

**El Dia De Los Muertos: The Power of Memory, the Persistence of Life
A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
By Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia
November 1, 2009**



When I think about Día de los Muertos, I remember a deeper, more symbolic holiday that recognizes the past and honors the people you loved.it confronts death in a real—and meaningful—way. It reminds you about the inevitable loss of life that comes with living, but it also allows you to find life beyond death.

~Adan Briones



C28 Calavera de la Catrina *La Catrina*

Reading

Woman with Somber Gaze

Woman with a somber gaze,
Tell me, what do you see in the candles?
are they ghosts in the night
or are they flowers of the earth?

What do you treasure on your lap
illuminated and transparent,
even in the air
your silhouette appears?

Twice as much the pain,
twice as much the loss,
the flowers have become rivers
and the fragrance cries out.

Pondering at night,
vigil of the imagination,
bundle of lights and echoes,
stay up late during the wake...

Woman with a tender gaze
the flames of candles reach out;
are they mocking this moment
or are they restfully flickering out.

In your illuminated face
life rejuvenates,
to those who love death
this is a golden night in their sight.

For those who love life
it is a night of confusion,
the wax kisses the flowers
and the flame caresses the emotions.

Julie Sopena, 1995
(Spanish poet)

Sermon

Just a few weeks ago we dedicated two trees, a bench, and an anniversary garden on our grounds. With each dedication our spiritual home becomes richer with history – not just any history – but our history – our love – our connection – with every passing day, with every passing person – this place becomes very literally our ground of meaning. I felt that vividly as we moved together in our band of perhaps 30 people, from place to place.

This may sound strange – but I hope someday we might have so many people whose ashes are here – whose memories are here that even the stones are engraved with generations of names -- our names. Perhaps each year we'd have an All Soul's Procession around the building. In such a young congregation – such a young building, it's hard to imagine the richness of the generations – but they will come.

It's in the nature of houses of worship to shelter the generations. Quiet cemeteries and churchyards nestled nearby where the faithful can pass by their loved ones on a weekly basis. But our society and lives have changed, our towns are great cities, our resting places are often far from where we live and worship. I've driven significant distances in the past year to cemeteries.

I am not Chicana or Latina and yet when I first encountered El Dia De Los Muertos – it was almost irresistible. Cemeteries and the idea of visiting the dead have always been important to me. From my first picnics as a child with my Aunt Louise, among the headstones and small crypts in Pittsburgh to a paradigm shifting experience I had at Fountains Abbey near Ripon, England -- being stopped in my tracks by the spirit of a long deceased knight. To Native American Burial Mounds on the campus of Beloit College -- a perfect place to stretch out on the ground and feel the past – of the planet, of the First Nations, of the college -- though, of course, over time and with a scientific disregard for the spirits of the dead and their descendants -- the mounds are all empty. All of these have been places that I have felt the departed around me.

So when I encountered El Dia De Los Muertos, it made sense to me. A time for visiting the departed, for meeting, defying, transforming, and defeating death. A time when people are allowed not only to mourn their losses but to honor the reality of the stream of life – of which every loss is a part. At the cemetery families are gathered in death and among them the living meet, bringing the favorite foods, music, even toys of their departed loved ones. In less transient times this practice would have meant that each family picnicked among folk they'd always known. The pain of more recent losses would be put in the larger perspective of the many families also gathered nearby with their own recent losses. Amid the laughter of children, the enjoyment of good food. In the US our funerals seem more like escorts for protected celebrities – secret service looking black cars and men in formal suits protecting the families from the disorder of death. Confined to hospital or nursing home or simply kept private – family by family -- death is not simply sad here – it is gloomy and tidy. But it was not always so. And I think that's, in part why El Dia De Los Muertos strikes such a chord. At the same time, as a Semitic woman with white privilege – and an American at that – I've had to ask myself numbers of times whether or not I have the right to celebrate this Mexican Holiday – this holiday that belongs to other peoples, another nation. My sense has

been that it is somehow almost universal – this time – when the harvest is in and the wintertime – is arriving.

