

November 4, 2007

Remembering Loved Ones: Dia de los Muertos

Dia de los Muertos combines the Roman Catholic rituals of All Saints Day and All Souls Day with 2,000-year-old Mexican Indian traditions. Its genius is that it mixes celebration with mourning. We grieve for those who have died, even as we honor their lives and the ways in which they live on through us. The holiday affirms life and gives us a chance to share our grief. This simple ceremony of remembrance puts us in touch with our place in time and our mortality, and it reminds us that to live is to create a legacy that endures for generations.

Many cultures, throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America have some sort of observance to honor those who have departed. These celebrations often suggest an important truth: the dead don't die, they live on in many ways. Traditional cultures, with their ghosts, and spirits, and reincarnations, may have grasped this important psychological insight, which we, with all our technological wisdom seem to have missed – those who have died are still with us.

In Mexico, Day of the Dead celebrations can be traced back to indigenous peoples such as the Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Maya. Rituals celebrating the deaths of ancestors have been observed by these civilizations for as long as 2500-3000 years. After the Spanish conquest, these indigenous celebrations were combined with the Roman Catholic holidays of All Souls Day and All Saints Day. All Saints Day falls on November 1st and it commemorates all those saints – known and unknown – who have been cleansed and have thus attained the beatific vision of heaven. The night before is Halloween or “All Hallows Eve.” All Souls Day falls on November 2nd, and its purpose is

to pray for the souls of all those who have not yet been cleansed of their sins and thus have not attained heaven. These two rather morbid holidays are also celebrated by Anglicans, Lutherans, some other protestants, and the Eastern Church.

Unlike All Souls and All Saints Days, Dia de los Muertos is typically celebrated joyfully. It is a way of remembering and honoring those who have died; but also of celebrating the continuation of life. For that reason, Unitarian Universalist congregations typically invoke this Mexican tradition, rather than the austere traditional Christian holidays. Those celebrating Day of the Dead construct an altar – or *ofrenda* – on which they place pictures of their departed loved ones, skulls made of sugar, flowers, and candles. Today, we honor this tradition here by also constructing an *ofrenda*, and adorning it with remembrances of the departed. And we take the time to remember them and to hold them lovingly in our hearts.

As I prepared for this celebration of Dia de los Muertos, I started digging in old family keepsakes and pictures, and I began to see in a new way just how it is that my ancestors live on -- in me. I'm not speaking metaphorically or theologically, here – they live in my cells, my genes, my DNA. I held up a picture of my great grandfather as I looked in the mirror, and I could see so many features of his that live on in my face. And as I thought about our combined history, I realized how much I carry in me from my ancestors that I'm not even aware of. Milton Scott, my great-grandfather, and his brother Orlando were Midwest farm boys who fought in the Civil War. They were both soldiers in the Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and they were part of Sherman's army as it made its bloody way through the south. I have copies of Orlando's Civil War journal and of letters Milton wrote from Vicksburg and someplace called Paint Rock, Alabama. Both

Milton and Orlando loved to read and to write, and the constant request in Milton's letters was for the family to send more books. I also have a copy of Milton's book on Prison Reform. As I read their words, I can feel how much of who I am is shaped by choices Milton and Orlando made in their lives a century and half ago.

After the war, they both returned to Ohio and resumed the rural, small town life that the war had interrupted. Milton married Eliza Fant, a recent immigrant from Hull, England, and they settled down to life on a farm. Orlando opened a hardware and seed company, that would eventually grow into Scotts Seed Company. The company still exists, but it's now owned by Ortho Chemical.

My grandfather, Harry Scott worked in a bank in Newark, Ohio, and I have also placed on the *ofrenda* a photo of him and of my grandmother, Ellen Hamilton. As I think about it, I can see so much of these ancestors in my own makeup. There were no preachers that I know of, but I see myself in their love of books, in their emphasis on education for themselves and their children, and in their concern for social justice. Milton Scott wrote extensively on political subjects, usually having to do with some kind of reform. Many of my forebears also were lovers of nature and the out of doors; they spent a great deal of time hiking and camping. Some of them manifested this interest by hunting and fishing, which would not be my choices, but which were ways of spending time in nature in those days. One of my uncles was something of a naturalist, which eventually caused him to become a taxidermist to preserve the bodies animals that his hunting friends had killed.

We can look at our children, and our grandchildren -- if we have them -- and we can see ourselves and our ancestors carried on in them. Just as our ancestors' choices

shaped our lives, our choices shape the lives of future generations. Until now, almost everyone in my family has been from England or Scotland or Ireland, but my daughter is the product of my earlier marriage to a woman from Delhi, India, so she carries a mix of different cultures. My wife Karen's ancestors were Jews who lived in Russia and Poland and who came to this country in the period between the World Wars, and her daughter, Anna, was born out of Karen's marriage to a Peruvian man, and so it goes. Each of us is a product of the generations that preceded us, and each of us passes on the history, memories, and molecular biology that we carry with us.

