

Our Lady of Guadalupe: Hope and Liberation
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship

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I first met Guadalupe in South Central Los Angeles in the winter of 2001. South Central LA is a riot-worn, beaten down area of the city, rift with racial tensions, the home of the infamous Watts riots of the 60's, and now weathering a shift from a primarily African-American population to one that is largely Hispanic. I was in South Central LA studying Spanish in an immersion program hosted by a confederation of area churches, with classes held in what was once a Norwegian Lutheran 'cathedral'. It was a confluence of cultures – none the least of which was the imposition, or at least the gentle knocking, of my naïve Midwestern persona against that of a much more worldly-wise people...people who are immersed in *la luche*.

It was exhilarating and somewhat scary to be there. I felt bombarded with things that I had not experienced before – not only in the learning of a new language, but with the entire immersion experience. Yet I was in a place of privilege – a guest – able to leave at will – able to escape the filth and the noise by getting in my car and driving to other more 'desirable' LA locations. I had chosen this experience, and unlike those who live in this area out of necessity, it was not a mandatory existence. I had chosen this experience; unlike the situation for the indigenous peoples in Central America in the 1500's, my life was not in jeopardy.

As we know, the story of the Western Hemisphere is one of conquest. The Conquistadores have celebrated it as progress and achievement; the indigenous peoples whose families were slaughtered and whose culture was decimated would have a much different perspective. In the United States, what was the celebration of Columbus Day, is now for many a day of shame, a day to try to make some retribution to the Native Americans, or at least to acknowledge the European's role in the demise of their known civilization. In Central America, it is estimated that the fall of the Aztec Empire, led by Hernán Cortés, and combined with the introduction of smallpox and typhus, took hundreds of thousands of lives.

Along with the conquistadors, came the friars and priests. Roman Catholic missionaries first arrived in the New World in 1523, even before Cortés. Their first steps, in an attempt to accomplish conversion, were to eradicate the local idolatry and to translate Christian doctrines into native languages. They persuaded Indians to tear down their temples and to build churches and monasteries in their place, in hopes of replacing one theological structure with

another. The use of statues and paintings in Catholic ritual mirrored so well the Aztec worship many believed that evangelisation of a continent had been successful. In reality, however, the conversion was somewhat superficial.¹ The stamp of the Aztec character remained on the minds of the indigenous peoples, just as the masonry of broken Aztec temples was built into the walls of their churches. (As an aside here, and thinking back on Guadalupe's request of Juan Diego to build her a church, I have to wonder what voice we would need to hear in order to tear down our temple and rebuild? What can call us to take that kind of action?)

We heard, just a bit ago, the mythically rich story of Guadalupe and Juan Diego, as told by Tomie de Paola, a great storyteller, but not perhaps the most reliable historian. Yet his version is perhaps as accurate as it gets...there are many variations on the story and much contention about its original version. I'm not going to get into that today; it is not my mission to prove or disprove the authenticity of the story or of Diego's tilma that is still on display in Mexico City. Let me just say that even though his cloak is over 400 years old, and it is made of cactus fiber, it apparently shows no real signs of deterioration. Artists have tried, unsuccessfully, to reproduce the combination of oil, watercolor, and fresco...a limited palette whose colors have never faded. Studies in the last few decades, using infrared photography and other forensic investigations, seem to show that there was some altering of the image over the early years, but nothing more recent than the 17th century. And so the question remains, was this a miracle of a supernatural origin...or the work of an earthly artist? Again, this does not concern me today. As the humanist in me would say, if we cannot know the answer, it is not even worth worrying over. What matters more is the effect(s) the existence of the mystery has on our daily lives and our struggle to be free.

What I hope to explore with you today are two things. First, the grafting of one culture onto another, the imposition of one religion onto another, and the resulting mixture – because this can be compared, I believe, to what Unitarian Universalism attempts to do...and second, to look at, just a tiny bit, to just barely open the door a teensy crack to the power of a religious symbol, or even a redemptrix, in the life of a people. I want to see what value it might have and what we can learn from it.

¹ Vaillant, George C., *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise, and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (Doubleday, 1962)

So...first things first...

