

## *“We Remember Them”*

October 27, 2013

When someone we love dies, we suffer. We go through the seasons of that first year, and everything reminds us of our loss. As our first reading reminded us:

*At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer*

*We remember them.*

*At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn*

*We remember them.*

*At the beginning of the year and when it ends*

*We remember them.*

But at some point, for most of us, life returns to a new kind of normal, we recover our balance in a different world. And as the days pass, we have diverse ways of bringing our loved ones alive to us again.

This morning in our Time of Remembrance, we spoke the names of those in our faith community who had died in the past year, as well as loved ones in our private lives who are no longer alive and who we wish to remember. We are not alone in this kind of practice.

If I were to take a globe of the world in my hand, and touch it, any place my finger landed would be a place where people set aside time and create rituals to honor, remember, and connect with their dead loved ones. In North America next weekend, Roman Catholic Christians will celebrate All Souls and All Saints days, and Mexican Catholics, the Day of the Dead. Some Protestants consider all Christians to be “saints,” and they may celebrate the lives of Christians who have died, especially those of the local church, on All Saints’ Day.

If we move west from North America to Japan, we’d see Buddhists celebrating Obon at another point in the year to commemorate their ancestors and express appreciation for them. “It’s believed that during this festival the ancestors’ spirits return to this world to visit their relatives. Lanterns are hung in front of houses to guide their spirits, graves are visited and food offerings are made at house altars and temples. At the end of Obon, floating lanterns are put into rivers, lakes and seas to guide the spirits back to their world.”

Continuing on further west, to the Indian subcontinent, we’d see Hindhus performing sraddha (srad-dtah) for their deceased parents going back three generations. Sraddha is intended to nourish, protect, and support the spirits of the dead in their pilgrimage from lower to higher realms preceding their reincarnation and reappearance on Earth.

Moving west once more, we’d come to the British Isles, where Samhain ("sow-en"), the ancient Celtic new year, was traditionally celebrated on November 1. For many pagans that day that is still the best to celebrate the memory of their ancestors. And if the celebrants are fortunate, the spirits of those ancestors will return to communicate from beyond the veil of death, and offer advice, protection and guidance for the upcoming year.

Notice how many different purposes these ceremonies across the globe involve: expressing gratitude toward one's deceased loved ones, taking care of them, communicating with them, fulfilling familial obligations, and remembering.

For many of us in the culture of contemporary America, it is this re-membering, this bringing of our loved one back into our presence in some way again, that is so important in our rituals. Again, the first reading points to this: "*As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.*"

There can be such comfort, warmth in these memories, in this presence renewed.

Our second reading, May Sarton's poem, expressed this beautifully:

*We who find shelter in the warmth within  
Listen and feel new-cherished, new forgiven  
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend our complex love, our mourning  
without end.*

Now, connecting to our dead loved ones can happen in many ways, not just through rituals. A second, common way is through an even more immediate experience, the sense of the real presence of the person or of directly communicating with that person.

Our society assumes that such experiences are rare, but in reality they are surprisingly prevalent.

Dr. Camille Wortman, a nationally respected grief researcher, summarized the data:

"In one study ... 63% of the bereaved indicated that they felt their spouse was with them at times, 47% stated that he or she was watching out for them, and 34% reported that they talked with their spouse regularly.

In a study of children ... 60% said they had talked with their deceased parent, and 43% indicated that they had received an answer.

In a third survey, via telephone, 35% reported hearing the voice of their deceased loved one, 37% saw a vision or image of the deceased, 55% felt the presence of their loved one, and 69% said they had conversations with the deceased."

These experiences of communication with loved ones often provide comfort, but many people worry that if they are having these kinds of experiences, they must be losing their minds. They are often reluctant to talk with others about these experiences, fearing that people will think they are "going crazy."

If only people realized how common this is! We could feel comforted and less likely to doubt our own sanity if we were to experience such 'after-death communication.' We need to provide validation and support for people in their experiences of this, in our church and beyond. After all, there are entire cultures in which seeing ghosts is a normal part of life.

I know in my own family, my younger sister experienced my mother's presence after her death, and I 'met' my older sister in three dreams after she died.

Agnosticism comes naturally to many Unitarian Universalists. We aren't certain about what we believe. And our agnostic temperament can help us accept without judging, not only people of diverse religious beliefs and cultures, but also those among us who have these 'after death communication' experiences.

There is one more important way we bring back our dead, in addition to the rituals of remembrance and direct experiences I've already mentioned. Listen to this story:

*"When the founder of modern Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a special fire, say a special prayer, and the trouble would be averted.*

*Later, when his disciple, the Rabbi Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I cannot light the fire, but I know the place and I can say the prayer." And it was enough.*

*Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save the Jewish people, would go into the forest and say: "I cannot light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place." And it was enough.*

*Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his house, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be enough." And it was enough.*

For some of us, the best way to bring our loved ones alive again for a little while is to tell their stories. Like the rabbis, we will forget details over time, but even the simplest retelling can be enough to rekindle memory and the feelings of love and being loved.

However we do it, though, whether through a personal experience of their presence, or through ritual, or through sharing their stories with others ... it's important to bring our dead to life again in our hearts.

And it is important that a faith community be a safe and respectful space for all these different ways of doing this, so that people can grow whatever their path, their experience.

And "grow" is what we do from such occasions, in part because remembering our dead gives us an occasion to remember what we love about life.

I remember a story my stepfather Francis told. When he was in his early twenties, his girlfriend was killed in a car accident. He and a couple other young people were also involved, but they were unhurt. At her funeral, my dad met a former almost-girlfriend. That night, they made love,

and my step-sister was conceived. Not all of us will get someone pregnant when we remember what we love about life in the face of death, but we may remember with a heightened intensity what we treasure about life.

Alison's story this morning reminded us how life and death go hand in hand. Not one first, the other trailing at a distance, but hand in hand.

And yet... sometimes we may shrink from remembering... We may feel unable to bear to feel those feelings, and take refuge in numbness, intellectualizing, or diversion.

Perhaps, we worry that remembering will lead us down trails of thought toward other deaths we have experienced that still hurt. Or we fear that it will lead us on the path toward our future, our own death, something so many of us hate to look at. However, these are paths we need to be able to travel; we need to keep them clear of bramble so we can know where we really are in our life, balanced as we are in an actual place in the interdependent web of all being.

Perhaps the greatest gift of remembering our loved ones, though, of bringing them alive again in our hearts and minds, is that when we do so, we stand firmly in a place of love again. When we stand "re-cherished and re-forgiven," as May Sarton put it, we do not stand in a place of fear. One of the reasons I am so grateful for Jesus of Nazareth' is that he drew this connection, over and over again, trying to help those he spoke with understand that by remembering that they are loved and loving, they move away from the anxiety, fear and worry that can so constrict our ability to live, and to face death, fully.

My friends, let us remember our loved ones and rejoice in our ability to bring them alive again in our hearts and minds. Whether through rituals of remembrance, direct experience, or through the re-telling of their stories, grounded in love by this, we can turn again and step on in our lives, holding hands with both life and death.

Blessed be. Amen.

\*\*\*

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Meg Soens  
on October 27, 2013 at  
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Medfield.*

\*\*\*