

“Immigrants: The Call for Justice”
by Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
October 21, 2007

For me, attending the Latin American Encuentro last weekend was the emotional equivalent of riding the amusement park ride called “The Scrambler.”¹ Perhaps you remember “The Scrambler” from a county fair or a state fair. “The Scrambler” was not a roller coaster. Instead, riding “The Scrambler” was like riding on the beating part of an egg beater – if that egg beater had a dozen whirling parts instead of only two, and if those dozen whirling parts seemed to be at risk of colliding into each other at any moment. The Scrambler was like an egg beater free-for-all, where every shift in direction threw the riders from one corner to the other in their riding compartment. (To tell you the truth, “The Scrambler” was my favorite ride.)

Some of those emotional shifts experienced at the Encuentro I feel more comfortable talking about than others. Yet “freedom of the pulpit” means, among other things, risking disapproval by daring to share thoughts, feelings, and doubts.

I was thrown into an emotional corner at least four times at the Encuentro. The first emotional corner into which I was thrown by the Encuentro “Scrambler” was by reflecting upon all all the migrations by all my ancestors. In this focus on my ancestors, I am aided and abetted by certain of my relatives, who have investigated these ancestors and where they lived. For example, my sister recently visited a part of Scandinavia where the border between Sweden and Norway has shifted often over the centuries as battles were won or lost. In this neck of the woods, the home towns of the Swedish branch of the family and Norwegian branch of the family are separated by about 30 miles. I am guessing that way back when, the two branches probably shared a gene pool – and possibly, a cave.

¹ This was the 23rd annual Latin American Encuentro, sponsored by the southern California unit of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. It was held at Throop Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena last Saturday.

My sister Mary brought back this t-shirt (“Rock Art of Sweden”), featuring a prehistoric humans and animals painted on a cave wall in the old stomping grounds of these ancestors. “Our relatives probably painted this,” my sister said proudly. As it happens, my artistic ability is less well developed than that of the people who made these drawings, so I am more than happy to bask in their reflected glory. ;) Nonetheless, it is a little embarrassing to confess that when the topic is immigration, the first emotional corner I am thrown into is the somewhat egocentric corner devoted to the migrations of *my* ancestors.

The second emotional corner into which I was thrown by the Encuentro was a lurch triggered by one of the speakers, Carlos Escorcia, a Nicaraguan American who was a member of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional, (FSLN). From his presentation on “Emerging Democracies in Latin America: the Impact on Immigration,” I took away a pointed message: “Do not think of immigration without thinking of imperialism.” Do not think of immigration *to* the United States without thinking of imperialism *by* the United States. Wow! It has been a while since I have heard such an impassioned and persuasive left-of-center exhortation. These days, the war in Iraq notwithstanding, imperialism is more likely to be expressed in international trade relationships rather than in military campaigns. Carlos Escorcia reminded me of my left-of-center commitments. And also . . . I remain the granddaughter of farmers, having absorbed their “rugged” individualism, which provides an internal “check” on certain leftist prescriptions for making the world a better place.

The third emotional corner into which I was thrown by the Encuentro “Scrambler” was happiness at running into people I knew from elsewhere in the District. Half a dozen or so people from Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church in Costa Mesa were there. Three years ago, I served that congregation as the intern minister. One of the Orange Coast Unitarian Universalist Church members at the Encuentro was Chilean American Cosme Noriega, who is a survivor of horrific experiences in Chile. Cosme has given me permission to share these words of his with you. I share them because they relate to immigration and imperialism. He said:

“Being a progressive, really a socialist, college student, I contributed to the electing of Dr. Salvador Allende as President of Chile in 1970. I wanted Mr. Allende as president and I wanted him to succeed.

Nevertheless, I knew from my listening to international news on shortwave radio, that even before the election, the United States government was working against the election of Mr. Allende . . .

I remember clearly the night that Mr. Allende was elected. From TV and radio, I experienced how, throughout the country, his ecstatic supporters, especially the poorest of Chile's people, were celebrating victory and expressing hope for better days. That night, my friends and fellow Allende supporters noticed and criticized me for my lack of enthusiasm. The truth was—though I was satisfied with the election results—I was very worried. I was anticipating the United States's maneuvering in order to destabilize the coming Allende government and to ultimately remove Allende from power . . .

I was not a wizard, and I did not want to be a pessimist. It was just that due to my political involvement and my international awareness from the time I was a teen-ager, I possessed too much information to be comfortably happy the night of Allende's election. Well, as you probably already know, the Allende government was overthrown in 1973. Massive brutal repression of all kinds took place for the next 17 years.

