

First Unitarian Church

October 29, 2017

We are so lucky here in New Mexico to live in a place with many layers of culture and history mingling together.

Green chile cheese burgers, you guys. But not just those.

In much of the US, this week will be all about Halloween. But people in New Mexico will also celebrate Day of the Dead, aka Dia de Muertos or Dia de los Muertos.

And... in Albuquerque next Sunday afternoon we have the Muertos y Marigolds parade to look forward to.

Next Sunday morning, there will even be a couple of professional face-painters in the children's religious education building just across the courtyard, to help us get ready. There's a note in the Order of Service announcements about that. You can book an appointment if you want. A portion of the proceeds supports the kids programs.

I fear that Halloween in the US—Halloween by itself—has become a little bit culturally stale. Do you know what I mean?

We still get into it. Some of us go all out with the spooky décor. Hey, I even covered one wall in the church office in spider webs with giant glittery black spiders.

The holiday is great for community bonding. Lots of people going outside and smiling with their neighbors.

And, you know, for someone coming from another country who has never seen anything like it before, it's definitely a striking cultural experience.

When my kids were little, one time my husband invited a Russian coworker to join us for trick or treating. He was new to the US and had never seen Halloween before.

He was amazed. He stared at the crowd of princesses and superheroes, the bloody "head wounds" and the walking dead and the "nurses" with mini-uniforms that reveal their garter belts, and all the other revealing costumes that high schools send out dress code warnings about.

Dan Savage says that grown-up Halloween is like a Pride Parade for straight people.

"Everybody does this?" our friend asked.

Well, kind of.

But most people have probably forgotten why. The origins, including the spiritual meaning, of Halloween have become disconnected from our celebration of it. That's what I mean by culturally stale.

It's a shame, because those parts of the holiday are so interesting and valuable. Do you know that the spirit of Halloween is related to Day of the Dead, and to similar holidays around the world?

Halloween and Day of the Dead are both traditions that have their roots in ancient cultures that would later be overtaken by Christianity, and both traditions retain some of their pre-Christian imagination and pre-Christian values.

Halloween can be traced back to thousands of years ago, to a time in Western Europe when the ancient Druids were celebrating the feast of Samhain [**Sow**-in]. These Druids were the religious leaders of the Celtic people. They lived in the area we now call France and the British isles.

Samhain was the lord of the dead. The Druids believed they had to sacrifice living beings in order to appease Samhain. In huge bonfires, they would sacrifice animals, and, yes, sometimes people, too.

It was also believed that during that time, during the Feast of Samhain, the boundaries between the living and the dead were blurred. There are places in Ireland that were known as gateways or portals between the world of the living and the world of the dead. You can still visit them.

On October 31st, it was said, ancient graves were opened. The souls of the dead could revisit their homes, where people might light their way with candles or welcome them with special foods. And creatures from the underworld, who usually remained underground, were also set loose to mingle with living people.

Living people acknowledged the presence of these underworld creatures, and sometimes the people even tried to trick the creatures by disguising themselves to look like them. This is believed to be the origin of the tradition of wearing costumes on October 31st.

Then in the seventh or eighth century, when Christianity had come into a lot of power in Western Europe, the Roman Catholic Church tried to replace Samhain with All Saints Day. All Saints Day was also called All Hallows Day, or Halloween. This Catholic day was a celebration of all the saints, known and unknown. The next day, All Souls Day, was a day of prayer for all Christians who had died. Previously, All Saints Day had been celebrated in April. In fact, the eastern orthodox Catholic Church still does. But the Roman Catholic Church moved it to November 1st.

It was an attempt to impose the Christian tradition, but the day before All Hallows Day—October 31st, the traditional day of Samhain—would not quite go away. Instead, it became known as All Hallows Eve, and eventually Halloween. Meanwhile, there was a custom on All Souls Day that children would go door to door offering

prayers. This was called souling. Soulers might then receive a treat called “soul cakes” in return. This is believed to be the origin of trick-or-treating.

I kind of get a kick out of the idea that all this time America has been teaching its children to engage in ancient pagan rituals for the Lord of the Dead and Roy Moore is just mad he can't post the Ten Commandments on a courthouse.

Let's not tell him.

So that's Halloween. And Samhain. All joking aside, a modern version of Samhain is still celebrated apart from Halloween, including in this congregation's Covenant of UU Pagans. Modern Samhain celebrations are more private than public. They may involve an altar, time in nature, remembrance of ancestors and sending messages to them, candles, and prayer. It is part of the theological diversity that is welcome and cherished here.

The story of the Day of the Dead has a few things in common with the story of Halloween. First, there was a more ancient tradition, an Aztec tradition of honoring the goddess Mictecacihuatl (**mik-teh-kah-see-watt**). In Aztec tradition, she presides over Mictlan, the underworld, guarding the bones of the dead.

As in the Celtic world view, the Aztecs did not see death as an ending. According to the Aztecs, death was a continuation of sorts. The way the Aztecs saw it, the phrases “She is alive” and “She is dead” have something in common: the words “She *is*.” Both life and death are states of being. They believed life was a dreamlike state, and it was only in death that a spirit truly awakened. Therefore, death was something to honor. Like the Celts, the Aztecs were also known for human sacrifice.

They originally celebrated a month long festival of the dead, and they did it in early summer, but with the influence of the Spanish, through which the Catholic Church once again imposed Christianity, the tradition became co-mingled with All Saints Day and All Souls Day, the celebration was shortened. It eventually became a three-day celebration called Dia de Muertos, or Day of the Dead.

