

## **“Letting Go and Holding on”**

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### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

Rainer Maria Rilke described the task of the poet this way: “to confirm confidence toward death out of the deepest delights and glories of life; to make death, who never was a stranger, more distinct and palpable again as the silent knowing participant in everything alive.”

Why should we invite this fearful figure into our midst, whom we would rather not get to know? Why make him more distinct and palpable? We begin our walk down the path of these paradoxical questions by bringing into our worship the celebratory tradition known as dia de los muertos, the Day of the Dead.

This holiday has origins in several religious traditions. The ancient Egyptians thought that spirits of the dead returned each fall to visit the living. They welcomed these spirits with food and lights.

These customs spread to ancient Rome and eventually were reflected in Christian traditions. The day of the dead, officially named All Souls Day in the Catholic Church, is celebrated on November 2, the day after All Saints Day. Although not recognizable as such in its current hypercommercial incarnation, Halloween – a time of visitation by the dead -- is part of this tradition. What is hallowed is holy. What is holy moves us toward wholeness. All of these words share ancestry with the word healing.

In the traditions of the Aztecs, Mayas, and other Prehispanic peoples on this side of the globe, death was seen as part of the process of life. The Aztecs honored the spirits of the dead and invited them to visit on holidays set aside for this ritual.

In Mexico, the Spanish conquest resulted in a blending of these native and Christian traditions. Today the festival of dia de los muertos, the day of the dead, is a community event celebrating the reunion of the living with the dead. Special foods and decorations are prepared. Special songs and dramas are performed. The atmosphere is an emotional mixture of joy and sadness -- lively rather than morbid.

Today our rituals and decorated sanctuary reflect our interest in and respect for this religious tradition as Unitarian Universalists. So come, let us ask again the ancient questions. Come, let us worship together.

## SERMON

For me, the Day of the Dead is a creative response to one of the most important questions in human life: what does my death mean? This is a question born of fear -- our fear of the ultimate unknown. What brings this fear, of course, is our experience of the deaths of those who populate our lives. Each of us wants to know not only what his own death means but also what meaning to make of the deaths of those others. We ask these questions from many different vantage points in relation to death – young or old, healthy or sick, working with death in our jobs or rarely seeing it. But no matter. Questions about death is something we all have in common.

My favorite theologian, James Carse, tells the story of one family's answer to these questions. He met them at a lakeside vacation retreat. They said they were attending a group meeting with a channeler of communications with the dead – that they did this regularly to be connected to a family member who had died, and who had been the central figure in the life of the family. They spoke of the missing member in the present tense, as if he might show up at the lake later in the afternoon to take a dip with them. Carse happened to ask them how long they had been doing the channeling with the one who died. Twenty-nine years, came the calm answer. He was stunned by this distance, but for this family, their missing relative was as present to them as Carse's nine-year-old child was to him -- about to jump off the diving board into the lake and calling out for dad to watch.

He described the family this way:

“These were people who had sought to have death taken away – and death was taken away. Death was now but one event in an unbroken cycle of events, and therefore no longer death. Death no more ended anything in their lives than a leap from the diving board ended the swimmers' play. Life and death had merged into a timeless whole that nothing could disturb.

I could not help feeling that when they got what they asked for, it was not death that ended; it was their lives that had ended. I could not know them where they lived. I could only look on with an indulgent smile. I sat next to them that afternoon – but twenty-nine years away.

Death dealt this family a terrible blow. They sought to recover, but on terms that were very costly. They wanted their old life back, but gave up the present to get it. They wanted life, but without pain, without limitation. Death had come into their life in a way that could not be undone. Rather than accept this pain and reconstruct their life, they erased the tape. They created a painless or nearly painless world, but one in which no one else could really join them – a kind of private cinematic screening room.

What did James Carse mean when said the lives of this family had ended? I believe he meant that in banishing death they had eclipsed their capacity to experience the preciousness of their lives. The question “what do our deaths mean?” is about experiencing our lives as finite. Think of how you treat something that has no deadline. (Funny, that word deadline) If we can do that something any old time, it usually won't get done until some kind of deadline appears on

the horizon. To ask what our death means is to ask what it would be like to live life as if there were always an ultimate deadline on the horizon – because in fact there is. We would treat time as precious and the perishable commodity called being alive as something of great value.

