

January 13, 2008, The New Hate Speech and What We Can Do About It

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An undocumented immigrant, a long standing resident of San Diego County, a wife and a mother of four was making the dangerous border crossing. She had gone back to Mexico because of a family crisis. And as she was crossing the border, she got caught in the wild fires in October and was moved across the street to the UCSD Medical Center where she was treated for her burns along with many other undocumented immigrants who were caught in that fire. And she died of her burns.

There was a forum on the website of the Union Tribune newspaper. People can write what they want on those forums and some very horrible things were said, that she deserved to die, that she shouldn't be here; and the whole issue of immigration was brought up in hateful language. One person posted the opinion of that illegal immigrants were like ants, if you see one in your kitchen, you must exterminate the ant because it will bring hordes, the swarm of ants to your house and undocumented immigrants are like that. And finally after a plea from many for civil conversation and from the moderator for civil conversation, the moderator closed down. The dialogue and was scolded in harsh terms for that. A politician whose courage I admire, California Assembly Member, Laurie Saldaña, had had enough and has called together an interfaith group to oppose the hate speech that's all around us now on this issue of immigration. Laurie, thank you for being here. And this interfaith group, yet to be named, has been meeting. It's a group of Protestants, Unitarians Universalists, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Quakers; it's a group of black, white and Hispanics. And our intent is to speak out with the authority of our faith traditions, about how wrong and harmful hate speech is, how it is against all of our religions to speak that way about fellow human beings.

At the first meeting in November, I was a little bit late I had to wait while I showed my ID and the church was called to see if I had been invited because the anti-immigrant Minutemen group had attempted to disrupt the meeting. And as we were leaving that meeting, the Minutemen came and stuck their video cameras and tape recorders in our faces and basically harassed us. I really think they were trying to provoke us.

Last year, the FBI reported that in the city of San Diego, hate crime increased by 25% and they increased by 32% in San Diego County in one year's time, and a huge part of that increase was due to hate crimes against the Latino population. (I hasten to remind you that not all crimes against Latinos with hate as

a motive were actually classified as hate crimes) So I want us to think about this. Crime is overall down in San Diego. Hate crimes way up. Those of us who are trying to live a decent life need to ask ourselves, "Is this the kind of community we want to live in? Do we want to let this keep going? Do we tolerate this? Do we just stand by and do nothing while this happens?" Violent action is motivated by hate and it has its beginning in speech that is motivated by hate and the problem is that in the debate about the policies around immigration, the outrageous has become normal. Extremist groups are interviewed by the media as if they are the mainstream position on this issue.

The outrageous has become normal. Arizona talk show host, Brian James, said on the air (and I remind you that these air waves, even though they have for the past several decades been sold to the highest bidder belong to the tax payers of America, they belong to you and me) and on these air waves, Brian James said quote, "What we'll do is randomly pick one night every week where we will kill whoever crosses the border. Step over there and you die, you get to decide whether this is your lucky night or not. I think that would be more fun." On the public air waves! The rhetoric of these hate groups (and that's what they are) is meant to inspire fear. They always talk of third world invaders who've come here to destroy our Anglo Saxon heritage, who've come to colonize our country, have come to destroy our way of life. And again, the insect analogy, very popular, hordes that swarm across the border. These are people seeking a better life with no criminal intent. But yet, they're accused of a conspiracy of reconquista, to reconquer parts of America that were once Mexico, and they're accused of spreading all kinds of terrible and unknown diseases like leprosy. Now, how ridiculous is that? Hansen's disease, which is what leprosy is called, hasn't been a medical issue for decades. Worse, undocumented immigrants have been called criminals, murderers, rapists and terrorists, and oh yeah, pedophiles. One California anti immigrant leader said and I quote, "Mexican men have reputation of leering at little girls. Which shouldn't surprise us since sex with children is socially acceptable in Mexico." This isn't being challenged!

Who is speaking out against this? Why do we let it go on? The media covers this stuff; and people believe this stuff; and the anti-immigrant groups with ties to certified hate groups; just check out the website for the Southern Poverty Law Center, these hate groups are interviewed by the media as experts in this debate. Even our governor has praised the Minutemen. It's a tough time for ordinary people in America, it's getting harder to make ends meet, the price of energy going up, and the price of a decent education for our children is going up, the price of food, going up. There's a lot of fear, much of the fear inspired by cynical politicians, and so find somebody to blame. It's the undocumented

immigrants and some politicians are competing with each other to say the most outrageous things about undocumented immigrants to gain votes.

And for a long time talk radio hosts have denigrated our public debate. Talk radio hosts on the left and on the right. But the ones on the right particularly have fostered hate speech, said it themselves, and tolerated it in their callers on the public air waves. Especially let's hold up Michael Savage and locally Roger Hedgecock and Rick Roberts.