I have Regina Marchi – a professor at Rutgers University – to thank for what I've been learning recently. Turns out that El Dia De Los Muertos or Todos Santos – All Saints is a holiday far beyond Mexico – it's Latin American. From one part of Latin America to another -- Chile, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala – each country has its unique celebrations. In fact Marchi says – it's misleading to call it a tradition – more accurate to call it “traditions”. Even from village to village the practices vary. In some areas of Guatemala the tombs are painted bright colors and notes to the dead are attached to kite strings. In other parts people pour liquor around the graves – I suppose this amounts to sending spirits to the spirits. While in other areas symbolic gifts are sent out to sea in tiny boats. In the Andes pan de muerte bread of the dead – as we'll enjoy later -- is baked and shared. Boys go from door to door receiving fruit in exchange for singing songs. It's a folk holiday that reflects folk traditions that reach back hundreds and, perhaps, thousands of years. It only ended up on the dates of November 1st and 2nd when the Catholics arrived and, instead of being able to detach the people from their celebrations, the church had to adapt those celebrations to the Latin calendar where the Europeans celebrated All Soul's and All Saints on November 1st and 2nd. So the altars remained – piled with food, bread baked in wreaths and skeletons for the deceased but enjoyed by the living, smoke curling toward the heavens from incense.

We've come to think of El Dia De Los Muertos as particularly Mexican for a few reasons. One obvious reason – Mexico's our closest neighbor to the south. Some Mexicans have brought the holiday with them as they moved here. Even more significantly, in the 1970's the Mexican government made a deliberate decision to promote the holiday as a national holiday instead of a regional one to boost tourism. They funded public celebrations and publicized local observances. They found a receptive audience in North Americans. I'd hazard a guess that this is because we were starved for authentic connection with death – at the same time that our own culture was, thanks to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and others turning a more insightful eye toward death and dying and El dia de los Muertos spoke to that movement.

Of course I use this we rather loosely since we come from so many places and histories – but using the great overgeneralization: “we” once had very different customs with respect to death ourselves. Coinciding with the end of October the celebration of All Hallow's or Samhain marked the start of the European pagan or pre-Christian new year – the bringing in of the harvest and the fervent hope that life would be sustained through the bleak winter months. The spirits were said to walk the streets and by ways – perhaps looking for the fragile to carry them off. To ward off the spirits folks would put offerings of food and drink outside their homes. Some would dress up to fool the visitors into thinking that the house had already been touched by other spirits. The church calendar originally celebrated All Saints day in mid May but moved it because – as usual – the folk were more attached to the calendar of life and harvest than the dictates of Rome and they already had a time to. It was interesting to me that, as I was surfing the web to get the Christian take on the season I found a number of sites that were still claiming that the holiday was changed not because the people found it more compelling in their own season but because – well it was easier to feed people at harvest than at spring time, because a pope preferred that date to others...

Clearly the power of folk traditions is greater than history and more persistent. And that, perhaps, is the greatest power that El Dia De Los Muertos has.

It's the power of the people. By the early 20th century El Dia De Los Muertos was a folk holiday that belonged to the rural areas. But with the Mexican Revolution artists and intellectuals turned to the holiday to reconnect with their own roots. They reached into and beyond the Christian tradition into the folk sources and in a way typical of the holiday they found life in a celebration honoring the dead. The Calaveras – skeletons, provided a way to look again at lost ancestors – a way to recognize the ancient bones of the culture. And they used the figures of Calaveras to portray political figures in a satirical way – in much the same spirit as the Jewish folkloric story of King Solomon who had a trusted but arrogant advisor. The king wanted to humble this advisor and sent him on an errand to find a perfect gold ring that could make the suffering person smile in gladness and the powerful person frown in consternation. The King knew that such a ring didn't exist but he sent out his advisor, who, as it happened, also knew that such a ring didn't exist, hired a fine goldsmith to fashion a perfect ring for the King and took it to him. The King, confident that nothing would have the powers he had asked for, took the ring with a huge smile on his kingly face. He turned the ring over in his hand and saw that there was an inscription engraved in the ring. As he read it his smile faded into a frown – Gam zeh ya'avov – this too shall pass. Just so the calavera says: this too shall pass. The skeleton has been a sort of revolutionary hero – leveling class and making all people the same beneath the skin. It unites us all if we have the courage to look into that boney face and the face of every mortal...

