

And the Dead in Sacred Memory

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People ask me sometimes what happens after death. I guess ministers are supposed to have the scoop on questions like this. I answer, quite unequivocally, that I think death is the end of life. Period. This life in this world is all we can be certain of. I have neither seen nor heard nor read anything to convince me otherwise, and frankly, I'm not even very curious. Brain activity ceases. Heart stops beating. Breathing slows then stops. Death.

Yet years ago when my sister brought home an Iris DeMent CD and announced there was what she considered a UU song on it, I had no trouble picking out the one she meant on first listen. It was, of course, the one with the refrain *I'll let the mystery be*.

For me there is no contradiction in holding simultaneous beliefs in basic biology and vast mystery. Life followed by cessation of life is what we know. But, as we learn over and over again in our individual lives and as a society, as a species, there is much we don't know. Much we may some day know as our collective body of knowledge expand. And, perhaps, much we may never know. Mystery. Biology. Both, it seems to me are facts of life--and death. And at times our discussions, our questions call for one and at times they call for the other.

This is the season for mystery. Last night was Halloween. Also known as All Hallows Eve, and Samhain. Today is All Saints Day. Dia de los Muertos. Tomorrow is All Souls Day. This is the season when, according to the pagan traditions of Europe and the pre-Columbian traditions of Latin America, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is thin. When connection and communication is most possible. We, reasonable, educated, rational, post-modern Unitarian Universalists may reject the idea that such things are possible. We may insist on biology. Argue or scoff when friends, neighbors, co-workers recommend books about life after death or life after life. But we too are reluctant to give up our connections with our dead. We too look for ways, need ways, to remember, to celebrate, to feel that something remains of those who have left us.

Since I took up residence over in the parsonage I've been asked a time or two if the cemetery spooks me. But cemeteries are not places of fear for me. I was just six years old the snowy May afternoon (only in Minnesota, right?) we buried my maternal grandmother next to my grandfather in the Otsego Cemetery--then surrounded by farm land. Each summer we'd visit, watching through the years as the pine trees planted in memory of Grandma and Grandpa Gregg grew to towering heights over their shared headstone. And just last summer we buried Grandma Doege's ashes next to Grandpa Doege's ashes in the cemetery at the edge of Appleton, Minnesota--a landscape reminiscent of this one, the reason I'm so at home here. I've led ritual good-byes known as interments or burials in dozens of cemeteries through the years--from Fort Snelling to small, nameless plots of ground--helping families and loved ones mark the turning point

from grief stricken yet numb busyness to every day life in the midst of grief. And Dad's ashes? Well, Dad's ashes still sit in Mom's living room, on a shelf in the black plastic box from the cremation society.

My dad died of prostate cancer at age 63, about seven and half years ago. Prostate cancer isn't suppose to kill, but sometimes it does and it killed my dad. My niece and nephews were very young at the time, and though they loved Dad--the younger two in particular lit up and quivered with joy when he entered a room--they have only very few and very vague memories of him. So one summer day a few years ago Mom and I gave them a Grandpa Day. A Grandpa Doege Day.

Their parents dropped them off early in the morning and we gave them each one of Dad's ties to wear and pinned photographs of each of them with him on their shirts. We had a breakfast picnic with one of Dad's best friends. We photographed them with a poster sized picture of Dad left over from a long ago party. We hit golf balls in the backyard, read some poems, looked at photographs, and helped the kids write letters to Grandpa. We ate his favorite foods: White Castle for lunch, Oreo Blizzards for dessert, and spaghetti and meatballs for supper. It was a day of memories and celebration. The kids ask from time to time when we're going to have Grandpa Day again. Mom and I answer, when we've recovered from the first one. It was a full and busy day. Emotionally satisfying and emotionally exhausting. We're glad we did it but not eager to repeat it.