I was arrested, tortured and “disappeared” for almost a month. I was imprisoned for almost a year. Fortunately, I survived. I experienced medical problems for over three years afterwards and I still have psychological scars. In 1976, I was brought from a concentration camp in Chile to California. Why? In 1975, a congressional commission, chaired by senator Frank Church, investigated the United States covert action in Chile. The commission concluded that there had been direct United States involvement in the overthrow of the Allende government.

One of the remedial actions suggested by the commission was to bring to the United States 400 of the political prisoners being held in Chile. I was one of them. Paradoxically, I was brought to the United States in order to escape the United States's violation of human rights.” Through these words of Cosme Noriega, we hear a stark reminder – a very stark reminder – of why we should not think of immigration without thinking of imperialism. The stories of other immigrants may be less dramatic (as in the case of immigrants who are searching for greater economic security), but I believe that past and present imperialism by wealthier countries toward poor countries is an engine for immigration.

The fourth emotional corner into which I was thrown by the Encuentro “Scrambler” is the one which is most difficult for me to talk about. It concerns the strategic place of so-called “family unity” in comprehensive immigration reform. Immigrants’ rights attorney Peter Schey, in his remarks on “Legal Rights of Immigrants and Those who Assist Them” suggested that progressives should consider working through Congress to legalize the roughly 1/10 of undocumented people in this country who already have relatives who are citizens or legal residents. This 1/10 equates to roughly 800,000 to 1 million of the 8 to 10 million undocumented people currently living in the United States. In other words, Peter Schey asks us to split out the “family unity” portion of what is called the Unity Blueprint for Immigration Reform (www.unityblueprint.org) and lobby for it now, setting aside the fate of the other 9/10 of undocumented people for a later time (when political compromises may come more easily).

When I heard his words, my heart started sinking. I am keenly aware of the ways in which some relationships are privileged over others. Some “families” are privileged over others. I personally am not willing to work for a version of immigration policy reform which is anchored in a principle of “family unity” so long as immigration policy prohibits a same-sex partner to be considered “family.” In fact, I typically find myself in a particularly lonely corner among liberals discussing comprehensive immigration reform because I think it makes more sense to ration visas based upon job skills than upon so-called “family unity.” Yet I squirm because of the contradiction in my valuing of immigrants with job skills over immigrants whose family members are citizens or legal residents because it may be precisely consequences of imperialism which allowed some immigrants but not others to obtain those job skills. It is confusing! I believe that there is no single proper Unitarian Universalist “take” on immigration issues.

At the Encuentro, Salvadoran American Moises Escalante mentioned an Italian Roman Catholic Bishop, Scalabrina, who has an “immigration theology.” According to Moises Escalante, Scalabrina says that immigration is good because it “mixes” life without destroying it. It renews the miracle of creation. I would put it this way: Human beings generally migrate in search of greater economic opportunity, and human beings often migrate on account of love. These days, thinking of worldwide migration patterns, people often migrate toward greater economic opportunity so that they can better express love to some of their family members by sending money “back home.” Not only do undocumented immigrants in the

United States often contribute money into a Social Security system whose benefits they will never receive, undocumented immigrants often send money home.

We live in one world, and yet it does not seem wise to have completely open borders. I do not quarrel with a country's right and responsibility to be selective at its borders. I do quarrel with the immorality of using fear of deportation to exploit undocumented workers. According to David Bacon, a reporter and photographer who specializes in labor issues, agribusiness is complaining of a shortage of farm labor in an attempt to get a new *bracero* program. The old *bracero* program of the 1940's and 1950's allowed people to work here but not stay here. David Bacon writes, "When resident workers struck, growers brought in *braceros*. If the *braceros* struck, they were deported . . . [Today,] giving workers real legal status – a green card or a permanent residence visa, would help them organize without risking deportation."²

I conclude with this observation: Human beings are on the move. In the very distant past, the ancestors of some of us left Africa. The ancestors of others of us stayed in Africa. Nation states and their laws come and go because human beings are on the move. Ancestors who left Africa and, over countless generations, walked into the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the Americas searching for a better quality of life did not live to see us sitting here. *We* will not live to see where the quest for a better life takes those who come after us. We migrate for economic opportunity, and we migrate for love. As citizens of the world, may we increase both the economic opportunity and the love available in the world. May it be so.

² "No Fruits for their Labor" by David Bacon, *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 11, 2006, p. B9.