

Our Beloved Dead
Reverend Cyndi Simpson
A Ritual at the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, November 5, 2017

This month our worship theme is *Abundance*.

Going to explore that in several ways.

Next week we are going to explore this theme by considering: *What does it mean to be a People of Abundance?*

And especially, what does it mean to be a people of abundance when the times do feel so perilous in our nation and the world. We remain in uncharted waters, nationally, in a place where we have never been before as a country. And all the uncertainty and horror about the destruction of our values and our democracy that is happening every single day. What could possibly feel “abundant” about that? We will find out.

On November 19th, we will be celebrating Thanksgiving through a Bread Communion. So, all of you are invited to bring a bit of bread that represents a family and/or cultural tradition for you – and we will share that.

Today, we are remembering Our Beloved Dead. All of those beings in our lives that we have lost to death. The beings for whom we mourn and grieve.

Today, we wonder together:

What in the world could possibly be abundant about death and the loss of humans and creatures whom we grieve every day?

The dominant culture of the United States is not one that has a lot of comfort with death. Our main religion, Christianity, has many branches that proclaim that along with death comes the threat of Hell. Of an eternity of torment for those that either believe wrongly or act wrongly, however that may be defined. Many branches of Christianity no longer believe that. Still strong in our culture.

The Universalist side of our Unitarian Universalist faith were the people who denied the existence of Hell altogether, who believed that all were saved from Hell. Every single person of all times and places. Though we are no longer a Christian faith, that heritage of redemption for all is in our religious DNA.

So for many reasons, including the fear of what would happen after death, the dominant culture of the United States has been left with fear, discomfort and unease about death. It's not something we are comfortable talking about.

And this leaves us isolated from our own human feelings. We might try to stifle our grief or contain it or control it. And that is really not possible and not helpful.

Of course, people in other religious traditions and cultures fear the loss that death brings. Of course, they grieve with all the pain of human feelings. Yet, there are some other ways of understanding and perceiving death, quite different from what is most common in the United States.

And today, we are going to hear a bit about those other ways of responding to death and also remember Our Beloved Dead in a different kind of way. We will build an altar to Our Dead and connect with the ABUNDANCE they have left us. Their legacy of belief, knowledge, wisdom, experience and love.

People have celebrated festivals commemorating the dead for millennia. For many ancient people, the final harvest, the end of the agricultural and pastoral year, also marked the end of the calendar year. At this time they acknowledged the end of the cycle of the earth's seasons and gave thanks for its gifts. Often this was a time to acknowledge the human lives that had come to an end and to give thanks for their many gifts of love and learning.

These celebrations were certainly religious in nature. For many ancient and modern cultures, there is no separation between the mundane, or the everyday and the sacred. It's all one reality, with the sacred and the ordinary merged in all aspects of life.

Samhain, the Celtic New Year and beginning of winter, celebrated on October 31 and November 1, was the central feast in the Celtic calendar, a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet. With the dead offering insight and wisdom to the living.

In the Christian tradition, the celebration of the dead moved around a bit and settled on November 2, celebrated as the Feast of All Souls. On All Souls Day, people go to cemeteries and light candles and pray for the souls of their Beloved Dead. Here is an image of All Souls evening in Poland.

Last year at around this time, we learned about El Dia de Muertos, the Day of the Dead, celebrated in Mexico and other Central and South American countries. For El Dia de Muertos, people construct elaborate altars in their homes commemorating their Beloved Dead. The altar will have the deceased's favorite foods and other possessions, candles for and images of the saints, flowers and many other symbolic decorations. The Day of the Dead is observed also by going to the cemetery and decorating the graves and holding vigils. People will tell stories and jokes about the lives of the dead. They might invite a mariachi band to the graveside to play favorite songs. They will also cry and lament, as well as remember with joy and laughter.

In China and many other countries in Southeast Asia, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, the Ghost Festival is celebrated for an entire month. During this time, it is believed that the dead come back from the afterlife to visit the living. This includes not only distant ancestors, who are revered, but also those more recently dead. There are ritual meals held and offerings made to the dead of clothing, money and food. At the end of the Ghost Festival, paper lanterns are floated on water to guide the ghosts back to their homes in the afterlife.

Although there are many differences among these various religious traditions, there are some common themes:

- The observances are not only about mourning the dead, but remembering them through stories and through their lives: their favorite foods, clothing, activities and music. There is the joy of remembrance as well as grief.
- The observances often occur around the time of the harvest – so the abundance of what the dead have given as a legacy to friends and family is celebrated along with the abundance of the harvest. These

legacies include remembering the love, the wisdom and the teachings they passed on to those who knew them

- These celebrations often include prayers and rituals for the safety and happiness of the dead in the afterlife.

In none of these celebrations is there an element of fear, but mostly an acceptance of death as a natural part of life. And the belief that the dead are still with us. For some cultures, this is meant literally. That especially during these celebrations, the dead are with us again. It is also understood that the dead are with us through the way we remember them and what they have given to us. In that sense, these celebrations are truly celebrations of abundance and love, as well as grief and sadness.

Building the Altar

Going to build the altar to our beloved dead.

I'm going to ask you to come forward to place the photos and other mementoes of the dead on the altar.

I'm going to ask you to come forward. Take your time. Be reverent. Start at the front, and then folks behind come forward as others finish. Not one at a time, but as groups.

Before we do that, want to take a few minutes in silence.

Want you to think about your Beloved Dead –

What did you learn from them?

What do you cherish most about their memories?

And those of you who may not have remembered to bring something – on the seats in the middle aisle are cards and pens. You may write the names of your Beloved Dead on them for the altar.

Please come forward, those of you in the front rows. Come up the middle. Then as you are done, head back down the side aisles. Take your time in reverence.

Together we have honored Our Beloved Dead.

Please hear these words from Leslie Takahashi:

In the daily weave of our lives, those who have died are still strong, guiding threads.

Theirs is the golden glimmer or perhaps the brilliant red or the melancholy blue

—still they are part of the whole cloth of our lives.

They are the ancestors: the “goers before.”

Through this, we know immortality.

*In the **hour-to-hour** rush of our daily tasks,*

they travel with us through something they taught us which is now ours to do,

through something they loved which is now ours to carry out,

through something we shared which is now ours alone and yet not.

Through this, we know immortality.

*In the **minute-to-minute** grasp of where we are,*

we remember the joys our departed gave us

which opened us up to hope,

*the sorrows we knew together which taught us strength,
the life shared which is now ours to steward.
Through this, we know immortality.*

*In the **second-to-second** pulse of life,
we sense the spirit of those we have loved and lost.
This presence is too shy for naming, too amorphous for full knowing
and yet as real as the days we shared.
Through this, we know immortality.*

*They are more than remembered, they are memory itself.
For what we love lives on in the way our beloved dead accompany us through our life
—their words and wisdom our guide,
their humor our relief, their restless concern for the world our charge.
Through this, we know immortality.*