

Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead

Rev. Rod Richards

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

10/29/06

Reading

From "[Bringing the Dead to Life](#)" by Peter Morales; *UU World*, July-August 2000

We "sophisticated" Unitarian Universalists are apt to see the Día de los Muertos as primitive or quaint. Surely, few of us share the cosmology of rural Mexicans who lay out favorite foods in memory of a dead relative. If I do this with my mother's favorite foods (maybe one of my aunt Amelia's wonderful Christmas tamales or her calabacita stew), I don't believe her spirit will return and be pleased at being remembered. Nor do I believe my mother will hear her favorite old Mexican tunes if I play a recording of them.

Yet if we dismiss the Day of the Dead as pure superstition, we can easily miss the profound spiritual and psychological insight that makes this tradition powerful. A Mexican boy spending the night at his uncle's grave has a connection across time with his forebears that our children do not. While we dwellers in a technological age are connected to the World Wide Web, cellular phones, and cable tv, have message machines, voice mail, pagers, and call waiting, we have cut ourselves off from the web of time. Traditional cultures, with their mediums and ghosts and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we've repressed: the dead don't die; they live on.

I'm not speaking metaphysically or theologically. I'm talking about the very real stuff of memory, history, and molecular biology. Look in the mirror. The DNA of your ancestors is alive in you. Look at your children and grandchildren and see yourself and your ancestors. Think of the decisions made by your parents and grandparents. Their choices shaped your life. And the choices we make every day shape the lives of those to come. The interconnections stretch across time.

This is what the Día de los Muertos reminds us of, and this is its power. A simple ceremony of remembrance puts us in touch with our place in time and our mortality, and it reminds us that to live is to create a legacy that endures for generations.

Sermon

[The Summer Day - Mary Oliver](#)

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Yes, I would say. Yes, everything dies at last, and too soon...too soon.

Doesn't sound like the material for a celebration, does it?

What is this Day of the Dead for? All these sugar skulls and flowers and altars and decorations

and graveyard parties and places set at the table for dead people and skeletons in suits or work clothes or pajamas, going about the everyday tasks...What is all this seeming frivolity in the face of the saddest, the hardest, the most painful of realities? Rage, [says poet Dylan Thomas](#), *rage* against the dying of the light! But this is not rage. This is...what...acceptance? Surrender? If you can't beat it...celebrate it?

In one sense, each death is unique...just as we live *individually*, inside our own skin, we die as individuals. And outside the particular ways in which we each may face the greatest of mysteries, if we are given that opportunity, there is the seeming arbitrariness of the universe, of fate, of *the way in which* death will come calling. There are prolonged deaths and accidental deaths; there are those deaths which allow for preparation, and those which strike out of a clear blue sky; there are those deaths which feel like the completion of a story, and those which abruptly rip the pages out of a book, permanently robbing us of the expected ending. There are deaths that inspire reflection and deaths that leave us anguished, deaths that change our lives and deaths that render us numb; deaths that allow for reconciliation and understanding, and deaths that appear to slam the door shut on those possibilities. There are more deaths than I can name and many more than any of us probably want to hear about...

But one thing is sure: we will all die.

We are mortal beings. No one of us can aspire to a position that allows for escape from that reality. There will be an end to *this* existence for each of us. Death is the great equalizer.

That function of death did not go unremarked in my extended family. Though there was a belief in the "hereafter," there was the awareness that to get from here to after, one had to die. *Everyone* had to die. My grandmother expressed this in stark and suggestive ways, conjuring up rather frightening images especially to young ears: she would say, and most often upon the death of some sort of celebrity, actor or singer or politician, "Yeah, we all end up with a mouthful of dirt." Warm memories of Grandma, right? But I have to say, and maybe it's just because I grew up in this family, but I have to say that there *was* an underlying warmth there for me (once I stopped imagining a mouthful of dirt)...a warmth coming from the understanding that, as humans, no matter how far apart we think we are, no matter what chasms divide us in this life, we all share

this humbling reality: we will die. In that, we are equal. In that, we are joined together with each other and with all of life.

Doesn't everything die at last?

