

AUTUMN REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AND DEATH

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

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When I chose the topic for today's sermon several weeks ago, my intention was to use this service as an opportunity for celebrating the beauty of the fall season here in the Shenandoah Valley. But then came an unexpected life event that changed everything. Renée's only brother Roger died suddenly of an apparent heart attack—"out of the blue" without warning, like a lightning strike out of a clear blue sky. The past several days have been very difficult for both Renée and me. She has lost the last remaining member of her family, and I have lost someone who was more of a brother to me than my own biological brother.

So today, with your indulgence and support, I would like to reflect on autumn as the time of year when the boundary between life and death is most dramatic. In the ancient Celtic tradition, Samhain (pronounced "SOW-in") was "a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and dead could meet. These encounters might be pleasant if the ancestors had been treated with respect, if offerings of food were left out for them, and they approved of how their offspring had been behaving. But encounters might be unpleasant if the living had done something to distress the gods or the dead. In the latter case the living might even wear a disguise to avoid being recognized by the avenging dead. A disguise might also conveniently enable the wearer to 'get up to all sorts of mischief without being detected.'" [Patricia Montley, *In Nature's Honor*, p. 299]

Within the Christian tradition, the back-to-back observance of All Saints and All Souls days was a time for honoring both the saints who had been martyred during the time when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire, but also a time when the living could intervene on behalf of loved ones whose souls are trapped in Purgatory, awaiting their assignment to either heaven or hell. As Patricia Montley says, "The souls [of the dead] in Purgatory are themselves in need of help and can benefit from the prayers of those on earth as well as from the intercession of the saints in heaven. . . . Among people whose cultural

inheritance included [both] a pagan festival and a Christian feast of the dead, putting a dish of food or a bit of bread on the windowsill could be interpreted as welcoming ancestral spirits, bribing evil spirits to stay away, making an offering to the poor, feeding the poor for the benefit of the dead, or all of these.” [pp. 302-03] The connections between these ancient observances and the modern holiday of Halloween are pretty obvious.

As Christina Rivera described to us last fall, in Mexico and other Latin American countries, “One of the most elaborate festivals at this time of year is *El dia de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, observed on November 1 and 2 in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Typically, infants and children are remembered on the first day and adults on the second. Here the dead are **not feared but welcomed**. Combining Roman Catholic ritual 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.” [Montley, p. 310] In commenting on this tradition (before he was elected president of the Unitarian Universalist Association) Peter Morales said, “If we dismiss the Day of the Dead as pure superstition, we can easily miss the profound spiritual and psychological insight that makes this tradition powerful. A Mexican boy spending the night at his uncle’s grave has a connection across time with his forebears that our children do not. . . . Traditional cultures, with their mediums and ghosts and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we’ve repressed: the dead don’t die; they live on.” [Peter Morales, “Bringing the Dead to Life,” *UU World* June/August 2003]

Our celebration of Halloween and its kindred autumn holidays reflects the same ambivalence toward death as our ancestors. Like them, we are both **fearful and fascinated** with the fragile boundary between life and death. Our medical profession treats death as the ultimate adversary, and our funeral industry does everything it can to shield grieving family members from the stark reality of a lifeless body. Is there a way to view death as something other than ultimate failure or ultimate horror? Let me turn now to a book titled *Love and Death* by the late Reverend Forrest Church, who served for more than thirty years as minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. The insights contained in this book arise from his ongoing encounter—notice that I did not say “battle”—with terminal cancer of the esophagus beginning in 2006 and ending with his death in September 2009. For three years he stared down the gun

barrel of his own impending death. If there is one book I would recommend to you for dealing with death from a Unitarian Universalist perspective, this is it.

The biggest gift of Forrest Church's book is to transform our view from death as an **adversary** to death as an **ally**—as a teacher in the most fundamental lessons not for **dying** but for **living**. I can only hint at the wisdom it contains. The title of his final book is not *Life and Death* but *Love and Death*. He does not curse his fate of dying before he was ready. Instead, he extols the power of love in the face of death. “Death is love’s measure,” he says, “not only because at a loved one’s death our grief, however we express it, is equal to our love, but also because, when we ourselves die, the love we have given to others during our own brief span of days is the **one thing death can’t kill**. Because we and our loved ones manage to devise so many ways for fear to bind our hearts—fear of intimacy, fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation—because our fear of pain or possible pain manifest itself in so many guises, we often hurt each other without really meaning to. We hurt one another and ourselves by learning, over the practice of a lifetime, how to protect ourselves from pain. Add to this all the mistakes we make, and all the mistakes others make, and only one solvent can loose our hearts from self-protective captivity. Only love. And only a forgiving heart, one capable both of accepting and bestowing forgiveness, is open both to give and receive the saving power of love.” [Forrest Church, *Love and Death*, p. 74]

Let me pause here and ask, what are the fears that bind you— fear of intimacy, fear of disappointment, fear of embarrassment, fear of confrontation? These are not fears about death, but fears about living fully. Speaking now from the realm of those who have lived and died, Forrest Church offers this advice. “If you are struggling with a relationship, out of touch with an old friend, unsure of whether to risk a new job, uncomfortably estranged from your father; if you are hiding to be safe, taking care not to be wrong, I suggest that you take a chance. Don’t wait until you are sure. Though waiting until you have it right works for some things—mostly little things—often our most important decisions and actions are so fraught with danger that we will never surely get them right. . . . **Dare to live before you die.**” [p. 48]

In daring to live before we die, we follow in the footsteps of those who have inspired us by their living. They were not perfect, but neither are we. If there was one bit of advice I would add to Forrest Church's, it is this: Treat every interaction with your loved ones as though you will **never see them alive again**. For indeed, a time will come when that will be true. **Dare to love before they die**. In the case of an unexpected death like Roger's, the family members who struggled most with his loss were some of his sons who still had "unfinished business" with him—still caught in the turmoil and confusion of becoming responsible adults. Now it is too late for them to settle their differences with their father. Perhaps the most painful reality of any death is that you can **never again speak to your loved one**—at least not during this lifetime. Is it any wonder that the prospect of meeting your loved ones in the afterlife is so appealing?

A death that occurs in autumn is all the more poignant because we are surrounded by the passage from abundant life to apparent death in the natural world. Allen Young writes, "Consider thinking of the cycle of seasons the following way. In spring, life sprouts from the eggs and seeds sown last summer, well before the first frost and autumn's descent over the land. In summer, life reaches a full bloom, not just among the plants but among the animals too. Then in autumn, life literally falls off its pedestal of prolific glory. But while autumn may feel and behave like an ending, it is really a new beginning. . . . So we must not let autumn fool us into believing that life . . . is being snuffed out by its frosts. Look to the gaudy colors of autumn leaves to signal the eventual presence of renewed life. In autumn's vibrant colors there are reminders of summer's fullness of life, of winter's impending bleakness, and the prospect of spring not far beyond. **Autumn compels us to think about life's transience and continuity all in one.**" [quoted in Montley, pp. 48-50] Let me close by quoting an inscription on a sundial at the University of Virginia:

Time is too slow for those who wait;
 Too swift for those who fear;
 Too long for those who grieve;
 Too short for those who rejoice.
 But for those who live, Time is Eternity.
 Hours fly, flowers die; new days, new ways pass by.
 Love stays.

As we mark the passage from summer to autumn and now to winter, and acknowledge the end of a life well lived, may this be the faith that will sustain us: **Love stays.**