

The Day of the Dead

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The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, Oregon
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CALL TO WORSHIP

The leaves are turning! Yellow, orange, gold, scarlet, maroon.
And green leaves still firmly attached;
and those on the ground, brown and dry.
Change is in the air.
Autumn is here, a time of color and transformation, of harvest.
A time for memory, too.
Memories of loved ones may slip into our days
like the gentle, slanting sunlight when autumn afternoons ease into dusk.
We are called to stop and notice.

This morning during this time of change
we honor the memories of those who have passed on.
We celebrate the cycles of life.
And we stop to appreciate the gift of our own precious lives,
imperfect and impermanent as they are,
yet infinite in their capacity for joy and wonder.

Come, let us worship together.

OPENING HYMN
In Sweet Fields of Autumn, #52

FIRST REFLECTION

El Dia de los Muertos

(This reflection began with extemporized recollections of an especially elaborate and festive Halloween Party on Friday evening organized by Director of Religious Education, Candee Cole, and involving a significant portion of the church, young and old. Most of the rest of the reflection was extemporized, based on the text below.)

In Mexico, there is a holiday celebrated this time of year called, "El Dia De Los Muertos," or "The Day of the Dead." Some call it, "Los Dias de Los Muertos," because the holiday stretches over a few days. But it's not scary like a Haunted hike, or movies like Night of the Living Dead or anything like that.

During this time, the dead are believed to return to the land of the living to reconnect with their loved ones and enjoy some of the simpler pleasures of their lives, indulging in their favorite foods and drinks. As with pagan rituals from many lands, there is believed to be an opening between the worlds of the living and the dead during this Harvest season. We had a pagan service here on Friday night that highlighted this aspect of the season.

In the Mexican holiday, extended families create altars for their ancestors and others who have passed on, with flowers, bread, fruit, and candy. Pictures of the deceased family

members are added -- as well as personal artifacts, favorite foods, mugs, and so forth. That's what Linda has created here, using personal artifacts and photographs from many of you!

In the late afternoons special long-burning candles are lit, and the family keeps a vigil all through the night, communing with the deceased.

The next day, the family travels to the cemetery, bringing hoes, picks, and shovels -- and flowers, candles, blankets, and picnic baskets. They clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones, often spending the entire night in the cemetery.

When the family gathers, they tell stories, not just of the major life events of the deceased, but also the jokes they liked to tell, the silly ways they injured themselves, and so forth. It's a family reunion, and the dead are invited. It is a time for laughter and a time for tears.

In the United States, we tend to see death as a monster to be feared. We scream and run away from it. And even though it usually moves slowly, like a zombie, we can never escape it, as hard as we try. In Mexico, death is a part of life that is honored every year in what is probably the country's most widely celebrated holiday. As it is here at UUCE!! Death is a time of passage to another life, where one does not become a feared monster. The dead continue to be a celebrated part of family gatherings long after they have passed.

And this is more than a family affair. Mexican culture plays with death. During Los Dias De Los Muertos, townspeople dress up as ghouls, ghosts, mummies, and skeletons, parading through the town centers with an open coffin. The pretend corpse within smiles as it is tossed oranges, flowers, fruits, and candies by vendors and bystanders. A lot like the corpse we had in the coffin here at the end of the Haunted walk, except that instead of giving away candy, she tried to grab you when you took some! This playfulness with death helps us be more at ease with it, at least when the playfulness is not *too* scary for you. ☺

During this week, Skeletons are everywhere -- in cartoons, on signs, on the costumes of children and adults. While Christmas brings cookies to children and Easter brings chocolate eggs and bunnies, the Day of the Dead brings skulls made of sugar! Yum, yum! And there's nothing dark or depressing about seeing skeletons and eating sugar skulls when one has grown up with the tradition of welcoming the dead every year at this time, and talking about death and the dead with naturalness and ease during the year.

Now, don't get me wrong -- the Mexican festivities are mixed with grief and sometimes anger, especially in the years immediately following a loved one's death. During the Days of the Dead, special care is taken to honor different kinds of deaths, particularly those of children. And miscarriages. Mexican traditions honor the excruciating pain of losing one's child. Rituals like those of El Dia De Los Muertos honor the full range of our feelings while keeping alive the memory of those who have died.

If we could embrace death, dance with it, laugh with it, we would perhaps stop living in fear of death. We would be more at home with ourselves, living in respect for the natural limitations of life. It is interesting to me that El Dia De Los Muertos seems at first glance to be superstitious, full of magic and other-worldliness. And yet its effects are so practical. It helps people come to terms with death, with the death of others and ultimately our own death. It reconnects people with their family, both the living and the dead. It honors the past. It teaches people that they will become part of an honored past, and that they will be remembered as individuals, when they pass on.

