

THE UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF SANTA PAULA

We Remember Them

A Sermon on Death from a UU Perspective



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The festival of the Day of the Dead is considered the most important holiday of the year. It is not sad or morbid, but full of life and joy, rich in color and food and family. Marigolds are one of the most common symbols, and are called the "flower of the dead", because their scent is said to "attract the souls and draw them back." Tradition holds that the dead return to spend time with their living relatives and loved ones for a few brief hours each year, coming as spirits from the world of the dead. The children, or "angelitos" come back first, and food and gifts for them are set out. Then the adults return, and they are given the most elaborate foods and drinks the family possible. The people believe that the light of candles, as well as the scents of marigold flowers and incense help the returning souls to find the way back. Sometimes paths of marigold petals are scattered from the cemetery to the door of the house of the family celebrating the day. Legend says that the souls of the dead follow this yellow path, and though they are not usually seen, their presence is felt.

More than 500 years ago, when the Spanish Conquistadors landed in what is now Mexico, they found natives practicing these rituals that, in their eyes, made a mockery of death. Though the indigenous people had engaged in this practice for at least 3,000 years, the Spaniards tried to eradicate it, but to this day it is celebrated in Mexico and by Mexicans living in the United States and around the world.

Skulls that you see as part of this ritual are symbols of honor for the dead, whom the Aztecs and other Meso-American civilizations believed came back to visit during the month-long celebration. Unlike the Spaniards, who saw death as the utter end of life, these first people viewed it as not the final parting, just a time of changed forms. Rather of fearing death, they embraced it – they welcomed death into life. Because to them, life was essentially a dream and only in death did they become awake.

"The pre-Hispanic people honored duality as being dynamic," said Christina Gonzalez, senior lecturer on Hispanic issues at Arizona State

University. "They didn't separate death from pain, wealth from poverty like they did in Western cultures." This dynamic non-dualism spared them the pushing away of death and grief so common in the West, and gave them instead a way to annually remember and re-value their dead loved ones, so in a way to bring them back into life again, each year, every year. How different that our shutting away of our memories in the public view, so that for some the anniversary of a death becomes a private sorrow, and not – as in this Mexican holy day – a time for all to remember, and to include joy with the remembering, and to celebrate together.

The Spaniards, of course, considered these rituals to be sacrilegious, the actions of a barbaric and pagan people. As part of their mission to convert these native people to Catholicism, they tried to eliminate the Day of the Dead. Naturally, this succeeded only to reinforce its importance to the people, though as with so many holidays, the dates of the celebration were changed to closer coincide with Catholicism's holy days. But like the legendary Aztec spirits of old, El Dia de Los Muertos refused to die.

Today, the Day of the Dead is a cherished, complex holiday celebration where death is seen as integral to life. It might be best understood as a time, when in the world view of those who practice it, the veil between the living and the dead is lifted for a brief while. And the driving goal of this day for its followers is: "whatever pleased the dead in life they are to have again." On a day when the presence of the souls – the essences – of the dead back in life is both believed and revered, all the stops are pulled, and the very best the family can afford and create is prepared for these honored ones. It is a holiday when the whole family comes together - both living and dead, and is a time for the departed to join the living in the celebrations of the "continuum of life."

In rural Mexico, people visit decorate the gravesites of their cherished dead with marigold flowers and candles. Toys are given to dead children and bottles of tequila to adults. They picnic at the gravesite and eat the foods that their loved ones liked best in life. In Mexico's larger cities and in the

United States, people create altars in their homes, dedicating them to the dead. Flowers, food, drink and photos of the deceased make up the altar. They light candles and burn incense in love and welcome. These altars are an honor to the dead, and often entire rooms of the home are transformed, music is played, meals cooked, and memories relived.

Now, most of us here are not of Mexican heritage – so this day is not ours to claim. However, I want you to compare the view of death of Mexican culture with an American response, from Woody Allen, who said: I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.

I often hear, in my work as a minister, that UU's do wonderful celebrations of life, or memorials. I think this is in no small part due to who we are as a people of faith and reason. For a long time, we have not been so afraid of death, nor of its aftermath, grief and sorrow. We are not afraid to speak of these things. In fact, a colleague of mine has written of why she sometimes hesitates now from telling people what she does; after being in crowds, and noticing sometimes that people would draw back from her. And once, one told her that this was because she believed that the minister was "too comfortable with death." This was not in the minister's favor, who was then treated as if she carried a particularly virulent form of the plague.

But our acceptance of death, our seeking not to live in fear of it, is not new to us, as a religious tradition. Early in the years of this county the Universalists were radicals, who understood death as a time when all people would be safe, would returned to a loving god, would be saved. The leading doctrine of the time, on the other hand, held that death for most of humanity, no matter how they lived, no matter who they were, meant hell. Literally. Fear and revulsion were the norms as people considered death from within these doctrinal confines.

Then came the Unitarians, also radicals, and in particular, the Transcendentalists – Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau – who we will hear much more about next week. Up until their time, there were no cemeteries - only graveyards that were connected to churches, rather

barren places, and set apart from the church by tall, thick heavy walls. But Emerson, Thoreau and fellow Transcendentalist lived much of their days in the outdoors – they were lovers of the spiritual rush they felt in nature. They saw, in the seasons around them the certain beauty of the cycles of life, of which death was inherent, and they did not fear it.

They looked to the Greeks of classical times, who put their dead to rest in designated areas away from the town, in the country side where “for eternity they would be embraced by shading trees and soothed by murmuring brooks.”¹ And so the Transcendentalists were fundamental in the onset of the rural cemetery movement in America– in the first half of the nineteenth century new burial grounds were built, away from the crowded city, as spacious places of peace planted amid the beauty and grace of nature.

