

Día de los Muertos

by Rev. Don Garrett, UUCLV, October 31, 2010

This is the season of Halloween, of spooks, ghosts and goblins. Black cats. Jack o’lanterns. Skeletons. Witches. Children in costumes going door to door, crying, “Trick or treat!”

This is also autumn, the end of the year for growing things. The harvest is in and all that was green is turning – some brightly – toward the faded yellows and browns of dead and decaying vegetation.

Winter is coming. Nature has only darkness and cold to offer. Promises of spring can seem faint and far away. The cycle of nature can seem dismal, bleak, grim.

But it’s not entirely bleak. Autumn presents us with a paradox. Despite – and because of – the end of the growing season, autumn is the time of greatest abundance and plenty. It may be getting dark and cold, but the storehouses are bursting with food and security. Next month, we will celebrate our gratitude for that abundance, but the end of October is a festival of the macabre.

This is one of the times of the year when the veil between life and death is lifted, when the normally rigid boundaries between the living and the dead become softer and more permeable. How our culture reacts to the lifting of that veil is quite revealing. We’re scared. We’re terrified of death and the dead. Uncomfortable with our anxiety, we turn that fear into a grotesque parody. We make a parade of witches, goblins, black cats, and pumpkins, all decked out in orange and black like sick clowns of decay; sad, angry, tortured clowns that we mock. We laugh at them to dispel our fears. We dress up our children as creatures of horror, using the innocent vitality of their youth to counter the corruption of death. And even seemingly benign costumes still obscure the persons, the living children, and represent the loss of selfhood implicit in our understanding of death.

We fear evil and death, and nothing embodies them as completely as the figure of the witch. As compelling as they are, it’s interesting to note that the witches we contemplate are as fictional as vampires. Witches – in the Halloween

sense – don't exist and never did. They couldn't be nearly as scary if they were real. They're actually creations of a fearful and misguided European prejudice against the wisdom of nature, of the earth, of the Goddess.

The struggle against the gods of nature has roots way back in ancient Judaism. Hebrew history tells of an uneasy relationship between the Jehovah they worshipped in the desert, and the gods they found in their new home. The Canaanites worshipped Baal, a god of fertility and nature, as well as Asherah, the goddess. Most of the time, people freely worshipped both religions. But, when times were hard with famine, disease, or military defeat, the Hebrews blamed the nature gods for their misfortune. There are stories of mobs tearing down temples and murdering priests and followers of Baal and Asherah as though they were obviously evil. But if they were so evil, why were they so popular? They were popular because they honored the wisdom of the earth, the cycles of the seasons and the harvest.

As long as humans have walked the earth, people have honored the earth and the spirit that gives life to the things of the earth. But by relying on the resurrection of the dead for the meaning of life, European Christianity came into conflict with the ancient ways that found their meaning in the miracles that happen every day, every year, every season. Like the followers of Baal and Asherah the Hebrews persecuted, we have a heritage of persecuting those we call witches.

Witches became a kind of scapegoat for our culture as we created an abstract caricature of all the things we feared. By demanding that people not fear death, Christianity insisted that its followers suppress their natural human fear of death. But suppressed fears tend to reassert themselves in different forms. Fears of death reappeared as embodiments of evil: as the devil, and the devil's worshippers – witches. But what we call witches were – and are – simply wise women and men who embraced the seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

European Christianity made it hard to feel safe. Death was supposed to be glorious, but the torments of hell were preached far more vigorously than any delights that heaven might have in store. The struggle between life and death

became the conflict between heaven and hell, between good and evil. This led to an estrangement from the natural cycles of life that humans have understood and honored since time immemorial: death became the province of evil, of Satan, and life – whether temporal or eternal – was the province of goodness, or God. In the battle between good and evil, we hope that God is on our side.

And so we have the old Anglican prayer that sums up the spirit of this season: “May the good Lord protect us from ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night.”

What if things were different? How could that be? Let’s take a look at how these same issues worked out for another culture: that of Mexico. They don’t have Halloween; they have *Día de los Muertos*: the Day of the Dead.

When the Spanish missionaries went to Mexico, they found a people with rich religious traditions. As the native populations attempted to assimilate the Catholic teachings with their own religious rites, a clash of spiritual energies was inevitable. The Catholic holidays of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, November first and second, honor those who have died. Thus the Day of the Dead, celebrated on November second, was started by the Mexican people as a means of continuing their belief in the circle of life in which death plays a part and is not to be feared. As it evolved, the native holiday incorporated aspects of the Catholic teaching of death as an end to mortal life and a beginning of a new and better afterlife. But the lack of an indigenous concept of punishment or hell produced an exuberant response: that although death is a loss in some ways, it is an improvement in others and, overall, the dead are happy to be dead.

When the rock band, “The Grateful Dead,” came on the scene in the 1960’s, I thought the name was just some weird hippie joke based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. This was the spirit in which I saw the recurrent skeleton motif in their album artwork. They often depicted skeletons as smiling, dancing, wearing top hats and decked with roses. I loved what I took to be a novel embrace of death as a part of life. It was quite a surprise when I discovered that these images weren’t new at all, but was derived from the old Mexican religious tradition of *Día de los Muertos* and that the idea of the dead being grateful was centuries old.

