

Day of the Dead

Good morning.

This week we celebrated Halloween. We all have the leftover candy to prove it. In the Christian tradition—at least some versions of it—all Hallow's Eve is followed by All Saint's Day, and by All Soul's Day, a day to remember the dead. I have never been part of a Christian church that celebrates those holidays, so Halloween remains a secular occasion for me.

This is the time of year celebrated as Samhain by Pagans. In the earth-centered tradition, Samhain is halfway between the fall equinox (the festival of Mabon) and the winter solstice (the holiday of Yule). In our yearly orbit around the sun, that's where we are. The children's story today gave us a sense of this holiday.

In Mexico, a modern holiday called Dia de Muertos has evolved from older traditions, and has gained popularity in recent years. Families may create an altar to the dead with photos and flowers and food. Here is a quotation from Octavio Pas that gives a sense of the holiday and the spirit behind it:

The word 'Death' is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London because it burns the lips. The Mexican in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about, caresses it; it is one of his favorite toys and most steadfast love.¹

That's an interesting assertion about the difference between Anglo / European culture and Mexican or Hispanic culture. I identify as Anglo, as a "gringo", and it's true for me that death isn't something that I talk about readily. People in the communities I've been part of often use euphemisms: we say that someone "passed away" or "passed on" instead of saying that they died. To say that a person died feels a little bit blunt, almost impolite. But according to the quotation, that's not the case in Mexican culture. Which brings us to this day: the day of the dead, All Soul's Day, Samhain, Dia de los Muertos, on this day we allow ourselves to be close to death and to those who have died.

I like this idea, of welcoming death as part of life. Also, the idea of inviting loved ones who have died to be present in our lives. This is essentially what we are doing with our service today: the words of remembrance that we have spoken about Prad and Vicki; the silent memories we have awoken about our other loved ones. We have our own altar of sorts in the form of our Tree of Life in the hallway.

I don't know what happens when people die. Jackson Browne wrote a song that speaks to this:

*Don't know what happens when people die
Can't seem to grasp it as hard as I try
it's like a song that I hear playing right in my ear
that I can't sing, and I can't help listening.*

*And I can't help feeling stupid standing around
crying as they ease you down
because I know you'd rather we were dancing....²*

Some people believe that we go on to another life. I don't know what will happen to me, but I believe there is some form of energy that continues, in a way that I don't understand and don't have words for, just like there is energy flowing through my body now in ways that I don't understand or have words for: psychic energy, spiritual energy.

I do believe that we live on in the memories of others. I do believe that our energy, if you will, is felt after we are gone. This place is different because Vicki and Prad were here, they breathed here, they laughed and talked here.

Who have you lost?

How are they alive to you now?

With the leaf that you took, I invite you to take it home as a reminder of this moment—you could press it between the pages of a book—or you can take it with you and return it to Mother Earth in a deliberate and meaningful way for you-- or you can leave it in front of the tree of life in the hallway as a community altar to those who have died in our fellowship.

I will close with this prayer:

May we welcome the spirit and the energy of those who have gone before and are no longer with us. When we feel sad and alone, may we be comforted by the divine within, the divine beyond us in mystery, and the divine connection between us in community. May it be so.

¹Paz, Octavio, 1961. Quoted in "Día de Los Muertos Reflects Cultural Revival" retrieved at <https://www.expressnews.com/opinion/commentary/article/D-a-de-los-Muertos-reflects-cultural-revival-14496837.php>

² Browne, Jackson. "For a Dancer." Asylum Records, 1974.