It occurs to me, however, that Dia de Los Muertos, with its traditions of brightly decorated and highly symbolic altars, sugar skulls, family picnics in graveyards and dancing skeletons, is an annual, communal Grandpa Day. A time for remembering and celebrating all the dead in our lives, ritually, joyfully, regularly. The memories and the emotions become bearable with time and repetition--and through sharing the common bond of loss and grief and remembrance. It's a good tradition to maintain, even for rational, twenty-first century type folks.

Dia de los Muertos--the Day of the Dead--may at first hearing sound gruesome, an unhealthy fixation on death or the no longer living. Contemporary Western culture is, after all, extremely youth oriented and high paced--rushing head long into the future at every turn. The cosmetic industry depends on women's fear of aging or at least appearing to age. There is even a new field--cosmeceutical--dependent on the blurred understanding of appearance and health. Supermodels are washed up before they reach thirty. All but the very best or most lucky actresses start losing work after forty. Richard Gere manages to keep getting romantically paired with younger and younger female leads, but ordinary men are lured toward denial of aging by Just For Men hair color and Viagra. Bands, television stars, pundits and even politicians are in constant danger of being supplanted by the next new thing. Time waits for no man, or woman, or celebrity.

Our own nineteenth century Unitarian and Universalist forbears were prey to the same tendency, believing in *the progress of mankind onward and upward forever*. But history,

common sense and even science caution us against ignoring the lessons of the past. Those and that which have gone before us have wisdom to offer. There is no need for each generation to reinvent the wheel or rediscover penicillin. Our own discoveries and our own inventions await us--even as we continue to make use of and benefit from those of the past. Each generation need not write Hamlet or the Iliad or Beethoven's Fifth or Carmen or Blue Suede Shoes. They are here for us already--not to be discarded because they are old or their creators dead but embraced and loved and taught by. Human history, human knowledge, human experience are not inviolate, not set in stone, not unchanging or unchanged forever. Those who believed the earth was flat and the universe revolved around it were wrong, and Columbus' so called discovery of America had deadly consequences for those already occupying this continent. But neither are human history, human knowledge and human experience disposable, replaceable by the newest and latest and best.

The gifts, talents, deeds and sacrifices of our ancestor shaped the world as we know it. That cloud of witnesses encompasses us. We do not stand alone. We walk the paths they trod but farther and in new directions. Taking up their work, their dreams, their causes along with our own, until one day we take our place in the cloud of witnesses encompassing new generations. That is the way of the world, the way of human life. It is not a solitary endeavor--we live and work, play and pray, and die at last in community. In the community of here and now, and in the community of the ages and the generations.

Church is one place we revere and celebrate yet strive to not idolize the past and those who have come before. Churches are places of memory and hope. Or, as in a half remembered phrase that's been haunting me for weeks, church is community wherein "we hold the living in goodly fellowship and the dead in sacred memory." You here at Nora seem particularly good at this. You talk of bygone ministers and members with affection and laughter and familiarity as if they were contemporaries, not people who lived decades and even a century ago. And you welcome each new visitor as a potential member, as a possible bearer of the future of Nora Church. You love your past--your memories--and you are eager for your future--to witness your hopes embodied in your children and in strangers soon to become friends. We will talk more, in weeks and months to come, about the goodly fellowship and the hope. Today I commend you for the sacred memory. It gives you strength and depth--and it is what makes the hope possible.

J. Donald Johnston wrote:

In the presence
of Life
we say NO
to Death.

In the presence of Death

we say YES
to Life.

That's what Dia de Los Muertos is all about, and Halloween, and All Saints and All Souls, too. And it is what Unitarian Universalism is all about, at its core. The late beloved Forrest Church put it this way, "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." You may never set up an ofrendas in your home or picnic with your family in a graveyard. We may never again observe Dia de los Muertos in Nora Church (but I hope we will). The form isn't important. But remember our dead--their lives and their places in our lives is important. Acknowledging in big and small ways that one day we will be among them--whether in another life or realm or in the graveyard or simply in that communion of saints no longer living--is important. For such acknowledgement is what reminds us that today we are not yet there. Today we are alive, called to delight and rejoice in simply being. May it be so for you, today and in all the days of your life. Amen.