Our experience of mortality thus focuses our attention on the question of the value of our lives. We want to know, do our lives make a difference? Do they matter? What we long to know is not whether they matter just for the fleeting few moments – historically speaking – that we are onstage. But rather, do they matter in a way that is lasting. This is a question not only about what is valuable, but more importantly, about how our lives become valuable. If having a life that matters means having a life that is valuable, where do we get the value?

Certainly part of the answer is that we create it from within ourselves. But having left the Big Bang behind long ago, we know that we never create something literally out of nothing. We always need the kindling wood of prior human experience. For that, we are dependent on other people sharing their lives with us.

Whoever it was who died in James Carse's story, he clearly conveyed great value to the family he left behind. I'm not talking about virtues that we can put on a list to use as a recipe for living a good life. I'm talking about the kind of value we receive from every human life that touches ours, differentiated only by how deeply the liver of that life has been able to share it with us. A life shared in this way is a life of self-revelation, of vulnerability, of taking the risk of letting others see one as one really is.

When we receive this value from those around us, our ability to share, in turn, our present-tense life fully with others is enhanced. And this enhancement continues even after the giver of this gift has died. But the value is completely bound up with our experience of that giver. If the binding is particularly tight, when that person departs from our lives, we feel a huge loss. This is the cost of the value received from the person who died.

And so we are presented with a dilemma: how can we deal with the grievous loss we feel from the death of those close to us and yet hold onto the value they gave us – value that lives on in our lives and becomes part of the value we in turn bequeath to those who follow us? How can we let go of what must be let go of, while holding onto to what must be held onto, in order to lead lives that matter?

The family in this morning's story sought to deal with this dilemma by holding onto what death had taken away. They found ways to try to continue to relate to the dead relative as if he were still alive. They redirected their energy and attention from the present, with all of its pain and loss, to the past. This is a repudiation of death. But one of the most important values we receive from the lives of those who go before us is that those lives end, and thus give us a sense of our own mortality. Without that sense of death, we cannot have the experience of living lives that make a difference.

The family bound themselves to the past in order to keep hold of a relationship of great value. This way of coping exacts a terrible cost. It actually keeps this relational value small, instead of magnifying it by sharing it. Such sharing requires us to be full present with the living.

That full presence is impossible if we are dwelling in the past. You can't be in two places at once.

The only way to avoid these terrible costs is to let go of the dead as living personalities, to accept this grievous loss. By inviting the truth of death into our lives in this way, we enable ourselves and the dead to have lives that matter – that transcend death in the only way that real transcendence is possible. The way to allow those who have died to pass on to us the value of the lives they shared with us is by living out the gifts they have given us.

This enables us to hold the dead as memories we can have in our lives without taking ourselves away from the present. Memories that are shared with the living enable our experience of the dead to grow and change, rather being a private analgesic for pain.

Letting go of the dead has that quality that every virtue has – carried too far, it becomes a vice. Rather than hanging on too hard, another terribly costly way of coping with the pain of losing a loved one is to do the opposite: to banish the dead person from one's life by attempting to forget him as much as possible. Rather than denying his death by hanging on, this form of coping denies his life by pushing it away.

I saw this happen with friends of my father. The pushing away actually began while he was still alive. My father was a positive, gregarious person. He touched people with his generosity, warmth and sincerity, and he had many good friends. He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1975. His physical constitution was strong; so he survived biologically long after he ceased to be present mentally. Some of those good friends stopped coming around. They never asked my mother how he was, or for that matter, how she was. These were not callous or indifferent people. They just didn't know how to cope with the fact of my father's virtual death. They could not include this pain in their lives, could not deal with the loss of him and the vivid reminder of their own mortality.

In turning away from the pain of losing their personable friend, they wound up losing something of even greater value – a living, growing memory of the spiritual experiences he gave them during his life. These experiences could have transcended his death and persisted in their lives, but only by their choosing remembering over forgetting. You cannot remain connected to the value of something you've spent years avoiding.

