

**DIA DE LOS MUERTOS**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**November 2, 2014**

**Opening Words**

Our opening hymn speaks these traditional words:

For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
Who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
Thy name most holy be forever blest.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

And a modern poet speaks to us:

In the quiet before cockcrow when the cricket's  
Mandolin falters, when the light of the past  
Falling from the high stars yet haunts the earth  
And the east quickens, I think of those I love –  
Dear men and women no longer with us. ("Dear Men and Women,"  
By John Hall Wheelock)

**Sermon**

"Hola, mis muertitos!!" Hello, my little dead ones!

In our service today, we honor the spirit of the Mexican festival, Dia de Los Muertos, Day of the Dead. Understanding well that death is a serious issue—terminally so, one could say—we humans can and do choose to embrace it, laugh with it, celebrate all who have gone before us. For we know that we, too, will join them, whatever our status or gender or race or wealth or virtue or condition of any kind.

The day of being born and the day of dying are bookends to the same shelf of volumes we call years and experiences.

Today we rejoice and laugh about the wonderful people we have known and loved in our lives. I think of Grandpa Linton, my mom's dad, wiry, crochety, a man who could fix anything—who played cootchie-koo with my one-year-old toddler, and gazed adoringly upon my just-born infant in his bed. Who supported me unconditionally, a seventeen-year-old mother of two, and who would also say, "Jesus Christ, babe" to me when he thought I was doing something stupid. Who loved us so.

Or Granny—his ex-wife, my mom's mom—who, according to my mother's story, had hitched a ride to Kansas with her boyfriend, in a freight

car, when Mother was a teen-ager, and dropped out of sight. When I asked her about it, she replied indignantly, "I was only gone two weeks!"

Today, we celebrate Dia De Los Muertos, perhaps the best-loved of all Mexican festivals, a blend of indigenous and Catholic tradition and custom. From Aztec and Mayan ancestors has come the knowledge that souls continue to exist after death, resting placidly in Mictlan, the land of the dead, not for judgment or resurrection; but for the day each year when they can return home to visit their loved ones. Day of the Dead is when the spirits come back to visit, if the living act as facilitators. We miss them and we mourn them, of course—but we rejoice with them every year. God, that spirit of all that is greater than we are yet dwells in all of us, is so present in the lively reverence of Dia de Los Muertos.

What would we be doing, feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, if we were Mexicans, celebrating this joyous dance with death?

This morning's children's story gives us a feel for it.

In my household, Gary, the main cook, will probably have spent time in days before November 2, making *empanadas*, *tamales*. And maybe he had said, "*Esperense!*" to me, when I wanted a taste ahead of time! Perhaps I (who love sugary things) will have baked the *pan de muertos*, bread of the dead, and *calaveras de azucar*, sugar skulls. Maybe we could exchange *una probadita*, a taste, for *una miga*, a crumb, joking fondly with each other as we prepare for this happy holiday.

Besides the cooking, all of us—the grown children, their dear children—will have thought about loved ones who have died, and we will have created our *ofrenda*, our altar of pictures and mementoes, made vivid by bright cloths and the golden marigolds we associate with this fiesta.

On the Day of the Dead, we visit our friends, indulge the children in sugar skulls, express our respect and admiration for other *ofrendas*. We admire Catrina Calavera and her relatives—all of whom are skeletons—who will be eating and drinking and dancing and doing everything human beings can do, only without skin and muscles.

And, we will trek to the cemetery where our dear ones lie, dropping marigold petals, so they can find the way if they become lost. We place salt and water and food on the graves. Musicians play hymns, marimba pieces, funeral marches and lively party music, as priests go about intoning prayers. We sing and we dance and we eat and we drink. We share the happy and funny and poignant memories of those who now live in this place. We are grateful for life and love, our closest connections to the Holy.

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Are we, as we celebrate Dia de Los Muertos with our Mexican friends, indulging in morbidity, or disrespect—or, at the very least, inappropriate behavior?

In our country, we maintain a definite distance between the living and the dead. When someone dies, we send the beloved body immediately to the professionals, who do the washing and dressing, the combing and cosmeticizing, the injecting of chemicals into veins. The services are left completely to a professional (except in some cases, like most Unitarian Universalist ones, where collaboration is the order of the day). Burial is so often in a place that has flat gravestones, so the lawn mowers can get over them—no ornate and unique headstones for us.

We keep our distance, thank you.

Is, then, the whole-hearted reveling of the Day of the Dead a sign of an aberrant people, or at the very least one that makes light of death?

No.