CHORALE INTERLUDE
Breaths by Ysaye Barnwell (of Sweet Honey in the Rock)
words by Birago Diop

TREE OF REMEMBRANCE

Now we have a time to honor our loved ones who have passed on. You will find on your seat a "Recuerdo," on which to write a name or names of loved ones who have died, and a pencil. I invite you now to think of these people, write down names, perhaps a short message. Please take a moment to see if anybody sitting next to you could use assistance with this exercise. And then bring your Recuerdo forward, and perhaps your neighbor's as well, and attach it to this tree.

Let us begin.

LIGHTING THE FAMILY CHALICE
Children and youth leave for their classes, halfway through this service

MEDITATION

"Harbingers of Frost"
by Robert T. Weston

Autumn, we know,
Is life en route to death.
The asters are but harbingers of the frost.

The trees, flaunting their colors at the sky,
In other times will follow where the leaves have fallen,
And so shall we.

Yet other lives will come.
So may we know, accept, embrace,
The mystery of life we hold a while.

Nor mourn that it outgrows each separate self,
but still rejoice that we may have our day.

Lift high our colors to the sky! and give,
In our time, fresh glory to the earth.

SECOND REFLECTION

A Day for the Dead, and the Living

I begin with the poem by Birago Diop adapted by Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock for the song ("Breaths") we heard earlier:

*Listen more often to things, than to beings,
Listen more often to things, than to beings,
'Tis the ancestors' breath when the fire's voice is heard,*

'Tis the ancestors' breath in the voice of the waters.

*Those who have died have never, never left.
The dead are not under the earth.
They are in the rustling trees,
They are in the groaning woods,
They are in the crying grass,
They are in the moaning rocks.
The dead are not under the earth.*

Today we have gathered objects that have power for us because they were held by or given by or have captured the image of someone we love, someone who has died. Here are the dead, in our photographs, in... (sampling of objects on the altar)...

Here they are, in the objects they gave to us, in their images...

They are woven into us still. They live on in our hearts, our memories. Their faces and voices and words and touch are with us still.

This is a poem by May Sarton called "All Souls":

*Did someone say that there would be an end,
An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning?
Such voices speak when sleep and waking blend,
The cold bleak voices of the early morning
When all the birds are dumb in dark November –
Remember and forget, forget, remember.*

*After the false night, warm true voices, wake!
Voice of the dead that touches the cold living,
Through the pale sunlight once more gravely speak,
Tell me again, while the last leaves are falling:
"Dear child, what has been once so interwoven
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven."*

*Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
Are wound and bound together and enflowing.
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited –
Only the strands grow richer with each loss
And memory makes kings and queens of us.*

*Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,
We who find shelter in the warmth within,
Listen, and feel now new-cherished, new-forgiven,
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend
Our complex love, our mourning without end.*

Our relationships do not end when one of us dies.

Although my father died ten years ago, he is still my father. I wear the tie he gave me, though it is fraying. I hear his voice of reason temper my enthusiasm. I feel him nearby, sitting in his chair, when I listen to classical music. I hear his management advice as unexpectedly as mystics hear the voice of God. I feel his fatherly pride when I reach milestones in my vocation.

And even beyond these specific associations, I continue to be in relationship with my father and others I have lost. I find them at the beach, at the meeting of ocean and land. I hear them in the rustling trees. It is as if by dying, and becoming part of the unseen world, all things unseen are hallowed by their presence. When we feel that sense of transcendence come to us as if by wind, an invisible touch, may we know that it carries the breath of those who have gone before.

They have gone before us. But they are woven into us still. They live in our hearts, our memories. They live in our photographs, in the objects they gave to us...

And they live on in things unseen. Whatever makes us think that perhaps there is some greater force or love that holds us all, whatever is transcendent for us, music or art or nature or something else, this realm of spirit now holds those who have gone before us. By their living and their dying and the love we shared with them, our lives are blessed, sometimes shimmering with power, as if all things were alive.

They are with us still. If we listen, we may hear them. If we look, we may see. If we ask, they may answer. And if we hold out our hand, they may smile and help us feel their embrace.

Blessed be.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Agnus Dei from *Missa Brevis St. Joannis* F.J. Haydn (1732-1809)

READING

Nostalgia
by Alberto Blanco

There is the sky. Now I can see it.

*There is the open sky
waiting for the best that I can give.*

*Left behind are parents,
friends, givers of advice...*

*The dream toys of childhood,
the tree of desire,
night in the depths of the pool,
the park that witnessed our first kiss...*

*I see it all in the distance
like a body that awakens
in a remote part of the landscape.*

I look at it as if it were false.

*We have arrived at life
by saying farewell to everything we've loved,
to that which was given,
to all those we love.*

But there, at this moment is the sky.

CLOSING HYMN
Let it Be a Dance, #311

BENEDICTION (in two voices)

by Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of all creatures –
Passing in and out of life, dancing...
To a music so subtle and so vast no one hears it –
Except in fragments.