

A Growing Awareness of what the Border Has To Do with Us

By Sister Kathleen Erickson, RSM

Spending three weeks over the 2019 holiday season in the El Paso/Juárez area has strengthened my resolve to share widely about what is happening at our southern border. Having spent 30 years engaged in the issue of immigration in a variety of ways, I feel compelled to confront more effectively the question of *what does this situation have to do with us in the United States?*

If you were to choose to go to the border, you too would meet wonderful people—generous, caring volunteers from around the United States and Mexico. You would see rooms full of donated blankets, clothing and other necessary supplies intended for men, women and children migrants. You might be told that cash contributions are the need now, as shelters in both El Paso and Juárez pay rent, heat, light and water bills, as well as respond to medical needs. As the complicated reality changes almost daily, you would learn of the need for transport for migrants to get to interviews or court dates, rejoin family in the U.S. or travel back to their own country. Typically, your response would be generous.

You would interact with migrants who maintain a sense of personal dignity and care for their children in spite of degrading treatment at the hands of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel and the humiliation of sleeping for months in makeshift shelters. You would get a sense of—and perhaps be devastated as you see in their eyes the impact of—the trauma they have suffered.

The estimated thousands of migrants in Juárez waiting for the chance to seek asylum in the United States would begin to take on faces for you. The staggering numbers reflect human misery in the extreme. My own heart lurched as I recognized hope in the eyes of parents waiting for the chance to request asylum of U.S. officials even as I knew almost none of those requests would be granted. I greeted a newly arrived woman at the Juárez migrant center, saw the tears flow and realized she was waiting to talk with a doctor about being raped on the journey north, who knows how many times. Her 4-year-old daughter clung to her and broke my heart.

I met women from Honduras and learned of them receiving death threats for participating in protests against the U.S.-backed Honduran government. Their strength and vulnerability were palpable. One expressed grave concern about the high suicide rate among young people in Honduras.

Far from being indifferent to the seemingly never-ending cruelties perpetrated against migrants, people throughout the U.S. who pay attention to this crisis are appalled. We are generous and caring. But my recent time there made me realize we must make our response more effective. I had with me a book published in 1977, *The Raft is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist/Christian Awareness*, a conversation between Daniel Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh, and was struck by this:

“It’s foolish and retrogressive to accept a kind of citizenship that implies toleration, silence and approval of crimes against the innocent. Practically everyone today should be either in exile or jail or in some kind of trouble.” (Berrigan)

Thich Nhat Hanh responds:

“...I believe the only useful energy is compassion, love, concern—these generate energy that can go with calm and serenity.”

Those two statements deepened my conviction that we in the United States must face the fact that this crisis is about us in many ways. Are we not participants in what theologian Cynthia Bourgeault refers to as “the heartbreaking hypocrisy of Christianity”? I believe we MUST challenge both a spirituality that exacerbates hierarchy and division, and structures that have benefitted us and wreaked havoc in other countries.

In 1985, a speaker in Nicaragua told a Witness for Peace delegation, “The people in the U.S. are good people but they live in a cloud of disinformation. Your work is in your own country.” In 2013 in Honduras, a Mercy Associate said strongly: “Until the people in the U.S. realize what is happening, *things will not change for the better.*” Most of us are not even aware that the U.S. government supports a Honduran president whom the people know to be illegitimate and criminal. Our lack of awareness contributes to that reality.

We don’t see it. I grew up waking to the smell of coffee my dad made every morning, and never once realized that people in countries like Guatemala who grew and harvested that coffee were paid so little their children didn’t have shoes. Guatemalan friends in Omaha tell about family members back home whose children are dying or lack of food and access to medicine. Their country is experiencing drought for the third year in a row. What has that to do with us?

Is it our problem that workers in multinational corporations in Juárez earn about \$50/week and live in poverty? That their low wages make our cars and appliances and technology more affordable? That workers in the U.S. earn a lot more? That our business model is based on profit rather than the common good? How much longer can we enjoy the good life and not be aghast that desperate people die trying to cross our border and are imprisoned if they succeed? How will we respond as climate crises force more migration? When will we realize everything is connected, and that *how people treat one another is not a partisan question?*

We are blessed to live in this time of growing awareness. We can no longer avoid the truth except by deliberate choice. We can learn more about the reality of our world by reading books such as *New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, by John Perkins; *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*, by Todd Miller; and *Sand and Blood: America’s Stealth War on the Mexico Border*, by John Carlos Frey. We must pay attention to news coverage related to the unprecedented economic inequality that has worked to our advantage. We must get this reality into more conversation, learn together and begin to brainstorm ways to change unjust structures and business practices. We need to recognize the spirituality of the oneness of all things.

There is a kind of personal discipline needed to commit to the hard work ahead. Will we rise to the challenge? Will we ourselves become more effective at making the connections and challenging one another to raise awareness that leads to change?

Kathleen Erickson is a Mercy sister based in Omaha, Nebraska. She is eager to share her insights with schools, parishes and other groups. You may contact her at kerickson@mercywmw.org