

In A Place Where Blisters Kill
by Jay Dravich

Labor Day is a unique holiday. Secular, it celebrates neither a historic event nor a famous person. Its intent is to honor the small guy, the working man and woman.

This Labor Day weekend, I was driving south from Santa Cruz to do what I could to help keep alive the most dedicated and most unwelcome laborers ever to be denied a page in the labor history of America.

It was already hot in the morning and the drive to Tucson, Arizona, promised to be a gauntlet in the rapidly rising temperature. The air conditioning would have to be occasionally turned off to prevent the car from overheating and I regretted not having done the seventy-five thousand mile oil change before I left town.

I spent the night in a motel in Blythe, California, where nearly every room was occupied with men and boys dressed in camouflage preparing for the first day of dove hunting season. The bird that symbolically represents peace on earth, carrying an olive branch from G-d.

I arrived in Tucson in early afternoon, in time for the weekly three hour orientation by the youthful leaders of “No More Deaths”. For the past four summers No More Deaths volunteers have gone out to the Sonora desert to rescue migrants who are lost and dying. Dehydration is the looming frightful presence in the desert so volunteers walk on trails known only to the “coyotes” placing gallon jugs of water all along the routes. I had mailed in my application to join them in their desert camp for a week.

The application asked if I could walk four miles in four hours carrying a twenty pound pack in one hundred and twenty degree Fahrenheit weather. I wrote back “yes”. I wasn’t sure I could do it, but I wanted to give myself the benefit fo the doubt. The truth was I was afraid my sixty-two year old, not brought in for regular check ups body might not be able to endure the heat.

During orientation they gave us a crash course in wilderness first aid. How to distinguish heat exhaustion from heat stroke. What do to with sprained ankles. When to call in the helicopter evacuation unit and to never, ever use one of the snake bite kits they sell in all the outdoor stores. There was some brief talk about what to do if we find dead bodies.

We got a short history of the border. I hadn’t known that this whole tragedy only just recently began during the Clinton Administration and the decision to create NAFTA. Before then, border crossing was not routinely a death defying ordeal.

I didn’t have any idea there were so many federal police, under so many different bureaus who are taking over the South West of America. In addition to the significantly increased federal police rosters, there are many private contractors making vast amounts of money on the American side of the border from the plight of the migrants. Wackenhut, a private prison contractor, for example, has a very lucrative contract with the Department of Homeland Security to operate the buses that transport people to detention centers and then to the border for deportation. If the Mexican Mafia is the profiteer on the southern side of the boundary, these corporations and federal bureaus represent the northern profiteers in this quid pro quo human trafficking scandal..

I certainly never before had considered the ramifications for the local population of having so many federal police patrolling their townships. All these thousands of new federal

police, brought in under the excuse of border protection are just as comfortable turning their attention to the citizens as they are to the migrants. There is an area at least a thousand miles long and close to fifty miles wide that is now under federal police occupation. It is just like in Central America. There are frequent military check points. All vehicles are stopped. All citizens detained. The men have automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. The local population the solitary, rugged people who inhabit the desert have suddenly had their privacy invaded by cameras, sensors and helicopters.

We also received an update on our volunteers being arrested by federal law enforcement. I definitely did not want to go to jail nor was my spirit buoyed when I saw stacks of No More Death posters that read: "Humanitarian Aid is Never a Crime". Several months back two volunteers had been arrested while evacuating three very sick men from the desert to a medical facility in Tucson. The men had been vomiting, were severely dehydrated and one had blood in his diarrhea. The volunteers were charged with aiding and abetting undocumented individuals. The good news was the case had been dismissed. The bad news was there had been no final ruling on the case which meant one never knows what's coming next.

At the end of the orientation half of our group left for Nogales, Mexico. Outside of Nogales, No More Deaths volunteers offer emergency first aid to more than a thousand migrants a day who, regardless of health distress are thrown off a Wackenhut bus, in the middle of nowhere, and a couple of miles from town on the other side of the border.