Dwelling in the past with the dead and dwelling in the present without them appear to be two very different ways of coping with loss; but their effects are the same. They both deny the fact of death – one by trying to keep alive the person who died, the other by turning away from, and thus dimming, the life that he shared with those around him. Both deprive the living of their own sense of mortality and thus diminish their aliveness. Both also deprive the living and the dead of the chance to pass along the value of their lives to those who come after. We cannot pass along that which we have forgotten, any more than we can pass along something we hang onto so tightly that it keeps us in the past.

The paradox suggested by the words of the poet Rilke, who called us to worship today, thus comes fully into view. To embrace life, we must embrace death. To receive and pass along

the value bequeathed to us by those who are no longer here, we must let go of what must be left behind and hold onto what must be kept present.

There is no recipe for dealing with this paradox. But Dia de los Muertos does point us toward the important ingredients. This Mexican religious observance is above all a community project. The important questions about death are relational, and only in relationship will we find wisdom and peace. And the important questions about death are actually about life. On this holiday, Mexicans do not make a pilgrimage to the past. They invite the dead to visit the present, but not to dwell here. The purpose of the visit is not to exhume what must be let go, but rather to refresh recollection, to keep alive what must be held onto and passed on.

And how are we to make that all-important distinction -- between what must be held onto and what must be let go? It is not so simple as drawing up lists of what was good and bad about the dead. Living out of such lists would belittle our own role in how the lives of the dead are passed on. We are not here to be mere scribes, copying their virtues and erasing their vices. We are here to be painters and poets, using our experiences of the dead as part of the palette and vocabulary from which we create our own lives – experiences that will be of the same kind of use to painters and poets yet to come.

Painters and poets are not handed recipes for their work; but they have a sense of how to do it. In relation to the dead, my sense of this how is always to ask this question: when is my way of relating to them making me more present to my life with others who are here now, and when is it taking me away?

My father was a not Unitarian. He was a disciplinarian. A strict one. Among many other things, this meant that he hardly ever apologized. This wasn't arrogance or vanity, I realized later. It was a conviction that to apologize to children was to show weakness, which would only encourage them to disobey and misbehave.

I kept these memories fresh when my own children came along. I knew I would make mistakes, and I made more than my share. But I vowed to apologize to them, so they would not make the mistake of thinking what had gone wrong was their fault, as children are so very prone to do. I knew what it was like to think everything was my fault.

If these experiences with my father had been so hurtful that remembering them pulled me into the past, it would have been better to let go of them. They were not, and I think it turned out that way because others – starting with my mother – shared so many earlier memories of my father that made it easier for me to have compassion for him.

These stories helped me understand what it was like for him to grow up fatherless, in a family so close to poverty that they measured their net worth in inventories of grits and lard and other foodstuffs and simple necessities of life. I am confident that my father's mother hardly ever apologized to him either. And if she were here with us today, I expect she would proudly declare that, yes, she did raise her son to be a strict disciplinarian; that in her life, discipline was what made the difference between keeping a family together and watching it unravel. But I think she also would say, as would every person whose picture sits before us today, hold onto

whatever you have from me that helps you make a life that matters; and let go of whatever you have from me that stops you.

My father, like every human being, yearned to be known by others and remembered by them in a way that made of his life a deathless contribution to a larger, lasting story. He shared himself as best he could. I am my father's poet, and so, I hope, will my children be mine, writing verses long after I am gone in which are embedded my own deathless contribution, translated by the uses they make of what my life means to them. It makes me smile to wonder what use they will make of having a nondisciplinarian father who apologized – who, truth be told, doted on them overly much.

This is what it really means to be immortal. Not in that theatrical, fairy tale sense of physical indestructibility, but in the profound sense of having touched others as deeply as possible.

I didn't hold onto the memory of my father's disciplinarian ways because I found a recipe for how to relate to the dead. I believe it happened because without any recipe at all, my heart somehow knew what would make me more present to my life with two of the most important people in it – my children. And so it is with each of us – a matter of listening to the inner speaking of the heart.

Our hearts, unlike our minds, are not upset by paradox. Our hearts can freely accept that a life with limitations is larger and fuller and more alive than one without limitations. The ultimate limitation of death frees us to receive the least limited, most inclusive life possible. May we claim this largest possible life in all of our heart-felt relating -- with the living and the dead alike.

AMEN.