

WHEN LIFE MEETS DEATH

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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[INSERT STORY: Susan Clark's "ghost story" at the Fall Harvest gathering at the Clouds' farm on Friday evening. The ambiguity of our interactions with the dead as both frightening and healing.]

Nearly all of the holidays we celebrate are hybrids, but none more so than what we call Halloween, which is a conglomeration of beliefs and customs drawn from many different sources. As Patricia Montley describes it in her book titled *In Nature's Honor*, the ancient pagan observance of Samhain was "a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet. These encounters might be pleasant if ancestors had been treated with respect, if offerings of food were left out for them, and if 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 all sorts of mischief without being detected.' Like other turning-point festivals, Samhain offered a license to behave inappropriately, sometimes exceeding the [boundaries] of rank or class." [pp. 299-300]

Later, the back-to-back Christian celebration of All Souls and All Saints days at this same time added a new element to the interplay between the living and the dead. Unfortunate souls who were trapped in Purgatory could benefit from the prayers of the living on earth, as well the saints in heaven. These interventions on behalf of departed loved ones included the giving of 'soul cakes' to poor people, especially children, who went begging door-to-door. "Among people whose cultural inheritance included a pagan festival [Samhain] 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." [Montley, p. 303]

"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." [quoted by Montley, p. 311]

What wonderful examples of the multiple levels of meaning that undergird our holiday celebrations. Isn't it interesting that our materialistic American culture has added its own new level of meaning by making Halloween the second most commercially lucrative holiday of the year? Our celebration of Halloween 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. This mixture of fear and fascination may explain the popularity of horror films such as the Alfred Hitchcock classic "Psycho" and more recent low-budget blockbusters such as "The Blair Witch Project" and the current hit movie "Paranormal Activity." We have come to view death as the ultimate horror. Modern medicine has contributed to this attitude by viewing death as the ultimate failure of its heroic efforts to preserve life at all costs. Dr. Sanjay Gupta, the widely respected chief medical correspondent for CNN News, has just published a book titled *Cheating Death*, about the ways modern medicine can preserve life in the face of imminent death. As much as I admire Dr. Gupta's skill in explaining medical procedures to the general public, I cannot accept his premise that averting death should be the most important goal of medicine.

Is there a way to view death as something other than ultimate failure or ultimate horror? Let me turn now to a just-released book titled *Love and Death* by the 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. (Let me also call your attention to an opportunity for further reflection on this book as noted on the back of today's order of service.)

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]

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.** Today we can honor their spirit and incorporate their courage into our own lives—a courage that affirms life even in the face of death. Let me invite now you into a spirit of reverence:

O Spirit of Life, bless us and those who have gone before.
 Today we bring memories of loved ones who have died.
 Today we share the joys and sorrows that come with the cycle of the seasons,
 For this is the time to remember, to honor, and to hold the spirits of our loved ones.
 Breathe into this moment. Know that we are in the company of All Saints, All Souls.
 Let the presence of those you have loved fill your heart.
 Be strengthened by the guiding hand of the grandfathers.
 Be nurtured by the compassion of our great grandmothers.
 Feel the spirits of the young, who also belong to us.
 And be inspired by the . . . company of witnesses here gathered.
 Let us hold close those who have shown us the way.
 May our memories be not a burden of sorrow but a source of joy and renewed spirit.
 For we walk where they have walked and we carry on their dreams.
 May this house be a sanctuary and a resting place.
 May it also be a place of preparation—a place to learn generosity, gentleness, trust, and integrity.
 A place to know that we are blessed.

[Lynn Thomas Strauss, in Edward Searl (ed.), *Beyond Absence*, p. 187]

Let me now invite you to join me in a responsive reading, # 721, followed by an opportunity for you to say the names of those whose memory you would like to honor.

Responsive Reading # 721