

# *Dancing With Lady Death Remembrance Service*



## *Morning Celebration*

Sunday, November 2, 2008

***“This is what the Dia de los Muertos reminds us of, and this is its power. A 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.” – Bringing the Dead to Life by Peter Morales***

### **Call To Community                      Susan**

Welcome this morning to our service of Remembrance and our celebration of the co-mingling of life and death. We welcome those who are with us this morning as we remember their loved ones interred in the Memorial Garden.

Our service this morning is inspired by the Mexican tradition of El Dia De Los Muertos or the Day of the Dead. This celebration is a joyful one, not mournful in any way. Our opening words echo that spirit:

In memory of them we sing their songs within us,  
Gathering all their dreams we carry in our bones.  
Their songs will lead us on,  
Their dreams shape us,  
And their light will guide us home.

We light on the altar of our hearts,  
A flame of memory and hope  
To hearten our struggle and guide  
Our weary steps in the path of peace.

**Chalice Lighting** Mary Lou Greene

gives a brief narrative of the Memorial Garden and the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Garden and leads the chalice lighting:

**In unison: “In search for truth and the spirit of love we unite for worship and fellowship.**

**Reading of the Names** by Tom Seluga and Joan Pipkins

*Unitarian Church of Staten Island  
Memorial Garden Interments  
2002-2008  
We remember*

*William Livingston Payne  
Jeffrey Mark Santlofer  
Horace Elliot Colpitts  
Lynn Korenblit  
Guy Erlandsen  
Richard T. Myhre  
Abraham Korenblit  
Lewis H. Hayes  
E. Joyce Musacchio  
Roger R. Hawkins  
Charles Murray Cossey  
Norma E. Cossey  
Marjorie O'Brien Rapaport  
Walter Persans  
Benjamin M. Jacobs*

**Story For All Ages** Steve Nutt

Tells the story of his great grandfather and how he inspired him to follow his calling to be a craftsman. Invites people to consider during this service the figures that inspire each person and why.

Will you join me in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving:

O Spirit of Life, we give thanks for each gift given—an hour spent volunteering, a song sung with a cheerful heart, a kind word spoken, and sharing out of the abundance of our lives. We give thanks for each of these and hundreds of other precious and meaningful gifts. Amen and blessed be.

Reading        *Names by Danusha Lameris*  
Read by Steve Nutt

What happens to the ones that fall out of favor:  
the Dorises and Archibalds,  
the Theodores and Eunices?  
They all had their day,  
once roamed the earth in multitudes  
alongside Gertie and Wyatts,  
as though there would always be  
at least one in every classroom.  
Names written in neat block print,  
scratched into tree bark side by side,  
engraved on heart-shaped lockets,  
or filling the morning paper  
with weddings and engagements.  
How could they have known  
it was their last hurrah?  
That one by one the Constances  
and Clydes would disappear,  
replaced by Jennifers, Jacobs,  
Ashleys, and Aidens?  
That few would ever dance again,  
corsage pinned neatly to their breasts,  
or hear their names on the radio  
read by the DJ in whispered dedication,  
or uttered in darkness  
by a breathless voice,  
or even shouted out in anger—  
“Seymour! Seymour!”—  
as they grabbed the keys and stormed out the door?  
Each name would fade quietly from daily life  
as though it had never existed,  
except for the letters etched into gray stone,  
warmed by the sun in the day,  
at night light by a crescent moon.”

**Homily**        *Dancing With Lady Death*        Rev. Susan Karlson

About ten years ago, I had a dream that I titled “The Matriarchal Graveyard.” In my dream, I went to the cemetery and saw old daguerreotypes of the matriarchs in my family tree. As I watched, the photographs came to life and began to move, telling each woman’s story. I realized from this dream that I was a part of the ongoing stream of my family. I didn’t really know most of them and yet a bit of their DNA resides in me, connecting us through the ages.

Nobel Peace prize winner Octavio Paz contrasts the Mexican attitude towards the dead with most of modern western society:

“To the resident of New York, Paris or London, the word Death is never pronounced because it burns the lips. Mexicans, on the other hand, frequent it, caress it, they keep it, they celebrate it; it is one of their favorite games and their most permanent love.” (from *Labyrinth of Solitude* quoted in

[http://www.carla.umn.edu/articulation/polia/pdf\\_files/celebratingthedayofdead.pdf](http://www.carla.umn.edu/articulation/polia/pdf_files/celebratingthedayofdead.pdf)).

Day of the Dead comes from a cross-pollination between the pre-Hispanic and Spanish Catholic practices. The Aztecs celebrated a festival honoring a goddess known as the Lady of the Dead. The Spanish brought Catholic practices with them including All Hallows’ Eve which occurred during the harvest celebration when the Celts lit bonfires to drive away “evil spirits.” The early Christian church incorporated the Celtic festivals into this same time of the year—first for All Saints Day, commemorating those who died serving the “Church and humanity.” Centuries later, November 2<sup>nd</sup> became All Souls Day, set aside to remember “all people who had died.”

All Souls Day marked a time when people believed the dead might come back as “witches, toads, or ghosts” and haunt those they “believed had hurt” them. People began dressing up so the dead wouldn’t recognize them. This practice fostered our dressing up in costumes around Halloween.

The origins of Halloween belie its emphasis on the scary aspects of death. In contrast, a Day of the Dead celebration weaves together the generations and allows people to honor and share the stories of their loved ones in their community.