We are all, in some manner, mixtures of cultures, experiences, religions, and ideologies. We live in a pluralistic society, and even if we didn't, each person would still be an individual in part because of the unique blending of the situations into which they were born and the things they touch and are touched by as they go through life. Perhaps few of us have had such a world-upsetting experience as that which happened to the Aztec peoples, but nonetheless, we are each changed by what we encounter. I see this on the first Sunday of the month when we have an introduction session here for folks who want to learn more about Unitarian Universalism. The way we start that conversation is by sharing our individual religious upbringings. These stories have similarities, yet they are unique. Some of us have been deeply wounded by religious indoctrination, some have been rather oblivious to religious influence, and some have struggled constantly to find their own path. In each case, there is some keeping and some taking, some acceptance and some rejection...and a blending together of those pieces to which we are willing to give authority or to call true - at least for the meantime.

I imagine that a similar process created Guadalupe. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztec empire was already a large blending of different cultures, thought at one time to include some 25 million people. The Aztecs and their forebears saw nature operating in a series of rhythms...birth, maturity and death...night and day...and the stations of the year rotating endlessly through spring, summer, fall and winter. They believed that forces of nature acted for good or evil very much as does humankind, so it was logical for them to personalize those natural elements as gods or goddesses. Their primary god was a sun god, whom they worshipped with human sacrifice...offering presents, uttering prayers and performing symbolic acts to induce the divine powers, or the forces of nature, to operate for the public benefit.

The Spanish conquest destroyed the core of this religion; I would imagine that the indigenous peoples were somewhat confused by the fact that even though they were no longer able to feed the sun, or to worship at their temples, the universe still survived.²

² Wikipedia.org

And so, as legend has it, just ten years after the Spanish conquistadores defeated the Aztec Empire and just a few miles from the final battle of that conquest, the Blessed Virgin Mary – but a dark-skinned Mary with Aztec features – appeared to an Indio, Juan Diego, on Tepeyac hill near Mexico City. This dark virgin, *la Virgen Morena*, is in one way a simple syncretization of an indigenous culture and the Catholic religion – a way to express the basic beliefs of the church in fresh new ways that reflect the cultures and the customs of the people.

But she is much more than that.

The Magnificat, which we read together, announces the beginning of a new world. Just so, Guadalupe's presence announces the possibility of a new beginning, a world where men and women of all colors and ethnicities could live together in peace and mutual respect. She models, in her 'lifting up of the lowly' Indio, the creation of a world of love and justice, of mercy and forgiveness. She is pregnant, just as the Virgin Mary was pregnant, but Guadalupe is pregnant with a whole new people – a new family of Europeans mixed with natives – the *Mestizaje*.

And this is not only symbolic. Through her, opposing differences are reconciled, creating a bridge between two cultures and religions. Despite the initial resistance of the Spanish bishop, and perhaps because of the huge popularity of the 'virgencita', the church eventually came to accept as authentic the story of Juan Diego.³ Guadalupe was made the patron saint of Mexico in 1737, and her story was officially recognized as a miracle by the Vatican in 1745. She became the symbol of Mexican nationalism, with "Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe" being part of the battle cry of the independence movement of 1810, and with Zapata's forces carried her banner in the early 1900's. Juan Diego was just sainted a few years ago, even though doubts remain as to his actual existence. Guadalupe has created a special relationship between the peoples of the American continents and the Catholic Church.

For me, this is a great story of empowerment – a successful journey on the spiritual path of a people – an authentic and meaningful outcome in a search for truth. While she is a mother to all, she especially provides women with a positive role model of an ideal self – although this comes with its challenges – just as the figure of Mary is an impossible one for women to emulate. Chicana writer and poetess Sandra Cisneros says of her, "She was damn dangerous,

³ "Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe" Manila Bulletin. December 12, 2005.

an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable.” Then she came to see Guadalupe as a sex goddess, and says “My Virgen de Guadalupe is not the mother of God. She is God. She is a face for a god without a face, an indigena for a god without an ethnicity, a female deity for a god who is genderless, but I also understand that for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me....Blessed art thou, Lupe, and therefore, blessed am I.”⁴

And this brings me to my second point – creating an opening to the idea of divinity. What role does Guadalupe play in the lives of those who adore her, and how can we view this from our often-rational vantage point? Can we learn something from the part she plays in the lives of millions of people, many of whom will be making pilgrimages to her this week?

It may be evident from what has already been said, but Guadalupe creates a bridge between the church and the home, between the doctrine and the heart. She is part of a folk cult, a popular religion that exists in the very daily lives of the people who worship her. Lupe is thought to be interested in the most common, the most everyday, of the people’s worries. It is said that she can cure almost any sickness. Problem drinkers go to her to promise they will never drink again. It is no wonder that her image is found everywhere in the Latino culture – on walls, in windows, on dashboards and candles, on clothing and blankets and jewelry – transformed into all manner of artifact and art. In another writing by Sandra Cisneros, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” she recounts prayers left for Guadalupe at altars and wayside retablos, such as:⁵

“Exvoto Donated as Promised. On the 20th of December we suffered a terrible disaster...the bus we were riding skidded and overturned...thanks to La Virgen de Guadalupe we are alive, all of us miraculously unharmed, except that we are afraid to ride buses. We dedicate this retablo to La Virgencita with our affection and gratitude and everlasting faith.”