The remaining four of us went out to the desert. The camp was located fifteen miles north of the frontier. Depending upon the trails selected by the coyotes, the camp was situated near the mid-point for people trying to cross the desert.

The camp looked better than I had imagined it would be. There was a gnome sized travel trailer that served as kitchen, with its three burner stove and no oven, pantry, library, medical supply storage and dry socks warehouse. Dining was outside under tarps that provided shade from the relentless heat and in moments could be transformed into a dry place to sit out the monsoon rains and furious lightning that beats the desert in the heat of the afternoon.

We had a wide choice of tents that were already set up and ready for occupancy. I took the first one we came to and it was like winning the lottery. I could stand up in it and it came with an army/navy cot. More over it had a water resistant rain fly.

The week started out well. We were aroused by some walking through camp singing us awake with a gentle Christian hymn. It was five thirty, the sun was coming up and it felt pretty hot for so early in the day.

There were seven of us who sat around the table, drinking brewed coffee and having our choice of cold cereals with soy milk. One man was my age. He came out to camp every Friday night and stayed through Monday afternoon. He'd been doing so from the beginning, four years back..With a winning smile and gracious demeanor he was respected for his knowledge of the desert and the issues surrounding immigration as well as for his tenacity that mirrored the landscape.

The rest of our group was comprised of youth. The oldest was twenty-five. He had recently decided to forego law school to continue working to save the lives of migrants. The youngest was twenty. He had just returned from a Spanish language school in Guatemala. In between there was a University all star baseball pitcher, a potential seminarian, a recent college graduate and one who hadn't decided on what to do come October. They were all white. Five

were male. One female. She didn't like the latrine system that existed and developed her own, slightly more pleasing facility.

The more I watched them over the week, the more I heard what they had to say, what they had seen, the more I learned about the many other No More Death volunteers, the more impressed I was with them.

Many of them have roots in the Church, coming in or out of some organized youth volunteer corps. They come with love and compassion in their hearts. With Jesus teaching them the way. They are turning away from the consumer culture and turning toward something far more grand. In the bookcase, Edward Albee's books stood alongside the Bible.

All of them are smart. They can connect the dots between NAFTA, the maquiladoras, immigration policy, Latin American politics, Katrina victims, the international corporate infrastructure and the Mafia. They comprise an authentic international youth brigade.

They are tough. Sacrifice is a privilege to them. They are mostly thin and scrawny, but scrawny in the same way as Appalachian hard working people are wiry. They are strong and strong willed. They are undaunted by the desert though our female companion did get a little upset when a large snake slithered across her personal latrine.

It is impossible to walk the desert and avoid getting stung, bitten, stabbed or sliced. I talk from experience. Yet the most any of these youth would do is to mutter an epithet and keep on going. They were even embarrassed when they arrived back at camp and I would insist on them using alcohol swaps to wipe clean the scratches..

On the first morning the two experienced volunteers studied maps. These were maps that showed the better known, more established migrant trails leading from Nogales to Tucson. We were patrolling about one hundred square miles. With six of us, we could walk two different paths and still leave a person behind to care for two men who had wandered into camp the day earlier.

One of the migrants had terrible blisters and the other was passing blood. They needed immediate medical care and were certainly not capable of continuing to walk. They decided to rest and heal at our camp for two days and to then call the Border Patrol agents to come out to camp, arrest and deport them to Nogales. We gave them the names of our medical volunteers located at the drop off site and hoped that something more might be done for them.

It is never our role to encourage or discourage the migrants from continuing their journey. Our purpose is to simply prevent them from dying along the way. Often times that means they admit defeat, voluntarily return to Mexico, recuperate and then try to cross at a later date.

Five of us prepared to leave camp for the five hour trek. I was dressed in the latest fashion attire from REI; socks, underwear, pants shirt and hat all specifically designed for desert wear. Everyone else in the group wore shorts and t-shirts, preferring to endure the cuts and slashes than to be overly hot.