And when my grandmother encountered someone whom she considered to be full of themselves, "putting on the dog," she would say, "Lookit that old bag of bones, thinking they're something." Look at that old bag of bones.

Skeletons. Underneath the flesh we clothe and adorn, is *bones*, just bones. This is why, though I'm quite sure she never heard of the celebration, this is why I think my grandmother would have appreciated the Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. She saw through to the skeletons, going about their daily routines; she saw through to our mortality, our commonality. She had made some sort of peace with the awareness that everything dies. She could be wry about it; she could refer to it in a humorous manner; but I knew that she had also experienced its anguish, painfully, losing a child, a husband, sisters and brothers and parents. She was sometimes grimly humorous about it, but the humor was not frivolous; it was hard-won. She simply recognized death for what it was: inescapable.

[Ram Dass asked](#) a spirit named Emmanuel what to tell people about death, and Emmanuel responded through the medium, "Tell them that death is absolutely safe." Whatever you think of spirits and mediums, I think that's a great message: death is absolutely safe. Millions of folks have done it; no one has failed yet. Once you've accepted that you will die, you can rest assured that it's absolutely safe. (He also said that death was like taking off a tight shoe...for what that's worth.)

But death is absolutely safe...a fool-proof process...everybody's doing it. And I think that the Día del los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, starts with that awareness. Not from the uniqueness of particular deaths, but from the universality of death. Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Yes, we are told with this celebration; yes, that is the way it has been and the way it will be.

But if I am suggesting that the Day of the Dead begins with the recognition of the universality of death, I am not suggesting that it ends there. It is also about the uniqueness, not of death or the circumstances of death so much, as of life, the lives of the individuals who have died. It is a ritual of remembrance and we don't remember universality, we remember particularity. The particular ways in which this person's life touched our own; the distinct characteristic of their personality and presence; the unique gifts they brought to this existence while they inhabited this world, in human form, skeleton and all. We remember, in spite of death's separation. We remember, in spite of death claiming finality. We remember, in the face of death, despite the fact of death, we dare to challenge death with our memories. Though not the rage that Dylan Thomas may have called for, remembrance is an act of defiance. It is a refusal to grant death all that it attempts to take from us.

Traditional cultures, writes, Peter Morales, with their mediums and ghosts and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we've repressed: the dead don't die; they live on.

They are gone. Yes. That is the reality of death.

And they are not gone. Yes. That is the reality of remembrance.

And though Death has robbed us of their physical form, we will set a place for them at the table. And though Death has robbed us of their touch, we can conjure up the feel of a hand on our shoulder. And though Death has robbed us of the sound of their voices, we recall their words and write them down and speak them aloud and keep them alive...*alive*.

And when our memory gives out, our DNA remembers for us; our history displays the footprints of those who came before; our gestures, our dreams, our work holds the imprint of ancestors.

I'm not speaking metaphysically or theologically... Peter Morales goes on to say. Think of the decisions made by your parents and grandparents. Their choices shaped your life. And the choices we make every day shape the lives of those to come. The interconnections stretch across time.

This is what the Día de los Muertos reminds us of, and this is its power. A simple ceremony of remembrance puts us in touch with our place in time and our mortality, and it reminds us that to live is to create a legacy that endures for generations.

Would you join with me in Responsive Reading #720, as we begin our Ritual of Remembrance?

#720 We Remember Them

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.

In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember them.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.

In 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 joys we yearn to share, we remember them.

So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

Ritual of Remembrance

I ask you now to speak the names of those you love who have died, speak their names into the silence, and know that you and your memories are held in the expansive love and deep respect of this community.

Speaking Names

So, on this day, in this celebration of the *Día de los Muertos*, as we remember those who have gone before us, as we recognize and honor their gifts to us, as we mourn their departure from this existence, I ask you two questions.

There is the *Universal* question: Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? That one we can answer all together, right? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Yes! Yes, everything dies at last, and too soon!

But then there is the question that speaks to the unique being that is you, the question that only you can answer, in the silence of your soul. This one, I ask you to take with you from this place, to ponder in your hearts:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*