens, essentially a child soldier. Despite his youth, the army saw promise in him due to his grasp of math and physics, and he was sent to Cuba for special training. Returning to the war-torn area around his hometown, he saw many friends die in combat. Jinotega, not a large city, had thousands of their young men come home in body bags from both sides of the conflict. His brother was among them.

Horrified by combat and alienated by the ideology of both sides, Ernesto tried to escape the carnage several times. He finally succeeded in escaping to the country that was arming the forces trying to kill him. He described his pre-NAFTA border crossing into the U.S., again, across the Rio Grande, as easy. The border is significantly more militarized today. Like Alex, Ernesto also ended up outside of Washington DC, where he worked at a restaurant and took classes during his time off.

Today — a couple decades later — he has a PhD in mathematics and is an engineer in Boston. In many ways, Ernesto's story could be seen as an "immigration success story." He escaped from childhood poverty and unimaginable violence, and has entered the educated American professional class in one generation – a rare and admirable feat. One might say, "He pulled himself up by his bootstraps and is now living the American Dream!" But Ernesto wouldn't be comfortable with this characterization. First of all, he is deeply conflicted that many of the projects he is assigned to work on as an engineer are contracts for the defense industry. And he describes a nagging feeling of "not belonging" that he doesn't think will ever go away as long as he lives in the states. His colleagues and acquaintances lament illegal border crossers, but they assure Ernesto that they're not referring to immigrants like him. He's not part of the problem; he's an engineer. But Ernesto identifies much more with the "problem" immigrants than with his colleagues. The rampant vilification of immigrants takes a severe psychological toll, which he says has become significantly worse in the last year. "I guess there really is an American Dream," Ernesto said, "because you wake up and realize it was just a dream."

We are used to hearing immigration stories chopped into soundbites for news programs, woven into pithy anecdotes by politicians, eagerly accepted to confirm whatever biases we already have. But I did not feel that people were telling their stories to prove a point. Their stories were told not to advance an agenda, but as ends in themselves. To hear these narratives from the people directly, unabridged, was immensely powerful.

It is difficult to make generalizations about the stories, since they come from such diverse sources. Individual stories are full of ambiguity. Striving for better economic conditions, but afraid of losing a sense of cultural identity. Growing up American, and then being told you are not, suddenly finding yourself not "at home" where you were born. You ache to join your family in the

states if they are in the U.S., but miss your family at home if you are in El Norte. In our attempts to understand the complicated forces driving immigration, we try to categorize stories as ending either in success or in sadness. But we find that the border between these concepts is quite blurry.

Clearly, I had plenty to think about over these thousands of miles. I am still processing a lot of it. Though it was a journey full of wonder, there were also aspects that were deeply difficult. I was always aware of the uncomfortable contrast between my journey south, by choice, while many around me were being driven north, by necessity. On a trip like this, and I suppose in life in general, you end up comparing yourself to those around you, asking yourself what *you* would do if this was *your* life. I questioned my values, knowing that they have been shaped by where, when, how, I grew up. Perhaps we would challenge, or ridicule, the values we now hold dear, if our lives had followed a different contour. The meaning of “work.” Respect for the rule of law. The importance of recycling. The meaning of “giving back.”

Today I am less certain about how to explain our complex and dynamic world than when I began the trip. I see human lives as both the product of individual agency and geopolitical forces. I see capital as a deceitful tool by and for the powerful to perpetuate existing inequalities, but at the same time it’s a tool leveraged by the disadvantaged to bring attention to and enhance their communities. I see immigration as a human right, but I wonder: how much vibrant cultural identity is being lost due to the unprecedented upheavals that have become our reality? When we move, what do we lose?

I see myself as the product of such a homogenization. My family is an immigrant family. But I am several generations removed from the journeys and trials of my northern and central European ancestors. A sense of meaningful ethnic identity has been supplanted by vague regional descriptors, like “former Midwesterner, maybe becoming a Northwesterner,” or “American.” But we all know what a fraught adjective “American” is. Who is included within the word “American?” The answer is much different today than it was 100 years ago, but the answer is the same in that we cannot say exactly. “American” may be used proudly, aspirationally, or pejoratively. It could mean a life of hard work, leisure, or unemployment. “American” is probably the right label for me — and the right label for our North American neighbors to the South.

This was all so complicated that I eventually let go of trying to understand. Instead, I thanked the universe, god, and the tangled web of humans who have shaped my life for bringing me here. In awe of a magnificent landscapes or touched by the love from others, I did my best to feel gratitude for the infinite combination of circumstances that allowed me to be at this place, at this time, with these people. My thanks were often deflected by my many benefactors. The altruists, in mostly Catholic Mexico and Central America, would never take personal credit. They often attributed their generosity to the gifts they have been given by God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Though they use different language than I would use at home, religiously and linguistically, I understand. People want to say “thanks” to the great unknown for all that they have been given – and try to pass on some of the goodness they have received to others. I hope to be able to do the same.