Cultural festivals – beginning out west in the US and moving east – brought together Latinos of various nationalities. They created a new sense of community and shared history – one that had been shadowed by European domination. The celebrations were friendly and inclusive. It created opportunities for a rising Latino arts movement. It also brought Anglos – people like most of us – into contact with the holiday.

There have been Day of the Dead celebrations have been carried on along the border with Mexico honoring those who have died trying to walk to a better life in America. Other ceremonies have honored those who have suffered and died from hate crimes – such as Matthew Sheppard, whose picture is on one of the Ofrendas. And this week the president signed into law the hate Crimes act – which gives every protest new meaning and even gives poor Matthew's death more meaning. Like so many holidays this one has evolved over time – from ancient communal altars to fine art like some of the pieces you will find on the ofrendas – from village sharing to transnational compassion, to cultural exchange. But one thing has been consistent through time. This is a time to experience the knowledge of mortality and our shared fate. A time to remember those who've gone before and to be in community while remembering. It's a time to embrace those for whom we've grieved while rejoicing in the gift of life through food, color, and companionship. When we bring the day of the dead into church we are recognizing that the village doesn't exist in the same way – but that here we have our churchyard and our beloved memories and here we invest our lives and love.

When reflecting on whether this Anglo congregation has the right to celebrate this holiday I turned to a Latina for answers. Regina Marchi wrote: "we can learn much more about the workings of culture by focusing our energy on the political, economic,

and social circumstances that produce migrations and transformations of customs than by asking whether or not traditions are “authentic”. US Day of the Dead celebrations, transmit messages about identity, struggle, and universal experience, making a tangible impact on the lives of participants. These rituals simultaneously challenge and revitalize mainstream US society.” I want to thank Doctor Marchi for those words – for that’s the spirit in which we offer our Day of the Dead ritual here. To challenge ourselves – and – that’s what Unitarian Universalists do at our best – we challenge ourselves in profoundly religious ways – certainly to question everything but even more – our heritage is to move deeper – to figure out – without controlling dogma – where meaning is found – in our lives, in the wisdom of the world. I look around at our society and I see great movements of people trying to wrestle out of homogenized America – lives of passion, spirit, authenticity – lives lived against the bone. I realize that it is not our manifest destiny to bring our own habits to the world – it is just as much our destiny – to have the world bring its best to us – to be changed by our world. To allow our borders – the borders of our minds and hearts – the borders of our nation – to be permeable enough to make us better human souls.

El Dia De Los Muertos transforms Halloween haunting into a positive encounter – a meaningful meeting with the past. A harvest of spirit and a feast for life.

Earlier in the week I went to the Mexican bakery near the Taco Bell on Dundee to order the Pan De Muerte. The proprietor arrived and, as it happened, had very weak English. I had even weaker Spanish – in spite of the fact that I live here – in Chicago where it would be most useful. I apologized. But a kind woman translated for me and then we began talking about the holiday. You celebrate it? She asked. I explained that we do it at church with Ofrendas and Pan De Muerte. She told me that her mother wishes she would celebrate it – but there just wasn’t enough time to get to the cemetery and she had kids in school. We talked for a while about how American society faces or doesn’t face death. We talked about how cultures impact each other. I thought about how hard it’s been for successive waves of immigrants to find welcome in the United States. And yet each time we find ourselves face to face with a culture that arrives with history, stories, struggles, and gifts. I thought what little respect we have shone to our neighbors to the south.

They are who we are – waves of folk – ages and generations – from the first nations to the present. Bringing our ancestors with us. Becoming ancestors ourselves. America once aspired to be the land of onward and upward forever – but somehow we’ve come back to remembering that the past is meant to be cherished as well. That’s where we get our grounding – and our sense of dreaming. A deeper sense of place and of belonging. From the national stories to the deeply personal ones. As we celebrate together today we join a timeless procession of people – people of all nations – who have honored their losses and felt the spirits crowd around them. We join the wave of humanity

Rest needs to be transcribed from the recording.

And here in this place – as we bring our pictures up to the ofrendas we make deeper

To Life.

From the Gazals by Jellaludin Rumi
translated by Nader Khalili

i was dead
i came alive
i was tears
i became laughter

all because of love
when it arrived
my temporal life
from then on
changed to eternal