[Pause]

Celebrating Dia de los Muertos suggests another, equally important, way in which the dead live on with us – in our hearts. People die, but the love we share with them lives on. I also left a memento of my friend Mike on the *ofrenda*. Mike and I worked together as volunteers at the Marine Mammal Center on the Marin headlands. He was a letter carrier in Hayward, but Mike spent most of his spare time caring for seals and sea lions. He stood 6 foot five and weighed 275 lbs. A former football player and Marine, Mike had tremendous physical strength, and he was one of those people can do just about anything. If you wanted something fixed, or you didn't know how to do something, you called Mike. At the same time, he was one of the gentlest, sweetest, most caring, nurturing people I have ever known. He loved everyone, and everyone loved him. At the age of 50, Mike discovered a red spot on his neck that wasn't going away, and he was diagnosed with phase 4 melanoma. Although he fought the cancer heroically, Mike was dead within 2 years.

I was with Mike when he died, and I consider it to be one of the most privileged moments of my life. I know that I will carry Mike's memory in my heart for as long as I live. Mike was clearly failing, and we had just managed to get him home from the hospital and into his own bed. Mike died that very night, surrounded by family and friends. Each one of us was touching him, and we were telling him softly that he was loved and that it was OK to let go. So Mike was held in love as his life ended, and he continues to be held in love by those of us who were close to him. And being there with him when he died was one of the most profound moments of my life.

My experience with Mike convinced me how important it is that we pay attention to the act of dying as an important component of our lives. In several other instances, I have observed that someone seemingly waited to die until he or she could get home from the hospital and into familiar surroundings. I know that this was true of my father when he died. It's as if the person felt that they could let go only after they had gotten out of the hospital and back home. So, it seems to me, we need to pay a great deal of attention to the process of dying in the lives of those around us. We need to treat the process sensitively, with compassion, doing what we can to hold the dying person in caring and love. When we choose to be present with someone who is dying, we enrich our own life, even as we help the dying person to make this difficult passage.

Many religious traditions focus on life after death. Buddhism and Hinduism are premised on the idea that a person will go through a long cycle of death and rebirth until he or she finally reaches some sort of unity with the universe that will enable the person to step off this wheel of existence. Both Christianity and Islam place heavy emphasis on an afterlife. The quality of that afterlife, whether paradise or hell, is determined by how

well people adhered to the rules and mores of their tradition in this life. Among the Abrahamic faiths, belief in resurrection of the dead and an afterlife came along after the time of Jesus. The ancient Jews did not have a particular set of beliefs about life after death; everyone who died went to a place called *Sheol*, but there was no concept of Heaven or Hell, no sense of reward or punishment, and no afterlife.

As Unitarian Universalists we hold diverse views about what happens after the death of our body. Some believe that the soul – whether self-conscious or not -- returns to the cosmos, some believe in other forms of transformation, some believe that death is the end of any form of consciousness. It is sometimes said that we UUs believe in “life before death.” This means, I believe, that we honor those who have gone before us and hold them in our hearts. It also means that we view the time of dying as one of the most important phases of a person’s life, an occasion to be treated seriously and with compassion and sensitivity. Certainly, UUs have been in the forefront of changing society’s attitudes about death toward accepting it as a natural part of life, toward compassionate care for those who are dying, and toward simpler ceremonies that honor the life of the person who has died.

[Pause]

As we join together to celebrate the lives of those who have died, it is important that we also remember the many people who have died violent deaths in recent years. Thousands upon thousands of people have died as nations and cultures play out their deadly power games, and we have developed ways of desensitizing ourselves to these deaths. When I was younger, and served in the military in the Vietnam War, we did this by referring to “body counts,” rather than to dead human beings. Those counts

doubtless included many civilian men, women, and children, and the terminology tended to hide the fact that these were real people who had died violent deaths – people who loved and who were loved, who had families, and who had the same cares and concerns that we have.

Today, we refer to our ability to carry out precision bombing and “surgical strikes,” and when civilians are killed, we call it “collateral damage.” In the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, civilians who are killed remain faceless, and we content ourselves with the notion that they are merely “collateral damage.” But they too were people just like us, who loved each other, had their families, and went about their daily lives. As Rosemary Ruether, one of my seminary professors said, “one side’s collateral damage is the other side’s loved ones.” The same holds for American military men and women, We have become desensitized to the fact that these are real people with ordinary lives who make up the daily casualty figures.

And of course it is never the leaders, the ones who decide to go to war, who end up dying violent deaths – it is always the little people, whether combatants or civilians. It is ordinary men, women and children who die violently, and who end up as “body counts” or as “collateral damage.” The sheer human cost of going to war is staggering. Ordinary people die sudden, agonizing deaths. Men, women, and children die for no other reason that they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And Americans die too, young men and women give their lives, and the body bags come home. How far have we gotten from recognizing the grim reality of death – the once-hopeful lives that are brutally shattered, the broken bodies, the dead children? What will

it take to make us recognize that death is serious business and that causing it in the name of a policy or doctrine is wrong?

[Pause]

So, as we celebrate this Dia de los Muertos, let us remember and honor all those who have gone before us.

We carry them in our genes and in our hearts.

And let us honor and respect our children and the generations still to come who will carry our memory into the future.

And let us lift up those who live every day under the threat of violent death, the little people, the ordinary people, who are always the ones to do the dying.

Let us remember our ancestors; let us remember our loved ones;

Let us remember!

May it be so! Amen!