

Homily: All Souls Day: A Service of Memory and Celebration of Life

Halloween has its beginnings in the ancient Pagan harvest festival of Samhain (pronounce *sah-wen*), a time of year when it was thought that the veil between the living and the dead was thin. The Celts would drape themselves in animal skins, don antlers, and dance around a bonfire all night to scare away any evil spirits that might have escaped the veil. When conquering Romans attempted to Christianize the Celts, they imposed their own feast day honoring their Saints which coincided with Samhain. Thus, Halloween became a contraction and an accommodation of All Hallow's Eve or All Saints Day.

These days, for Unitarian Universalists, November 1st—the day after Halloween—is known as All Soul's Day, and it is a day for remembering our friends and loved ones who have died, not just the saints and martyrs of Christendom. For us, this is an important day to mark because we are especially concerned with remembrance for as you have heard me say many times — to live in hearts that love is not to die.

What do I mean when I say to live in hearts that love is not to die? First, this saying is engraved on a bench which sits in the beautiful memorial gardens of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY. I became familiar with it when I was an intern there. The quote is unattributed. It captured my imagination the first time I saw it. Yes, our lives continue in a sense in others' memory. The lives of many can live

on in history, some beloved and revered while others live on in infamy. But living in history is different from living on in hearts that love. To hold the memory of someone dear to us creates an aliveness that is, of course, intangible, or even spiritual. Unlike living in history, though, living in hearts that love can fade with each passing generation. That is why some cultures find it important to keep the ancestors alive within families. For instance, in Mexico, today is Dias de Los Muertos where they have been celebrating death all week. Today, culminates into families picnicking on their ancestor's graves and exchanging memories of loved ones of the past. This is not macabre but a rich traditional practice.

I carry many loving memories of my Granny which I share with my daughters because I want them to know who is in their DNA. I want to share with them my memories of the life-saving love and care she gave me. I want them to imagine her gifted hands and feet at the sewing machine or the organ both of which she had to pedal in order to power. I want them to share my memory of her smiling eyes and long silver hair which she let me comb and braid and pin into a clumsy updo.

To live in hearts that love is to hold those aspects of a person which do not perish with the body: the quality of their embrace, the timbre of their voice, the lessons they taught, the inspiration they gave, the warmth of their smile, the meaning they gave our own lives. Widows and widowers sometimes report feeling shame because they cannot

reconstruct the face of their long-gone spouses in their mind's eye. But mere countenance is not what the heart remembers; the heart remembers the who, not the what of another person; the heart remembers the heart, the soul, the love of another.

We are living with much lament these days. Why bring the subject of death to further our grief? Because I think we will find that when we face our losses, when we name our loved ones who are gone from our lives, when we honor our dead, and remember with joy those we sorely miss, these weary days will come into their proper perspective for us. Our memories will sustain us and teach us that love never dies.