This is not a scary holiday. In Mexico, it is celebrated in cemeteries at night. The family of the departed makes offerings of food and drink and places the traditional flowers, marigolds, at each gravesite. During this offering, the family members also offer prayers or speak to the dead. In the United States, many Mexican American families make a pilgrimage to family gravesites with offerings of flowers, but during the day, not at midnight. *Ofrendas*, or altars, are built inside many homes. They contain significant objects that the departed relative might have cherished as reminders of the deceased. Candles are lit and prayers are offered at the *ofrendas* as well.

These altars are considered a threshold between heaven and earth and bring the reunion between the living and the dead into the home. Making things to eat and toys to play with helps to make dying less fearful, especially for children, and gives the day a cheerful atmosphere. They also give the dead a hearty welcome by providing recognizable objects and offering their favorite food.

The most important character on *Día de los Muertos* is the key symbol of death, the *calavera*. This word means skull or skeleton. These skeleton images are not ghastly, but symbolic of life. In fact, they help the living embrace the circle of life. Mexican curios that feature skeletons employed in some kind of diversion done normally by the living – like playing in a band or washing dishes – express a whimsical rather than sinister view of death. The *calavera* shows up everywhere, even in the traditional food of the day, *pan de muerto*, a sweet bread molded into the shape of a skull and baked with a small plastic skull inside.

In her novel, *Animal Dreams*, Barbara Kingsolver describes a typical *Día de los Muertos* as celebrated by the small, poor village of Grace, Arizona. She writes:

“All Souls’ Day dawned cool, and the people of Grace put on their sweatshirts and gave thanks. The heat wave was broken. By half past eight the sun was well up and sweatshirts peeled off again, but it was still a perfect day. Every able-bodied person in Grace climbed the canyon roads to converge on the cemetery.

“It was the bittersweet Mexican holiday, the Day of the Dead, democratic follow-up to the Catholic celebration of All Hallows. Some people had business

with the saints on November 1, and so went to mass, but on November 2 *everybody* had business at the graveyard. The families traipsing slowly uphill resembled harvester ants, carrying every imaginable species of real and artificial flower: bulging grocery sacks of chrysanthemums and gladioli; tulips made from blue and pink Styrofoam egg cartons; long-stemmed silk roses bouncing in children's hands like magic wands; and unclassifiable creations out of fabric and colored paper and even the plastic rings from six-packs. . .

“Most families divided their time between the maternal and paternal lines, spending mornings on one set of graves and afternoons on the other. Emelina and the boys staked out the Domingos plot and set to work sweeping and straightening. One of the graves, a great-uncle of J.T.'s named Vigilancio Domingos, was completely bordered with ancient-looking tequila bottles, buried nose down. Mason and I spent half the morning gathering up the strays and resetting them all in the dirt, as straight as teeth. It was a remarkable aesthetic – I don't mean just Uncle Vigilancio, but the whole. Some graves had shrines with niches peopled by saints; some looked like botanical gardens of paper and silk; others had the initials of loved ones spelled out on the mound in white stones. The unifying principle was that the simplest thing was done with the greatest care. It was a comfort to see this attention lavished on the dead. In these families you would never stop being loved.”

You would never stop being loved. What a wonderful sense of community, of continuity. Children running to and fro around the graves of their ancestors, decorating and cleaning, playing as though they were in their grandparents' laps.

When you stop fearing death you can start loving the dead. When you start loving the dead you can forgive the dying. A large part of the anguish Americans experience in the face of death is the result of things we don't want to let ourselves even feel, much less acknowledge. We're caught in an angry and confused maelstrom of suppressed feelings – and you know what happens to suppressed feelings. They reappear with even more power in different forms. And so we fear death. We fear dying. We even fear the dead.

But even more powerful and damaging than the fear of death is the fear of what death represents: change. Some say that post-Christian secular America is

better off because it is free of the threat of damnation and hell. But it also lacks the hope of heaven and transcendence. And without a belief in some kind of transcendence, the natural desire for immortality can become literal and materialistic. It becomes a demand that this physical life continue forever. The medical establishment is the priesthood of this new materialistic theology of death and its goal is eternal life on earth. Death is seen as a merciless enemy that offers only meaningless suffering leading to annihilation and oblivion.

Clever humanists may debunk the stories of resurrection, death and rebirth, but we have nothing else to put into the void that remains. There's a real need for stories that can help us deal with change and transformation. Life is change, and the way we look at death shapes how we think about change in general. If we fear death, we fear change, and this limits our ability to cope with life.

We don't have to define eternal life as something mysterious that may begin when we die. If life has an eternal aspect it is always present – right now. Being scared of skeletons and witches and ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night may seem like innocent fun, but it can block our ability to embrace change with optimism and joy.

Life after death is not a myth. The person I once was no longer exists; the person I will be tomorrow has yet to be born. The Unitarian Church of the Lehigh Valley that was born in 1948 is no more. The church of the future is yet to come. Embracing the future means letting go of the present and letting it become the past.

I invite you to let *Día de los Muertos* teach us that we don't have to fear death any more than we have to fear the past; that the past can be as rich a part of our lives as the present; that letting go doesn't mean that we ever have to stop loving.