

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

November 1, 2020

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Day of the Dead

Last night was Halloween, All Hallow's Eve. Therefore today is All Saint's Day, followed by All Souls Day in some Christian traditions. And the name of the poem we just heard was "All Souls" by May Sarton. Thank you Jessica for choosing that poem and sharing it with us.

In Mexico, this is Dia de Muertos, the holiday when families make an altar to their ancestors and offer gifts to the spirits of the dead...as we observed in the story that Kendra shared with us this morning.

And in the neo-Pagan tradition, this is the time of Samhain, the half-way point between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. Like Halloween, like Dia de Muertos, Samhain is thought to be a time when the world of the dead is close to the world of the living, when we have access to the spirits of the dead.

And that's exactly what we have done through the magic we performed at the beginning of this hour. We spoke (or whispered) the names of our loved ones, our friends, who have passed from this life. We lit a candle to represent their presence in energetic form here. Let's remember right now the names that we spoke. Whose spirit, whose energy did you invite into this circle? Through our intention that person is here.

I say that we have access right now to the wisdom that person offered us when they were alive. Whatever love or inspiration that person gave you when they were alive, you can have that now. Any learning or support that came from that person is here now, because we have welcomed that person here in memory and in spirit. This is real.

The message that I heard in the poem just now is that we are interwoven with our loved ones even in death, and Kendra's story said the same thing. The poem says that mourning never ends. This can be interpreted pessimistically, that the pain and sadness of loss never end; but I also think that it means the positive connection felt with someone we love doesn't end.

For those of us who are experiencing grief, I am offering a grief support group that will be starting soon. Please let me know if you are interested, because I will use your input to decide what day and time the meetings will be held. I'm thinking twice per month. And while I am talking today about death and the grieving that comes with it, the grief support group is for any kind of grieving. I know that in this pandemic many of us are grieving the loss of many things. If you are going through grief and you want support, you will be welcome in this group.

The only thing that I want to add this morning to what we have already heard, through the story, through the poem, and through Karin's words of remembrance for her father, is to offer an additional perspective on death through the lens of the practice of Yoga, and through the Buddhist tradition.

Yoga: Savasana, the Corpse Pose

When I have practiced yoga, almost every time at the end of the hour we end with a pose called *savasana*. This is a relaxing pose, you lie on your back and totally relax everything. It's a resting pose. And *savasana* is called the corpse pose.

Usually the yoga teacher will give instructions for *savasana*, saying: “relax your whole body...feel the weight of your body on the yoga mat.” She sometimes says, “now relax the space between your eyebrows.” I don’t know how she knows that I am tense between my eyebrows, but she knows—because she’s a yoga teacher.

But sometimes, in my experience, the yoga teacher will give other instructions in corpse pose. She will say, “now imagine the body melting away. Imagine that only bones remain. Now imagine the bones turning to dust and blowing away.” This meditation as part of *savasana*, the corpse pose, is either alarming and scary or very freeing. And this is my connection to the Buddhist idea of non-attachment.

Buddhism: Non-Attachment

Buddhist wisdom teaches us that the suffering in life—that familiar feeling of suffering that every human knows—comes from attachment. Attachment to things and feelings and experiences leads to suffering, and non-attachment is the way to enlightenment and peace. For example, I might be craving a cookie, and in my attachment to the idea of wanting a cookie I suffer—should I have one or not? Is it bad if I do? Non-attachment allows me to experience the peaceful reality that I don’t need a cookie, that I am just fine with the cookie or without the cookie.

Of course, we are attached to many things in life: success, money, material things, exciting experiences, a certain identity. Buddhists say that letting go of all these attachments is healthy. We are even attached to our health, to our bodies....to life itself. The ultimate non-attachment, therefore, is to give up our attachment to life. This is the wisdom of the corpse pose meditation.

As Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun, says, the goal of her meditation is to come to the awareness that “When death comes, I will be ready.” Another way that she talks about it is, “Since death is certain, and the timing of death is uncertain, therefore how should I live?”

When I realize that I am going to be dead sooner or later, my body turning to bones and to dust, it helps me to see that I am alive now. This moment is the only moment I have access to. There is no other time but now; there is no other place but right here.

“Since death is certain, and the timing of death is uncertain, therefore how should I live?”

I might as well live to the fullest in this moment, because it’s the only one I have: the fullest loving, the fullest honesty, the fullest compassion, the fullest connection, the fullest vigor to make myself the best self that I can be and to spread love and joy in the world wherever I go.

May it be so in the time of Samhain. May it be so on All Saint’s Day. May it be so on Dia de Muertas. May it be so for all of us every day.