It is true that death is a serious matter. It is true that our hearts are wrung and scarred by the losses we sustain in our lives. This is a fact for all human beings, we who are born here only to die a seemingly-short time later. No amount of sanitizing or reveling can change that very difficult fact. Dying is exactly as much a part of life as is being born.

But: we are human, and we can choose so much, including how to live in a way that honors the “whole catastrophe,” to use the words of Zorba the Greek. We can choose, as do the Mexican people, to laugh and sing and dance with death, life’s unfailing companion. We can throw an arm around the shoulder of Catrina Cavallera, and stroll down the street of life with her clanking beside us, loose-boned and grinning. And we can know that we are the same as she is, she’s just a little farther along.

If we change our habits and begin embracing death as a part of the Great Scheme of Things, we might well find ourselves in the middle of a fuller, richer life. Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church, who died at age 61 with amazing grace, used to tell us that religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. If we look old Death straight in the eye, right in the middle of living as fully as possible—if we know it will visit every single one of us—we are likely to be more loving, more forgiving, more connected with the rest of humanity. More connected to Source of All, the mystery some call God. If we really know that our death and everybody else’s are inevitable, we may follow the advice, “Carpe diem.” Seize the day. “Carpe vivam.” Seize life. Carpe everything.

Let us take inspiration from Dia de Los Muertos. Let us not only refrain from avoiding death, let us give parties for it! Let us know that, when we celebrate a birthday, we are also celebrating getting that much closer to that mysterious event we call death.

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We will close our service today by continuing to create the *ofrenda* our children began. Soon, I will ask anyone who wishes, to bring a memento for our altar and simply say what the item is, and the name and relationship of the loved one.

I will start, by invoking ministerial privilege, and taking a little time with my offering on our altar. This morning, I would like to honor my mother, Peg Phillips, with whom I had a mixed relationship, filled with a certain amount of not-fun competition, and also lots of spirit and love. Life's paradox: we love, even as we have "mixed feelings." This morning, I simply remember the gifts she brought to me, to the family, to her friends, and to the world.

Here is her picture, appropriately a signed head shot: Mom was Ruth Ann on the old TV series *Northern Exposure*, and she adored the attention she got from being a star. Here is a little vase of marigolds, representing what a fabulous, avid gardener she was. She had dahlias that were the joy and envy of all who saw them, plus columbine and roses and lilies and a huge wisteria and....

Mother loved her beer, and she smoked like a chimney, from age 15 to her death at age 84. No altar to my mom would be complete without a can of beer, although she always drank the now-defunct Olympia. (I couldn't bring myself to buy cigarettes—the beer will have to suffice.)

Here is a funny, well-used cookbook, representing both Mom's love of cooking and her love of family. She and her mother—the famous Granny—created this family cookbook for us three daughters, at Christmas 1969, recruiting my then 10- and 11-year-old children to write poems for the opening pages. (Copies have been made for grandchildren.) In her intro, she says, in her frisky and humorous style,

This book is just a start for your "Family Cookbook." As usual, I didn't start in time to do any more than skim the top of Granny's and my cooking experience. As a matter fact, I found it practically impossible to write down, in any useable form, the sum total of 95 years of cooking! As for typographical errors, just overlook them, won't you? Christmas is just around the corner and there's no time to proof-read. (I just hope that there are no more errors like the one I just happened

to spot in the recipe for Lobster Thermidor—by a slip of the finger, I listed as one of the ingredients, 21 cups of mushrooms!)

A locket given to Mom by my kids when they were approximately in the fourth and fifth grades, with their pictures in it. She never wore jewelry, but she cherished this bauble—I now wear it with pleasure and gratitude, and put it on our *ofrenda*.

Here is a whimsical bracelet of mine, representing Mom's amazing ability to be silly, to start laughing about something that tickled all of us into gales of laughter we called "getting the giggles."

And finally, representing Mom's deeply spiritual side, a tattered book by Quaker Thomas Kelly, given to me when I graduated from seminary. She was a lively, frisky, beer-drinking and cigarette-smoking, loving Mom and Nanny. She also had a deep relationship with her God, and was a devout Quaker.

Thanks, Mom, for your gifts of fun, resilience, love, commitment and faith. We still miss you.

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I now invite you to bring your memento to place on our altar. Please say the person's name and relationship, and what the item (picture) is.

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Adios, mis muertitos. We thank you for all you have given us. We honor you for the everlasting reminder of life and loss, of grief and love, of the struggle and wonder of being fully human. Gracias.

### **Closing Words**

I think of those I love –  
Dear men and women no longer with us.

And not in grief or regret merely but rather  
With a love that is almost joy I think of them,  
Of whom I am part, as they of me, and through whom  
I am made more wholly one with the pain and the glory.  
("Dear Men and Women," by John Hall Wheelock)