The Greek word, from which “cemetery” originated, is *koimeterion* – meaning “sleeping place”. In ancient times, these *koimeterions* were located near or often next to the countryside resorts where the Greeks came to study philosophy and to contemplate nature. In this way, death was understood as part of the turning of the wheel of time, part of the natural scheme of life. To the Transcendentalists, the old walled graveyards were shadows of the negative theology espoused by their Puritan ancestors. According to Edward Searl, author of *In Memoriam*, one of those early cemeteries, Mt. Auburn in Cambridge, was where the rural cemetery movement really took hold. It became not only a burial ground, but a popular place to visit, with its beautiful landscapes designed to intentionally bring death into a natural scheme and to encourage human acceptance and open reflection. Searl says:

The landscape architects ... incorporated a Romantic aesthetic ... deciduous trees, including the evocative weeping willow, provided an emblem of the transience of life. Evergreens, the cedar in particular,

¹ Edward Searl, *In Memoriam* (Boston: Skinner House, 2000), p.10

testified that virtue cannot be destroyed, even by the most searing winter. Ponds, reflecting the sky, mingled the real with the ideal, as did the horizon where heaven met earth..." For these forebears of contemporary Unitarian Universalists, the Transcendentalists, these new rural cemeteries were places on the border line between "time and eternity (and) the past and the future." They would not have used language about a veil between life and death lifting, but they would have spoken of the wonder of it— of the sheer awe of being a part of the human journey, and how, by actually walking and reflecting amid the graves in the beauty of these cemeteries, they somehow transcended their usual ways of thinking and being in the world, and touched something extraordinary, something closely akin to holy.

This acceptance of death, this placing it in a context of the natural order of things, does not mean a denial of grief. Rather it transforms grief from that which is to be avoided, because it is painful, to something one is asked to journey through, as part of the journey of being fully human.

Judaism is another religion whose paradigm of understanding death and grief illuminates this type of acceptance. In this tradition, the grief process begins, when possible, even before death, when family members or beloved ones keep a vigil by the bedside of the dying, practicing ancient rituals to mark this passage from life to death. After the time of death, the loved one becomes a mourner, or an "ovel". The first seven days are understood as the most intense time of mourning, and during these days the mourners stay at home, where they receive visitors and journey through their sharp early grief in the embrace of their home, surrounded by loved ones. After seven days, the body is buried, all with time honored rituals and liturgies. Upon returning from the cemetery a particular candle, the *Shiva* candle is lit, signifying that god is with the family, with the loved ones at this time. And then a special meal, called a "meal of recuperation" is given to the family or the survivors by the community, to welcome them home, to welcome them to this next stage of sorrow and life.

After the first seven days of *Shiva*, thirty days are then designated to mourning, called “sh-loshin) This is a time when some regular activities may be resumed, though the bereaved must avoid places of entertainment. After these thirty days, the formal time of mourning is over, except for in the case of the death of a mother or father. In those cases, formal mourning lasts for a full year, and includes rituals and devotional practices during that time.

Jews mark the one year anniversary of death in a ceremony called *Yahrzeit*. (Yard-sight) Special prayers, including the mourner’s *Kaddish*, are recited in the synagogue, with the community present, and the lighting of a symbolic candle. This prayer, the Mourner’s *Kaddish* is then recited every day for the eleven months after the death of a parent, spouse, child or sibling, and subsequently on each anniversary after death. In this way, the journey of grief is formalized and embedded with Judaism, as a process that begins even before death, and is part of the spiritual practice of the bereaved for an entire year of remembrance and recovery, and then every year thereafter, for as long as that person shall live.

This parallels the Mexican *Day of the Dead* in that it seeks to bring death into life, as something that does not end with burial or cremation. It honors sorrow and grief as the real and right response to the death of loved ones. It honors the human love felt for those we lose, a love which does not end, a love which merits remembering, speaking, and acting upon – as we do here today, as contemporary Unitarian Universalists, by placing food and photos and mementos upon our altar, by remembering that even though those we loved are no more with us, still we remember. We remember them. We remember our days together, our years, our well of experience with them. We remember the hopes we had which we did not get to see fulfilled. We remember what they gave us, how they enriched us, how we were changed because of knowing them. We remember how much we loved them. And we recall, that even as time passes, and even memories fade, that as we often say at our own memorials – within this congregation:

I do not know where we go when we die;
And I do not know what the soul is
Or what death is or when or why.
What I do know is that
The song once sung cannot be unsung,
And the life once lived cannot be unlived,
And the love once loved cannot be unloved.

And now, I would like to ask each of you, as you choose, to stand, one by one, and call out the name or names of your deceased loved ones. Please stay standing. You may also wish to identify your relationship, for example “my mother, Virginia”. If you do not wish to speak, but are silently calling out a name, you may also stand, without words.

The Calling Out of the Names

Now let us together speak a liturgy of remembrance. Some of you will recognize this liturgy, adapted from Judaism. I will say a phrase, after each of which you will respond, “*we remember them.*”

At the rising of the sun and at its going down *We remember them.*

At the blowing of the wind and amid the chill of winter *We remember them.*

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring *We remember them.*

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer *We remember them.*

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn *We remember them.*

At the beginning of the year and when it ends *We remember them.*

When we are weary and in need of strength *We remember them.*

When we are lost and sick at heart *We remember them.*

When we have joy we crave to share *We remember them.*

When we have decisions that are difficult to make *We remember them.*

When we have achievements that are based on theirs *We remember them.*

As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, and *we*

remember them.

We remember them. So may it be, on this day and for all the days of our lives.

Our closing hymn is one that is often sung at UU memorials, reminding us of the simple blessings of life, the simple gifts of being human, of loving and being loved.