And another:

“Virgencita de Guadalupe, I promise to walk to your shrine on my knees the very first day I get back, I swear, if you will only get the Tortilleria la casa de la Masa to pay me the \$253.72 they owe me for two weeks’ work. That’s all I’m asking for...what I have coming to me.

⁴ Cisneros, Sandra, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” in *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, Ana Castillo, ed. (Riverhead Books: New York, 1996)

⁵ Cisneros, Sandra, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (Vintage Books: New York, 1991)

Virgencita....there is no one else I can turn to here in this country, and well, if you can't help me, well, I just don't know."

And then in Cisneros' own voice (perhaps one that has special meaning to me in my current baldness):

"Virgencita...I've cut off my hair just as I promised I would and pinned my braid here by your statue. Along several hospital bracelets. Notes printed on the flaps of envelopes. Silk roses, plastic roses, paper roses, roses crocheted out of fluorescent orange yarn.... I've cut off my hair. Which I've never cut since the day I was born. Something shed like a snakeskin. I leave my braid here and thank you for believing what I do is important.

That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during a civil war, and during a farmworkers' strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother's patience, in my grandmother's endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power, don't they? The power of understanding someone else's pain. And understanding is the beginning of healing."

I know there are theists in this room. I know there are those who embrace the gods and goddesses of paganism. I know there are those who believe that there is a spark of divinity in each of us. I know there are those for whom even a trace of supernaturalism is an intolerable concept. Yet my question is for all of us. What role might having a symbol, holding a story as sacred, even turning to a statue for comfort and guidance, play in allowing people to live at the greatest possible fullness of life? We don't have to actually believe that Guadalupe or a savior exists, to believe that the energy she, or someone/something like her might bring into our lives could be beneficial and energizing.

I suppose it all comes down to what that symbol represents, and now we in turn interact with that symbol. Guadalupe symbolizes solidarity in community and in turning to her, Latinos touch a sense of belonging and interconnection. Guadalupe stands for 'lifting up the lowly' and many who pray to her feel dignity and optimism that they don't feel elsewhere in their lives. Guadalupe represents a divine interest in the real life of common folk, empowering them to see their lives as worthwhile.

Let's say that there was a tangible standard-holder for all the values that we hold dear, that would motivate us to do better, to be better, and to feel better. What would that symbol look like? Generally Unitarians believe, just as did the Aztecs, that there are forces of good and evil in each of us, and so if we were building a symbol for our values, it could be logical to personalize those elements anthropomorphically. And if we could see those values embodied in human form, are we not more likely to recognize them, to praise them or to criticize them? Historically even UU's have used a human-like image of God when talking about God as one, or when insisting on the goodness of God. Guadalupe was created to serve a need – what is our need in these times? What does today's UU god look like?

Where am I going with this? Well, I am not recommending that we need a UU-God or a ritual using idols....at least not in any traditional sense. What I am suggesting that we already have our gods...and they are right here in this room. Like Guadalupe, we have all been created from a unique blend of circumstance and experience, and we are in a position to create what has meaning for us by choosing to listen and respond to the wisdom around us. We have an unswerving faith in humanity, knowing that we each hold that spark of the divine so evident in this season of hope and new beginnings, which creates the potential in each of us to embody our highest values. We all have the ability to be empowerment and comfort to each other. We all have the potential to create community out of destruction, interconnection out of chaos, and to affirm what seems doomed for destruction. We are all a blending of races, of cultures, of belief systems, and we can find ways to unite in a celebration of that diversity, made stronger by our differences.

It is not the presence of a symbol, a god, or a Guadalupe, that makes or breaks a good and meaningful life. It is what we choose to do with what such a symbol represents. We can write a prayer and hope that some other force takes care of things, or we can actually embody that prayer in our actions toward one another. We have the power to create symbols that will bring out the best in us, always reminding us of our highest purpose. There may be little miracles in life; I don't doubt that. But I also know that what really makes a difference is in the promises we keep to ourselves, to our values, to each other, and to life itself. Remember, in order for our gods to approach us, we have to see them in us. Blessed art thou, Lupe, and therefore, blessed are we. So be it.