Besides carrying water for ourselves, we filled our back packs with "Migrant Packs" which consisted of a box of raisons, a small can of potted meat, a juice, a power bar and whatever other small boxed or canned food was available. A clean pair of white socks was always included as well.

I asked about the socks. An experienced volunteer explained it to me: "This is a place where a blister can kill a person. There are about three thousand migrants moving throughout

the Sonoran desert every day. They travel in fairly large groups, often from ten to thirty people in a group. The coyote who is leading the group through the maze of trails knows the longer they are in the desert the more chance they have of getting caught or in trouble so his goal is to set a bone chilling pace, walking at night, with few rest stops in between. People often describe the pace as “running”. If for any reason a person begins to lag too far behind, he or she will become separated from the group and lost in the desert. One reason for people falling behind is that they have blisters from running in wet socks. If we can prevent a blister, perhaps we will prevent a person from joining at least a thousand other bodies a year that line our border. “

He had said a thousand migrants a year die of thirst out here. Others have said the number is far greater. No one knows for sure. Many of the bodies that are accidentally discovered can not be identified and no one knows what is the ratio of discovered to undiscovered bodies. The vultures come in quick in the desert and leave hardly any evidence behind..

We took “Roja” our sturdiest four wheel drive truck. We were only going five miles but I had never in my life driven on desert roads. It’s not pot-holes out there, its gullies. It’s ditches that can swallow a Volkswagen. It’s arroyos so steep that it’s hard to see what is on the other side.

This was my first geography lesson. Not all deserts are the same. I had spent a couple of days in Death Valley and once drove to Quartzite across the Mojave. I figured if you’ve seen one desert you’ve seen them all, so I was surprised at how much grows in the Sonoran desert. It’s not brown. It’s green. And every green thing has an attitude. Even the green things that don’t appear to be nasty are nasty. They’ve got thorns, knife edge leaves, stickers that burn and a type of cactus that latches onto people and sets barbs into the flesh.

Reaching the trail head we each grabbed two one gallon jugs of water and started off, a GPS (global Positioning System) dangling from our necks and a hand drawn map that, if it was correct, gave us a vague idea of the path. Periodically someone in our group would yell out: “Hola amigos. Nosotros tenemos agua, comida, medicina. Nos somos de la iglesia y no somos la pincha migra.. (Hello friends. We have water, food and medicine. We are from the church and we are not the f--king immigration.) We added this last descriptor in hope of gaining some trust from the migrants who had been taught to hide whenever anyone was approaching. Meeting people on the trail is not a good thing. There are many bad people out in the desert including drug dealers, bandits and police (often confused with bandits). Three white boys carrying water for dehydrated and/or injured migrants is almost too hard to believe, so the migrants stay hidden.

In the entire week in the desert, no one answered our offer of assistance though we saw many, many tracks. The other thing working against us making contact was that the coyotes prefer to move their groups at night and hide away from the trail during the heat of the day. When one of us expressed disappointment in not seeing migrants, our leader reminded us that our goal was not to meet migrants on the trail, our goal was to find those who had lost their group and were alone out there, somewhere, hopefully near a trail we might stumble upon.

We were encouraged to leave water jugs at crucial spots along the trail..We placed the water in plain sight just before migrants would come to a creek or a watering trough for free range cattle. All of that water is so dirty and so full of giardia that it causes diarrhea which further dehydrates and endangers the migrants. We wrote the words Agua Pura (pure water), the date and the GPS point we were nearest to on the jugs. That way, if we chanced upon one of our jugs further down a trail, which we often did, it would give us a clue how the trails were connecting to

each other. We left zip lock Baggies with dry socks alongside the jugs of water.

