

Beloved Dead

October 26, 2014

UU Society of Sacramento

On walks these days with my dog Luna we pass by at least 10 graveyards. These are not associated with a church, or part of a formal memorial setting – these are on people lawns throughout my neighborhood. Usually there are at least two tombstones, well worn, with odd inscriptions like UR NEXT, or IMA GONER. Some say Rest in Peace, though it appears not to be the case with bones strewn around the graves, or even bones that look like they are crawling out from the grave. Some of these gravesites have cobwebs or even spooky music.

Of course you know what's going on here – its Halloween. – jack-o lanterns, trick or treating, costumes, parties, ghouls goblins and witches – our holiday is a hodgepodge build up from traditions that are ancient as well as modern.

In North America Halloween is a decidedly secular holiday, one where our celebrations seem to get scarier and scarier each year, rivaling the macabre that seems prevalent in our movies and TV. even death is not scary enough – zombies currently rule our airwaves. The dead now rise us and try to eat us. At Halloween, we make scary images of death to frighten ourselves – perhaps distracting ourselves from the reality of death, or laughing at death in a belief that we can minimize it.

It is not a coincidence that Halloween occurs at this time of year, the cycles of the earth make death very present – our gardens are coming to an end, the fields are harvested, days are shortening, we are all aware that the darkness will be lengthening and deepening in the coming months. From its earliest origins and throughout its developing history, this holiday we call Halloween has always been about the deaths and ghosts of people. The Celts believed that on the last night of October the spirits of the dead returned to earth to mix with the living. The veil between the worlds of the living and the dead is at it thinnest. Food was put out for the spirits, fruits of the Harvest were given in offering. They call this holiday Samhain.

Some cultures take this holiday seriously, take the idea of death, and those that have passed on seriously. In Mexico and Latin American countries, Day of the Dead combines Roman Catholic rituals of All Saints' and All Souls' Days with millennia-old Mexican Indian traditions. The holiday includes solemn religious rites such as masses and prayers for the dead in church. Here the dead are not feared but welcomed. In Mexico and Latin America some families keep

candlelight vigils through the night at the gravesites of their dead, singing and remembering giving their children a connection across time with their ancestors.

This congregation has celebrated the Day of the Dead with an elaborate altar with photos of Beloved dead, food and other festive items of celebration and remembrance.

To some of us, the idea of spending the night in the cemetery may seem morbid, calling on the spirit of the dead may seem superstitious or flaky. And yet these practices may be more mature than our North American approach of avoidance or exploitation of death. Peter Morales, our UUA president, speaking of the Day of the Dead, said “Traditional cultures, with their mediums and ghosts and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we’ve repressed: the dead don’t die; they live on.

In our service today we will celebrate our beloved dead. A bit later in the service we will have a guided meditation that will give you the opportunity to visit with your beloved dead. We will speak their names out loud.

Though it is not often talked about in our culture, many people have a practice of talking with their beloved dead. It can be a healing and nurturing process. When I am missing a beloved being who has died, I will sometimes go to a place in my mind where I can see them, talk to them, be with them. I can hold a beloved kitty in my arms and feel her soft fur, or ask advice from my grandmother. I feel their love and presence. Do I believe that I am really talking with them? – I don’t ask that question, it doesn’t matter, I don’t need to know? – I simply feel their presence and take comfort in it.

The dead are not gone from us, they are here for us in our memories, in our hearts, they are a part of us.

So let us celebrate this season of great the mystery of death – let us honor our beloved dead, be present to this time when the spirits are close by. Gathered Here in the Mystery of the hour, Gathered Here is one strong body, gathered here in the struggle and the power, spirits draw near.

Invitation to the ritual

Meditation and Honoring of our Beloved Deceased

At this darkening time of the year, our thoughts turn to things past, to life retreating, to those who are no longer with us. Images come to our minds; of dear companions, human or animal, who once graced our lives, loved ones whom we miss, persons whose lives made an impact on our lives; of all those who were here, contributing, caring, and are now gone.

Our memories bring both joy and sadness; let us not push these feelings away. For our recollections attest to the enduring importance of these friends, this love, our memories.

We will now come together to name our beloved dead. You may choose to name someone you knew during their lifetime, an ancestor who lived before you, a person you did not know but who has influenced your life. You may choose to name a beloved pet. Each of us holds many beloved dead in our hearts, but please share just one name. When you return to your seat, or while waiting your turn, you may choose to quietly name as many beloved dead as you would like to bring into our space today.

When you are ready, please line up on both sides of the sanctuary, step up to the mike in turn and name your beloved dead. We ask that you return to your seat by the center aisle.

Let Us Begin.

Prayer

Spirit of Life, whom we know best in our own loving and being loved, hold us as we remember our beloved dead, those we have loved, and those who have loved us, those whose lives touched ours. May these spirits live again in our tender thoughts, and prove that death and distance are powerless to sever the bonds that connect truly loving hearts. Remind us that we, too, are mortal; and that the only enduring legacy we leave is the love that shines through our lives. Let our hearts be full with gratitude for the gifts of life. Let us honor death – which has its own mystery, its own stage of life to be honored, blessed and finally realized. May we have respect for the never ending cycles of life and death of which we are all a part. So May it Be