All the ministers of your church have joined this coalition because we think it's time for decent people to say, "Enough! Enough. This isn't that kind of society. We are not giving up on the American dream of pluralism and diversity." As a group called Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform has expressed it in a statement, "All of us, Christians and non-Christian alike must stand up and reclaim our national dialogue. If the media will not make everyone aware of how extreme our national conversation has become, then we have an obligation to do that for them." Some people say, "Well, you know, it a free country. We have free speech. But remember, we own the air ways. They go to the highest bidder now, they don't have to. But even with the issue of free speech those who think that a decent society needs to challenge hate speech have a right to speak out as well. Many major corporation, having been confronted with some of the statements made on Michael Savage's "Savage Nation" after it has been pointed out that if their employees were to make statements like that, they would be fired because there are anti-hate speech policies in those companies, have withdrawn their sponsorships from Savage Nation because they don't want to be identified with those sentiments and I applaud those responsible businesses for doing that. As the group "Hate Hurts America" coalition has stated, "While Mr. Savage has a first amendment right to spew hatred, people of conscience have no obligation to purchase the goods and services of companies that offer financial support to that hate." We as consumers have some power. Now, you know, the way this works is advertisers are businesses that want customers. They don't have evil motives. They're sold a package of advertising and their advertisements are spread out on many different programs based on numbers of listeners. I don't think most of these businesses say, "Ah, I'm going to support hate speech! Ha, ha, ha!" They're just trying to reach customers and I'm wondering what would happen if concerned citizens were on a local level to do a similar thing as happened with Savage Nation and contact the advertising director of these local businesses and say, "Here are some statements. Is that what your company stands for?" What would happen then? A dialogue with those sponsors. I'm hoping that our coalition comes up with a strategy for that kind of dialogue.

You know, immigration is an awfully complicated issue. Even though I'm standing here behind the pulpit, I don't have that answer. I think the answer is very complicated and I think the debate is way too simple. And why is it even called an immigration issue. Maybe it's an employer issue, or maybe it's a low wage issue, or maybe it's a cheap life style issue or maybe it's a humanitarian issue, or a refugee issue. All of those talk about some aspect of this problem. This is all pointed out by linguist George Lakoff and he says especially that the words "illegal alien" lead to a misapprehension and an over simplification of this issue. Illegal. We think of criminal, we think of rapists, murderers, burglars, armed robbers, and aliens. Well, that's somebody not even human, somebody from another planet. Illegal aliens. I'm quoting Lakoff. "These are not neutral terms. Imagine calling business men who once cheated on their taxes illegal business men. Imagine calling people who've driven over the speed limit, illegal drivers. Is Tom DeLay an illegal republican? The intent of these people who cross our borders to take these jobs is not criminal. It is not intent to harm or steal. The problem is not being called the "illegal employer problem". And our employers are not being called "illegal".

Since the North American Free Trade Agreement, the economy of the poorest in Mexico has collapsed and people are driven to the borders. But knowing what I know about what's happening to the economy in Mexico, I know that if I were a Mexican trying to support a family, trying to feed them and provide them with a decent quality of life, I would have to cross the border. I would tell you that if you look at that situation you would probably make that decision too.

Unitarian Universalists believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual that requires us to speak out against hate speech. Our Universalist heritage requires that we treat all people with compassion, understanding and respect no matter what your opinion is on what this nation's immigration policy should be. This speech hurts all of us because the hate crimes that were committed in San Diego this year were not only against Latinos but against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, African-American people, Asian people and others. It hurts all of us. It coarsens our public dialogue, it hardens our hearts to our fellow human beings It polarizes our debates, we must all become activists. So, what can we do? We can confront it lovingly when we hear it from our family and friends, Yeah that takes courage. Perhaps you can say, "Is that a very Christian thing to say?" Maybe that will have some impact on some of your family and friends. We can in our families here and in our religious education here, teach our children and youth to speak with care and respect because our children too are

poisoned by the common dialogue. You can speak out publicly, you can write letters to the editor and as our coalition works to develop strategies you can support us. This coalition has sent a petition to the State Attorney General asking him to investigate the hate crime increase in San Diego. We would like to partner with law enforcement and make sure that they are putting the necessary resources into combating hate crime. We want to reach out to the media with a different and better message. And I'm particularly interested in using our economic power, to dialogue with businesses that finance hate speech on our air waves. As a declaration about hate motivated behavior by the citizens of San Diego city and county declares, "Those who engage in hate motivated behaviors are denigrators of our democratic way of life and believe that the American experiment with diversity and pluralism is a failure. It is our responsibility to prove them wrong." It's my responsibility. It's your responsibility. It's our responsibility together, as a congregation, as a community and as a Nation. This month, we celebrate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Let's not forget what he said, "At the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. Amen."