

Day of the Dead
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
October 26, 2008

(Prior to the opening responsive reading): Beloved ancestors, we welcome you into our sacred space here today. You are invited here. You are welcome here. Come into this time, come into this space, come into our hearts and minds. We thank you for your gifts: our lives, our families.

Responsive reading #718

Opening Hymn #27 “I am that great and fiery force”

Story “Ghost Wings,” by Barbara M. Joesse

Ofrenda Table

(Hand out fallen tree leaves)

Here in the United States, we usually don't like to talk about death. The images of death we tend to see are either scary ones in horror movies, or sterile and clinical events tucked away in a hospital. Rarely in our culture do we see it as something normal, and even more rarely do we celebrate it as part of the cycle of life. But in many parts of Mexico, that's exactly what they do.

Death is part of the cycle of life. When we leave the scary movie theaters and sterile hospitals behind, we discover that death is as natural as birth. Here in the northern hemisphere, especially at this time of year, tree leaves are a reminder of both the beauty and the fragility of life. I'm handing out leaves this morning so that you, too, may be reminded of the beauty and the fragility of life. In a little while I will invite you to come forward with your photographs and mementos, if you brought them. I know we gave you late notice in the Friday email update, so for those of you who were not able to bring anything, I invite you to take a leaf to share on the Ofrenda Table.

The Ofrenda Table is set up in preparation for the “Day of the Dead” as an altar to honor ancestors. The Ofrenda Table often has photographs of family or friends who have died, with items and mementos the dead person used or enjoyed.

500 years ago, when Spanish soldiers landed on the shores of what we now call “Mexico,” they encountered Aztec people celebrating a ritual that seemed to mock death. The Spaniards considered death as the end of life, but the Aztecs considered death a continuation of life. Instead of fearing death, they embraced it. To them, life was a dream, and only when they died did they become truly awake.

This ancient celebration, a combination of European Christianity and native Aztec ritual, comes to us today in the form of the celebration called “Day of the Dead.” Families go to the gravesites of loved ones who have died and celebrate by telling stories of the person and eating

their favorite foods. Sugar skulls are decorated and eaten, and special bread, known as “Pan de Muerto,” is baked in the shape of bones and covered with sugar. Eating sugar skulls and Pan de Muerto are symbols of eating death, taking ownership of death. The offerings of sugar skulls and bread are a kind of communion between the people and the ancestors – a way of showing that the bonds of love are still present.

In the “Ghost Wings” story, the granddaughter tells how the butterflies leave the Magic Circle of her area of Mexico every spring and return every fall. Those Monarch butterflies are remarkable. They winter in the mountains of Mexico, roosting in fir forests to gain strength for their migration north. Around the time of Easter, they ride the winds to Texas where they lay eggs on the underside of milkweed leaves. Each parent butterfly dies, leaving up to four hundred eggs to hatch a few days later. Within two weeks, that caterpillar becomes a new Monarch butterfly, and continues the migration north, and the cycle repeats itself. This cycle repeats itself five times, with the fifth generation being born in the northern United States and Canada. Then that fifth generation leaves its northern home and flies up to two thousand miles to return to Mexico.

But the amazing thing is that this fifth generation is “returning home” to a place it has never been before. They return to Mexico during the “Day of the Dead,” and many people believe they carry the souls of the old ones – the relatives who have died. It may or may not be that they carry the souls of the human dead, but in a very real sense they carry the souls of their own ancestors with them. That fifth generation each year has never been to Mexico – and in fact, only one in five generations is even *born* in Mexico – and yet, they know exactly where to return.

Whether it is in our DNA or in a spiritual psyche, I believe each of us is shaped in part by events that happened long before we were born, and we have a sense about where we need to go in order to return “home,” even if home is a place we’ve never been before. In fact, that is exactly how many of us found a spiritual home in a Unitarian Universalist church.

One ancestor who helped make us who we are today as a people of faith was Michael Servetus. Michael Servetus was born in Spain in 1511, later becoming a doctor. After reading the bible for the first time, he wrote to Martin Luther and John Calvin to enlighten them after discovering that the Jesus he read about in the bible was far different from the doctrinal Jesus he recited in the Christian creeds. His letters were not well received. So, as a man of twenty years old, when his letters failed to move the learned elders, he wrote and published an impertinent book with the modest title, *On the Errors of the Trinity*.

In this book, Michael Servetus argued that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of God, but that there was only One Eternal God, a Unitary God, not a three-person Trinity. And those “enlightened” Protestant reformers, who so recently had been persecuted themselves by the Catholic rulers, turned right around and persecuted Michael Servetus in return. Eventually they arrested him, imprisoned him, brought him to trial on doctrinal heresy, and when he was 42 years old, they burned him at the stake. It is appropriate that we remember him on this Day of the Dead, for not only was he a martyr for his Unitarian beliefs, but tomorrow is the anniversary of this death, which took place 455 years ago on October 27, 1553.

So today, as we remember our spiritual and family ancestors, I invite you to bring forward your photographs or mementos or leaves at this time. In honor of your loved one, I invite you to recognize in the leaf a kindred spirit of something that lived in usefulness or even in beauty, and now may rest in our memories in a place of honor on the Ofrenda Table.

Candles of Remembrance

“Grandmother’s Gift” is one of generosity. She has lived a full life, and recognizes it is time for her to leave, and to make room for the next generations to come through. But when she dies, she is not forgotten. When she dies, her family continues to tell stories about her, and her body nurtures the soil to bring new life and new fruit into the world. Her life was vibrant, and her death helped to provide a way for new life.

Today I set up a photograph of my father, and I also brought some leaves from his tree. My father had a liver disease that lasted eight years. At the end, when he was in hospice, my mom and my brother and I were all sitting with him in the hospital room when he died. I was very glad I could be there with my family when he died, and very glad that my father did not die alone.

After he died, we had his body cremated. He died in February, but later that spring, on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, we held a memorial ceremony for him and planted a tree on the church property in Davenport, Iowa. We opened the box that held my dad’s ashes and scattered them around the roots of the tree. I still have friends in Davenport, and now, every year or two, I make it back down there for a visit and I stop by my father’s tree for a few minutes. I stand next to his tree and listen to the wind blow through the leaves. I touch the trunk and remember my dad’s life. I remember his work as a minister, and I remember his love for me. His love reminds me once again about the love I can share with my family and the world.

Lighting a candle is said to be like the beginning of a life. If that is true, then perhaps extinguishing a candle is like the ending of a life. But death is not the end of us. We live on in the memories of friends and loved ones. The influence we possessed in life lives on – moving and shaping persons and families and society long after our individual candle is extinguished. I invite you at this time to call out the names of those you want to remember this day. I will light a candle for each name.

May the blessings of life be upon us and upon all whom we meet.
May the memories we have honored here give us hope for the future.
May the quality of our lives be our benediction.
Go in peace.