Today people celebrating Dia de Muertos create personal altars called *ofrendas*, which means offerings. Ofrendas are adorned with photos, flowers, and sugar skulls. As with traditional Samhain, people celebrating the Day of the Dead prepare special foods—in this case the favorite foods of the people who have died. Food is placed on the *ofrenda*, along with the other items. Those same foods, as well as objects that belonged to the deceased, may be taken to the gravesite as gifts.

Originally, Day of the Dead was not celebrated in northern Mexico, where other indigenous people had their own traditions that were different than the Aztecs. But in the 1960's, the Mexican government made it a national holiday to bring the country together, and to honor its indigenous roots.

In New Mexico, which used to be part northern Mexico and where the border crossed families and communities when it was drawn, Day of the Dead is also popular.

One notable aspect of Day of the Dead is the playful spirit of it. Playfulness is another thing it has in common with Halloween.

I love the face-painting, and the whimsical variety of Day of the Dead figurines, little skeletons doing everyday things, like playing guitars, getting married, or driving trucks. They do everything the living do, but in the world of the dead. They are like a mirror image to us.

The goddess Mictecacihuatl (**mik-teh-kah-see-watt**) is still very much present, too, represented in the iconic image of a female skeleton with a crown of brightly colored flowers known as La Calavera Catrina.

Although people still may put on costumes portraying death, or the threat of it, most Americans who celebrate Halloween and not one of the other spiritual holidays along with it—Day of the Dead—do not spend time remembering those who have died, or thinking about connections between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Halloween has kind of lost its authentic connection with death.

That seems a shame because the world of the dead is such an important part of us.

It is important to tend the connections between ourselves and those who have died, and to tend the connection between our own lives, and the intimate, mysterious reality of death that awaits us all.

Harvard Professor of the Comparative and Historical Study of Religion Kimberly Patton points out that:

Recent psychological research has shown that the fundamental urge of those who grieve is to seek to *extend* and strengthen ties with their lost beloved ones, not weaken and attenuate them—contrary to [trite] American [platitudes] of "healing" and "moving on." And it turns out that bereaved persons yearn more, not less, to strengthen such ties as time goes on.¹

There was a beautiful, heartbreaking story last year on the radio show This American Life, about people in Japan experiencing this yearning.² It's a story about survivors of the earthquake and tsunami that happened in in 2011. It killed six times more people than 9-11. A lot of people. Many were never found.

¹ In an interview titled "Who are the Dead and What Do They Want?" with Michelle Bentsman. <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2015/10/29/who-are-dead-and-what-do-they-want>

² "One Last Thing Before I Go: Act I." This American Life. Episode 597. Accessed online October 25, 2017. <<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/597/one-last-thing-before-i-go?act=1#play>>

In one of the towns that lost the most people, Otsuchi, a man who was having a hard time dealing with the death of his cousin tried something creative and interesting. He found an old phone booth, and installed it in his garden. It sits on a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The phone is not connected to any phone lines. It's just sitting there.

The man calls it the "wind telephone." It carries conversations on the wind.

In Japan, the line between the living and the dead is considered to be very thin. It is not unusual for people to stay in touch on a regular basis by making offerings to their deceased loved ones.

And so it happened that soon other people who had heard about the wind telephone began randomly showing up on the man's property.

Five years later, the man estimated that thousands of people from all over Japan had visited the phone booth.

One 71-year-old woman who lost her husband in the tsunami regularly brings her young grandsons. She picks up the receiver and says hello. Then passes it to the boys, who chat into it about going into fourth grade and second grade soon, giving little updates about their lives. They do this in a normal kind of way, as though they were in conversation with any living grandfather. Then they all say goodbye, and hang up.

Others dial a phone number—perhaps the last number they had for their loved one in life. Some listen into the phone without speaking. Some cry. More men than women come to use it, which is interesting, because Japanese men are not known for expressing their feelings very freely. And indeed, in the phone booth people say things like "I love you," and "I miss you;" direct expressions of feelings that are uncommon in Japan, even among women or couples.

One young man visits who lost both of his parents, his wife, his one-year-old son, and his house in the tsunami. Five years after the tragedy he had built a new house, but he tells his family over the wind telephone that without them there, it doesn't mean anything.

He says he wants to hear their voices, but he only hears silence. He apologizes for not being able to save them. He has complicated feelings. Many of us do have complicated feelings toward the deceased. Love, longing, guilt, anger, disappointment, or numbness. It's okay.

Some of the most common phrases people share on the wind telephone are "don't worry about us," and "we are getting through." They want to reassure their loved ones, and protect them from worry or a sense of burden.

In the absence of a wind telephone, many of us still speak to the people we have lost... just in normal conversation. Many of you who've lost loved ones have told me

how natural it feels, and how helpful it is, to speak aloud to them, and you wonder if this is normal. If you doubted it before, now you definitely know it is.

Our deceased loved ones visit us in dreams and visions, too. We see them in signs—a certain song, a certain bird—and we see their hands or their spirits in the events of our lives.

It is natural that this is so.

We all stand in a long procession of ancestors. Many people came before us, more than we can ever imagine, and many will come after. At moments of birth and death, we are gathered together with them at the edges of life, at the limits of our understanding and almost-understanding. When the line between the living and the dead is blurred or thinned, at those moments or in ritual moments or in private conversation or prayer, Los Muertos—the dead—are with us.

Look at the great crowd of people who are with us right now: represented in photos, objects, and flowers.

They are with us in spirit, in our hearts, in our memories, in our days and in our nights. They are part of our lives. They are part of who we are. They are present in our sorrow, and in our celebrations, and through the turning of the seasons. They are a part of the living we still must do, and part of the joy with which we may do it.

So let us dedicate this service to them. And let us dedicate other celebrations this week—our candles and costumes, our sweets and playful parading—also to them.

May they be honored, may their spirits smile upon us, and may they rest in peace.