

WELCOMING ALL SOULS

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READING

We offer two readings this morning. The first is from Kahlil Gibran:

Then Almitra spoke, saying,
We would ask now of Death.

And he said:

You would know the secret of Death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;

And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.

Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour.

Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?

Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?

And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

And these words from Unitarian Universalist Chaplain Barbara Holleroth,

"It is sometimes said that we are born as strangers into the world and that we leave it when we die. But in all probability we do not come *into* the world at all. Rather, we come out of it, in the same way that a leaf comes out of a tree or a baby from its mother's body. We emerge from the deep within its range of possibilities, and when we die, we do not so much stop living as take on a different form. So the leaf does not fall out of the world when it leaves the tree. It has a different way and place to be within it."

SERMON

I was ridiculously old before I attended my first funeral. I lost a grandmother when I was ten, but only my mother traveled back to New York for the funeral. When my father's mother died 15 years later, the family didn't have a service. It wasn't till I was in my early 30s that I went to any kind of memorial or funeral.

When I was 12, the girl who lived two houses down from me lost her mother. Patty was alternately my friend and my nemesis, but I had always loved her mother. I cried and cried when she died, and my parents were concerned that the funeral would be too upsetting for me. They wouldn't let me go. They wanted to protect me, and I understand why, although I think they were wrong. Keeping me away from death and the dying, keeping me in ignorance of our rituals of mourning, did little but confuse me and certainly offered no comfort.

As humans, death is something we fear and yet which fascinates us. We are alive and we know we must die. That fact drives so much of what makes us human, what we do to give the brief span of our lives meaning and purpose. Yet as Rev. Forrest Church says, Death is not the enemy, it is the limit that gives meaning.

That's not what my parents were thinking when Patty's mother died. In modern America, we use technology and tenacity to insulate us from death. We have a fascination with youth and youth culture. The Baby Boom generation may be among the most resolute in the determination to live as long as possible. Last night, when two among us hosted a decade party to celebrate their 60th birthdays, I said things to them like, Here's to another 60! And, May you be truly middle-aged.

Yet in our determination to keep old age and death at bay, we are missing something profound.

As Kahlil Gibran's Prophet tells us:

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the
body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?
And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides,
that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?
Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.

This is a natural time to settle in and consider endings. In Jill's words, this is a season of passing. The leaves are falling. The earth is turning to darkness. So, today, we turn inward and consider living and dying as humanity has been doing for millennia.

The timing of the traditions we embrace this day – All Hallow's Eve and Dia de las Muertas – is traceable back thousands of years to the Gaelic culture in ancient Britain who celebrated the harvest and prepared for the coming winter. Yet the Ancient Gaels also believed that on Oct. 31, the veil between the living and the dead was lifted and the spirits of the dead could walk the earth. The people often wore masks to mimic or placate these spirits. When the Romans conquered Britain in the early first century, they brought their own late October festival honoring the dead and blended it with Gaelic tradition. Fast-forward about 8 centuries, when the Catholic Church moved its celebration of All Saints day from May to October to coincide with the Gaelic holiday. The church at the time well knew that it, too, must blend with local tradition to make new converts.

Fast-forward again another 8 centuries to the Spanish invasion of the "New World." In Mexico, the Aztec had a long tradition of celebrating the ancestors in a month-long festival in August. Again, the Catholic Church accommodated local religious tradition, but moved that celebration of the dead to fit the timing of All Hallow's Eve. Those traditions are handed down to us in North America as the Mexican celebration of Dia de las Muertas.

Today, in our culture that tries to deny or avoid death, we can look to ancient peoples and ancient celebrations to remind us of the nearness of death, and to assuage our fears. Indeed, we neither come into the world, nor do we leave it. Our living takes on many forms throughout time. Death is not the enemy. It is the limit that that gives meaning.

What meaning can we carry forward with us today? What can *we* learn from people who ran not in fear from death, but faced their fears? Traditions that acknowledge that the line between life and death is not so clear as we might think. Practices that teach us to honor and embrace our ancestors, to acknowledge the presence of the dead among the living, in our memories and in the way we live now.

In my travels in Mexico, I have been both attracted and disturbed by the nearness of death. It's not that Mexicans fear death less than others, yet they deal with their fear more directly and more openly than many. They both laugh at and celebrate death.

And they do seem to have an understanding of death, an acceptance of its meaning that I think we miss.

This struck me forcefully when I visited the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, one of the great museums of the world, dedicated to the ancient cultures of Mexico. In one room, there is a wall of photographs of many people from many cultures and races. Simple photographs of faces, in rows perhaps twelve across by eight deep. They are the kind of pictures that change depending on the angle of viewing. Approaching the wall, I saw only faces, but as I walked by, the photographs changed to reveal the skull beneath each face. Continuing on, they changed back to the simple smiling faces. I walked back and forth many times. People in the flesh, then the grinning, hollow-eyed skulls, then full faces again. I found an angle where I could see the contours of the smiling face as if super-imposed over the bone of the skull beneath.

This wall of faces struck me with the nearness of death. The skull, universal symbol of death, rests just millimeters beneath our skin. Each of us is a kind of walking death mask. Like the Katrina doll that is ubiquitous in Mexico, at some level we are all just walking skeletons.

And all the distinctions we see in faces are non-existent in the skulls beneath. There was no way to tell which skull was black or white, man or woman, Asian or Hispanic. Death is indeed the great equalizer. We are all the same in death. What is the import of the distinctions we make in life?

This brings to mind the question our services have been considering of late, Who is the Other? These photographs bring new perspective. At the skeletal level, there is no other. We are alive, making what we can of our limited time, and then we die. Our souls pass on where they will, our bodies indeed return to the earth. Our bones are remarkably the same.

If this is so, how might it move us to act in the world, in this brief span we are granted? How might we learn to embrace one another more fully?

This is the day we set aside to consider such questions. The day we set aside to remember our dead. To commune with them. To remember our connection to them. To acknowledge our own mortality. We stand on the shoulders of ancient religious traditions, weaving the tapestry of the living and dead more intricately. Enriching the patterns of our lives.

We honor our human ancestors this day for we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

We remember

And all those members of the church who have lost parents in this year passed.

We remember those who have graced the world for better or worse. Writers Madeline L'Engle, Molly Ivins, Kurt Vonnegut, David Halberstam. World Leaders Gerald Ford, Boris Yeltsin, Jeane Kirkpatrick. Opera stars Luciano Pavarotti and Beverly Sills, director Ingmar Bergman, mime Marcel Marceau, and sad-faced clown Emmet Kelly. Economist Milton Friedman, astronaut Wally Schirra.

We think, too, of the millions of those who are mostly anonymous to us. The soldiers, the civilians, and the insurgents who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and in conflict throughout the world.

Even as we hold those less celebrated perhaps, but known intimately to us.

We do this, as people have done forever, in this time of passing, which we recognize in the returning cold and dark, in the falling of the leaves. Let us learn in our own way, what ancient peoples have known, that living and dying are not as clearly defined as we might think.

In words from our reading,

“In all probability we do not come into the world.... Rather, we come out of it, in the same way that a leaf comes out of a tree or a baby from its mother’s body.... And when we die, we do not so much stop living as take on a different form. So the leaf does not fall out of the world when it leaves the tree. It has a different way and place to be within it.”

May we now be together with the living and the dead in a different way. May we carry forward ancient traditions. May we honor our ancestors in this time of passing.

Amen.

May it be so.