By the time we returned to camp the temperature had climbed to 112 degrees, my brand new, REI, fifty dollar wicking shirt was torn in a dozen places and there were blood stains on the cuff. My shoulders ached and a yellow benign looking caterpillar was voraciously chewing my arm. I made it to the dining area and soaked my bandana from a spigot in a five gallon water barrel and draped the cloth around my head. I drank from a second water barrel, filled with ice water, courtesy of a beautiful neighbor who allowed us to use her well water and freezer.

She was the true "Camp Mother" constantly reminding the volunteers to bring her their laundry and always keeping the door open if they needed a shower, or an air conditioned room in which to sit or sleep. Like many who live out in the desert, she had compassion for the migrants.

It's hard to not have compassion for the migrants. These are frequently young men who scrape together their entire extended family's resources, selling their cows, mortgaging their homes, doing whatever it takes to come up with one to two thousand dollars apiece to pay a coyote to take them to America. When they arrive in the Mexican border towns, many of them country bumpkins, they are easy prey for every low life bandit. If they are lucky they don't get beaten, robbed or scammed out of their money and make a successful contact with a coyote. The coyote is lowest man down in the crime syndicates that are running a billion dollar annual business in human trafficking; This is a business with low overhead, where lots of people are making a lot of money; and corruption has a price tag that can easily be afforded.

The migrants are told to wait in one of the syndicate run hotels where they have to pay for their food and lodging. They are not allowed to leave the room and everyone is very frightened. Then suddenly they are told to get ready. It doesn't take them very long. They have very little to pack, at most a small day bag. If it is a child who is crossing, the day pack will be pink and have a picture of Barbie Doll on it.

A vehicle takes the group to the border and they begin their trial. The migrants have almost no food, at most a gallon of water and poorly made sneakers. Even in winter, when the desert night air reaches the freezing point, blankets are rare. It's hard to carry something in the desert when you are walking very fast, your life dependent on staying with the group, terrified of spraining an ankle on the rock strewn path in the dark of night, becoming thirsty, then becoming very thirsty, then having to make the decision to drink the polluted water or try to make it to the pickup point, never knowing if Border Patrol agents in helicopters are going to spot you and signal for your capture moments before your ride arrives to carry you to freedom. The freedom to work at whatever job you can obtain, at whatever wage is offered..

No one in the group is carrying a compass or even a map, because those who run Home Land Security have decided that if a migrant is found with a compass or map, it is irrefutable proof that this person is the coyote and instead of facing voluntary deportation, now faces criminal prosecution. So, besides taking a vague bearing of the sun rising in the east and going down in the west and knowing that freedom is to the north, there isn't much to guide the migrants. Throughout the ordeal, they have an awareness that the entire family's welfare depends upon them succeeding in getting jobs in the United States. Their failure will bankrupt the entire family.

Lunch lasted a couple of hours, there being no reason to leave the comfort of one another or to go out into the blazing sunlight.. At three in the afternoon we went out on our second patrol.

A slightly shorter one this time.

When we arrived back in the evening, I had the strong impression that if something didn't happen real soon, we were going to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for supper. I grabbed a skillet and put a pot of water to boil. An hour later we had rice and stir fried vegetables using my secret recipe of soy sauce, ginger, roasted garlic, olive oil and hot chile powder. Bedtime came on quick.

The next day I was the first one out of bed and sang my companions awake with "Amazing Grace".. After breakfast we started out on two new trails. That morning I learned about herpetology. I got to recognize and stare at a rattlesnake, many different spiders, tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes that are so ill disposed that they will attack people for no discernible reason and those stinking benign looking yellow caterpillars that leave welts wherever they crawl.

I thought about the migrant. The migrant who is even more vulnerable to the crawling, slithering, hopping, leaping teeth of the desert at night. The migrant who has no first aid kit, no sun screen, no mosquito repellent, aspirin or moleskin for the place where his sneaker has dangerously started to rub against his ankle.