When we go into the Parish Hall to place photos or mementos on our altar or ofrenda, you’ll notice four elements. First, there is water for the thirsty family members who have traveled from the land of the dead. The water on our ofrenda was collected during our Water Ceremony at the beginning of the year. The bread of the dead comes from the earth and is meant to remind the loved ones of the aroma of fresh bread that can appease their hunger. The wind moves the colorful tissue paper decorations that bring a sense of mirth and joy and finally fire purifies as in the candles lit in honor of the ancestors’ names. Bright marigolds also are native to Mexico and provide a source of beauty and color on the ofrenda.

These practices may seem naïve as if the dead can consume food, see lit candles or hear music. If we focus on the literal beliefs, we lose the larger meaning of this celebration.

We don’t need to appropriate holidays like Day of the Dead but we do need to find ways, as indigenous people have known for centuries, how to cope with the difference between our biological urge to survive and our growing awareness that death will surely come to all of us. Modern medicine and the latest technologies can add decades to our lives, but not immortality. Today’s fifty year old may feel like they are only thirty in energy and outlook as some celebrities claim but we all will dance with Lady Death at some time.

If we dismiss this life-affirming celebration as mere superstition, we set ourselves up as being superior. My colleague, Peter Morales mentions that “a Mexican boy spending the night at his uncle’s grave has a connection across time with his forebears that our children do not.” We can be instantly in touch with someone thousands of miles away through technological communications devices, yet Morales says, “we have cut ourselves off from the web of time. Traditional cultures, with their mediums and ghosts

and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we've repressed: the dead don't die; they live on."

The dead live on in us. Their influence motivates us as Steve's ancestor prompted him to become skilled craftsmen. My mother's universalist views inspired me to become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

I felt closest to life and death the year I served as the intern minister in Annapolis. That year my mother went through a cancer operation and began chemotherapy. The week after her surgery, my cat Kenny was diagnosed with an inoperable carcinoma. I lived in an apartment next door to the church and Kenny and I would sometimes go down to the memorial garden where we would sit in silence together. There were two inscriptions on that wall that I memorized and meditated on.

One was from Kahlil Gibran's book *The Prophet* and the other from Mary Oliver's poem, *In Blackwater Woods*. The Prophet said, "when you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Mary Oliver wrote, "to live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

Sitting in that garden as in any peaceful place where life and death co-exist, with my cat at my feet or in my lap, those inscriptions provided comfort and wisdom. I learned to treasure a deep soulful connection with another creature, one that trusted me in his final days and hours.

I realized how vulnerable we are when we look on Lady Death and yet how priceless is the treasure of love and companionship, even when that loved one leaves us in the final passage of death. I remember fondly that year when I felt closest to life and death, that time I felt most whole. It was the year I embraced death in that memorial garden, memorizing poems, and finding a home and a calling in the heart of a religious community. I hope that each of you also finds ways to celebrate and remember the dead during this hallowed time of year and as you continue to live the visions and dreams alive in you. May it be so.

## References

*El Dia de los Muertos* by Irma S. Bohorquez-Geisler

*Bringing the Dead to Life* by Peter Morales.

<http://www.uuworld.org/2000/0700feat3.html>

*Pocketful of Miracles* by Joan Borysenko, October 31 entry, Warner Books, 2004.

[http://www.carla.umn.edu/articulation/polia/pdf\\_files/celebratingthedayofdead.pdf](http://www.carla.umn.edu/articulation/polia/pdf_files/celebratingthedayofdead.pdf)

## Ritual of Remembrances

During this service, we acknowledge the wisdom of this ancient tradition of the Day of the Dead, not seeking to recreate their celebration, but finding ways we can remember those we loved dearly or those who inspired us. By this remembrance ceremony, we honor what is still alive within us and we give thanks to our loved ones for their gifts to our ongoing growth and well-being.

All of you gathered here this morning are invited to share a photograph or memento with the congregation, tell us **your** name, and the **name** and **significance** of your loved one to you in a brief sentence or two.

## **Recessional When The Saints Go Marching In**

For our recessional, the musicians are going to lead us into the Parish Hall playing “When The Saints Go Marching In”. In the Parish Hall, you may place your photographs or mementos on the ofrenda or altar as we continue to process into the Memorial Garden for a brief blessing of remembrance and celebration of the seventh anniversary of the Memorial Garden.

### **7<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Memorial Garden Founding**

by The Rev. Susan Karlson

We come to this Memorial Garden  
Full of life,  
Life that our loved ones bequeathed us.  
Here we find peace and comfort through all the seasons—  
In summer when the apple tree is heavy with fruit,  
In the dappled sunlight of autumn when the leaves are underfoot,  
In winter when the snows bear down hard on the trees  
And the ground is frozen as we walk,  
And in spring when the birds find a nest for their young.

They once knew these seasons,  
they laughed and sighed, loved and cried.  
They shared their joys and sorrows with us.  
Their story lives on in us.

We cannot forget them  
For they are here in  
The cricket’s chirp  
And the rustling of leaves.  
If we are quiet for just a moment,  
We will hear the echoes of their laughter  
Or their favorite song.  
We visit this garden of remembrance  
And we are suddenly more awake,  
More alive.  
Stay still and quiet for a moment  
And feel their presence. (pause)  
Stay still and feel your own heart beat. (pause)  
Bless this day that we are all alive together,  
Joined with those we remember—always!

We shared in reading the names again in a circle in the garden.