


September Theme:
UNITY
Crossing Borders / Cruzando Fronteras
Special Guest: UUA President Peter Morales
~ Association Sunday! ~
Sunday, September 18, 2011, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Sermon Crossing Borders / Cruzando Fronteras
Rev. Peter Morales, president, Unitarian Universalist Association

It is good to be with you today. While you do not realize it, this is something of a homecoming for me. Fifteen years ago, as a first year seminarian at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, I preached the first sermon of my life here.

I had heard about the Spanish-speaking ministry here in San Jose and arranged to visit. Before I go on, let me compliment this congregation for having the courage to be a pioneer in cross-cultural ministry. That says a lot about the spirit of this community.

I came with Lilia Cuervo, a fellow seminarian at Starr King back then. Lilia would go on to serve here as a minister in your Spanish language ministry. One thing led to another, and Lindi Ramsden, then the senior minister, invited me to preach at the Spanish service.

I accepted. And then I had one of those experiences. “What in the world have I done?” I asked myself. (Or words to that effect.) I had never written a sermon, much less a sermon in Spanish. My Spanish, while serviceable, had a lot of rust. (It still does.)

Since then, of course, I have preached before thousands at General Assembly. I have preached hundreds of sermons in all kinds of venues. Yet I have never been as frightened as I was preaching that Sunday in Spanish to eight people. Just thinking about it gives me the willies.

My sermon that morning was entitled “Cruzando Fronteras.” It probably still exists somewhere on an old hard drive. I didn’t try very hard to find it.

And so today the wheel of life brings me back to San Jose. As I thought about my sermon for today, once again the theme of *cruzando fronteras* — crossing borders — came to mind. The very title “cruzando fronteras” is an example of the challenges of translation. The Spanish word “frontera” means both “border” and

“frontier.” In Spanish, the title suggests both crossing a border and crossing a frontier.

I believe that our spiritual lives can be seen as a journey—a journey in which we cross frontiers into new realms. To live is to cross borders of the spirit. Imagine if we all carried a spiritual passport that marked the border crossings of our lives.

My spiritual passport would have big stamp for when, at the age of 17, I got on a Greyhound Bus in San Antonio and headed off for college here in California. I lost the faith of my childhood in college. What other stamps would I see? I would see getting married and raising children—and, yes, having my children raise me. Parenthood changed me profoundly.

Living in foreign countries, literally crossing borders, gave me a new perspective on my own culture and reshaped my view of what it means to be human.

After a couple of decades of having no religious home, we accepted an invitation to attend a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Oregon. What a border that was! It led to seminary, parish ministry, and now to national leadership.

Pull out your spiritual passport for a moment. What are the big stamps on yours? How are you different today than you were five years ago, or 10 years ago? Imagine your life without those border crossings. You would not be you. To live is to cross borders; *vivir es cruzar fronteras*.

If our personal lives are shaped by the borders we cross, so are our lives together. Indeed, the distinction between the personal and the collective is misleading. I do not live my life in isolation from other people. In a profound sense I *am* my relationships, and so are you. As I think about the experiences that changed me and shaped who I am, all of them involve other people. Think about the experiences that shaped who you are today. Your relationships formed who you are. We cross our spiritual frontiers together.

As Unitarian Universalists, we come from a long line of people who have been eager to cross borders, to leave behind what no longer made sense or gave life. We are the spiritual heirs of heretics. Just look at them: Servetus, Theodore Parker, Susan B. Anthony, Emerson, Joseph Priestly and Olympia Brown. They were all troublemakers.

They believed slaves should be free and women should vote. They believed we should not passively accept inherited dogma. They looked critically at the Christian scriptures and then went on to explore teachings of non-Christian religions. Later we went on to take seriously the findings of science—findings

which changed our view of our place in the cosmos. We worked for civil rights and to advocate for full acceptance of LGBT people. Today our concern for the marginalized leads us to advocate for the rights of migrants.

As I look at our history, at the great span of our religious tradition, I cannot help but see that it is central to our nature to cross borders. We have always been a people who, at our best, have been open to new insight, to new experience, to new challenges. We can take pride in this. Yet the best way to honor our forebears is not to worship them, but to emulate them.

We have our own borders to cross.

If we cease to change, if we cease to be open, if we cease crossing spiritual borders, then we abandon what is at the core of our spirituality.

Just as important, if we fail to change we run the danger of becoming irrelevant. Our world is changing rapidly and we must create new ways of expressing our faith if we are to reach a new generation and if we are to be a strong force for compassion, peace and justice in our world.

As I think about the challenges we face today and the borders we must cross, two stand out. They are the border of culture and the border of social class. And while we can separate culture and class, in practice the two are closely intertwined.