When it came time for the afternoon patrol, I volunteered to stay in camp, admitting that I was tired. This pleased all the other volunteers since they wanted to be on patrol and gladly gave me permission to stay in camp every afternoon.

Later in the day storm clouds began to merge over the horizon. Thunder and lightning were everywhere. I checked to make sure all the chairs in our dining area were made of plastic. I rolled down the side flaps of our dining area and then set out for the kitchen. The five of them were going to return home cold and drenched.. They would need something hot. Drawing on my basic culinary background I made them a good hearty vegetable soup with tofu using my same secret recipe

And so it went all week. The weather got worse before it got better. We caught the tail end of Hurricane Henrietta. The tents all leaked, all but mine. People walked around wet all day and were wet all night. By now no one mentioned their personal discomfort. We knew there were thousands of people all round us who were just as wet as ourselves, with no tarps to sit under, no wet sleeping bags to crawl into and no hot soup to warm their shivering hands.

I still can't fathom it. What would it take to push a person to undertake such a perilous, soul draining, body punishing journey? What love of family would motivate a person to roll the dice, gambling with his or her very life, that they had the ability to endure such misery and the following isolation of living in an unwelcoming country just to send money home to improve the lives of others? What level of economic enslavement would drive a person to risk his life to save his people. What nobility do they possess that they can forgive us for this journey through hell and still want to clean our houses, wash our dishes, harvest our crops, enable us to live our lives of comfort?

For the one out of three migrants who is captured and deported, from whence do they draw forth the courage to attempt to cross once again? For be sure, when migrants have gotten as far as the Mexican border, there is very little room for turning back.. If only one out of three people is intercepted it follows from reason that within three tries, everyone, one hundred percent minus those too injured or dead, get to cross into America. Virtually everyone who tries to cross the border is successful. All the border guards, all the barbed wire, all the walls

separating neighboring countries don't stop virtually anyone who is insistent on crossing.

The black runaway slave had the underground railroad. The migrant has no-one. The black runaway slave had the northern states where maybe he might find safe haven. The migrant has no-where to find sanctuary. The migrant has taken the place of the black on slavery's auction block. The whip lash is gone. It has been replaced with the threat of the cactus bush for no matter how long the migrant lives and works in the states, he knows that one small, little mistake and he can be thrown across the border forced to face crossing the frontier once again.

What have we done, America? How have we allowed our nation to take such a wrong turn? What political machinations are taking place all around us to create fear and for what purpose? When did we become this greedy? We use to pride ourselves on our generosity. We loved our Statue of Liberty that proclaims: "Give me your tired, your poor". What do we need to do to reclaim the high ground and more importantly, do we have the spiritual strength to turn it round right?

Sunday afternoon we parted ways. Two of us were leaving, more were coming to take our places. I took good care to secure the rain fly on my tent to insure at least one person would have a dry bed in which to sleep.

Two days later I arrived home. I walked into the kitchen and stood there struck by a sudden awareness of abundance. Everywhere I looked, I saw comfort and ease. As my wife and two friends gathered around the dinner table I offered to say Grace.

Dear G-d. We give so much thanks for all the comforts that surround us: for the food to satisfy our hunger, for the water that comes out of tap to quench our thirst; for the roof and walls of this house that protect us from the elements, for the companionship of friends that drives away the darkness of isolation and for a bed to sleep in assured that we are safe. Most of all, Lord, we give thanks for the ability to challenge a sickness that runs so deep in the American political body and whose only antidote is love and compassion. Amen.

For more information or to make a donation you can send checks or money orders to: No More Deaths, P.O.Box 33173 Phoenix, AZ 85067. Make checks payable to "No More Deaths". The organization is also always in need of new white socks and ace bandages.

Recommended Reading List:

The Devil's Highway by Luis Alberto Urrea

Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail by Ruben Martinez

Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the Illegal Alien and the Remaking of the U.S. Mexico Boundary by Joseph Nevins

Enrique's Journey by Sonia Nazario

Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression by Anne Bishop

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