We live in the midst of one of the great demographic changes in American history. Today, about three quarters of Americans over the age 70 are “anglos” (or “whites” -- people of European descent). Of Americans under the age 10, a minority are white. Indeed, the numbers vary because our old categories don’t make much sense. What do you call a child who is one-quarter Korean, one-quarter Mexican-American and half anglo? I read that the Oakland schools have children who speak 70 different languages at home. I suspect the same is true here in San Jose.

Of course, if anyone gets that America is rapidly becoming more diverse, it should be you. Here in California you live it and see it every day.

Yet because our history in America has its roots in the churches of New England, the expression of our faith has traditionally been very “yankee” in flavor. I am the first president of the UUA from the west. (I like to tease people at our Boston headquarters by telling them that when I left California to serve a congregation in Colorado I thought I was moving “back east.”)

There is nothing wrong with New England culture. However, if we insist on traditional and rather elite New England ways of doing things in areas where it

does not fit, then we will unintentionally create barriers when we want to cross borders.

As UUA president I have had the opportunity to visit Unitarians and UU's in England, in Romania, in the Khasi Hills of northeastern India and in small villages on the island of Negros in the Philippines. I have met UUs from Indonesia, Hong Kong, Uganda and Mexico. These UUs vary from urban intellectuals to rural illiterates.

The fact that there are UUs in all these countries and in all these social settings has enormous implications for us. For me the great lesson (a lesson we all know but need to take to heart) is that there is nothing, *absolutely nothing*, intrinsically north American about the core of our faith. Unitarian Universalism can take many institutional forms. It can express itself in ways that vary from culture to culture. We have always known this, but the implications of this are far reaching.

We must learn to be a religion that crosses the cultural boundary of our New England roots.

If we are to thrive, if we are to bring the good news of compassion and human dignity to millions of people in the new America and across the world, we must learn new ways. We must learn to express our faith in ways that are compelling in Boston, in the Khasi Hills, in Africa, in the Philippines, in Transylvania, and far beyond. We simply have to get better at crossing cultural borders. Our future, right here in a new multicultural America, absolutely depends on it.

Closely related to the border of culture is the border of social class. Because ours has always been a faith that respects human learning, we have tended to be a faith that appeals to educated people—particularly in the last century. The vast majority of Unitarian Universalists in America have graduated from university.

I am delighted that we are open to and respect human knowledge. This was something that first attracted me to our faith. And yet, just as our core message transcends the particularities of one cultural group, so too does our message transcend social class. We can do this. I have seen Unitarian Universalism thriving among the rural poor.

The challenges we face in creating a faith that is truly multi-cultural and that spans the boundaries of social class are formidable. It involves changing lots of habits.

Although the challenges are great, we must also be mindful of another fact: we have a breathtaking opportunity. We already have a theology that embraces teachings from the great spiritual traditions and from the world of science. We are surrounded by people who are seeking spiritual community. We often hear about

the rise of fundamentalism. It isn't true any longer. Fundamentalist evangelical congregations are actually in decline. The group that is growing rapidly are the "none of the above." Twenty years ago the number of evangelical young adults was twice as large as the number of those expressing no religious preference. Today those numbers have just about flipped. Evangelical young adults have gone down from 25 percent of the population to about 17 percent. The number of "none of the above" have more than doubled from 11 percent to 26 percent.

Yet these people, people I call the spiritually hungry and religious homeless, are seeking a spiritual home that is not dogmatic, that is compassionate, that accepts all people. In other words, *they are us!*

Our challenge is to learn to engage them.

We are part of the same tribe, but we don't know one another yet.

*Perhaps I belong to the tribe
of those who have none;
or to the black sheep tribe;
or to a tribe whose ancestors come from the future:
a tribe on the horizon.¹*

We have to reach out, to meet them where they are, to learn their language.

Let us never forget that this journey is ultimately spiritual and religious. Our journey depends on our spiritual preparation. We must begin by strengthening the bonds of compassion and commitment in our congregations. We must be open to new possibilities. We must practice humility. None of us has all the answers. Together, sharing wisdom and knowledge and resources, we are so much wiser and stronger. We must be brave and fearless. We must always remember that world we seek to create together, a world of compassion, of harmony, a world filled with life and joy, a world of peace, is worth our dedication. And we must always remember that if we join together as true partners, then crossing borders is an exhilarating spiritual adventure.

We are border crossers, you and I. This is our precious spiritual heritage as Unitarians and Universalists.

Come, take my hand and I will take yours. Vamos, mano en mano. What an adventure we have before us! Grab your spiritual passport! Come, let us be on our way.

Let me close with the words of Alberto Blanco:

¹ From a poem by Alberto Blanco, "Mi Tribu" / "My Tribe."

I'm talking about a tribe you can't talk about.

*A tribe that's always been
but whose existence must yet be proven.*

*A tribe that's never been
but whose existence
we can prove right now.*

So may it be. Amen.