

THEY ARE NOT GONE

A Sermon for the
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Celebrating All Souls/ Samhain/ El Dia de los Muertos
Sunday, October 28, 2007
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

First Reading

Miriam Renaud

I was helping my five year-old daughter, Sidney, brush her teeth one morning when she informed me that after I died, she would talk to me in heaven. Given my perfect state of health, I was startled by this unexpected turn in our conversation.

After I regained my composure, I said, "So you think I'll be going up to heaven after I die, somewhere up in the sky?" Without a moment's hesitation, she answered, "No, not somewhere up in the sky. Heaven is everywhere. Like God. When you're in heaven, you'll be with me everywhere."

I [was stunned.] Instead of imagining heaven as a special, other place, Sidney construed heaven existentially – in terms of an everlasting presence in this place.

"Do you remember how I told you my Daddy died?" I asked. "Well, sometimes I feel like he's very near to me. Sometimes I even think I can talk to him."

Sidney nodded gravely. And then she explained, "That's the reason people pray."

I repeated what I'd understood her to say: "You mean, people pray so they can talk to the people they loved who have died."

She smiled yes.

[And to thank God for them. "Out of the mouths of babes."]

*Hymn 315

This Old World

American folk tune

This old world is full of sorrow, full of sickness, weak and sore;
if you love your neighbor truly, love will come to you the more.
We're all children of one family; we're all brothers, sisters, too;
if you cherish one another, love and friendship come to you.
This old world can be a garden, full of fragrance, full of grace;
if we love our neighbors truly, we must meet them face to face.
It is said now, "Love thy neighbor," and we know well that is true;
this, the sum of human labor, true for me as well as you.

Second Reading

Kim Crawford Harvie

The very best thing we can do, both in grieving and in supporting others in their grief, is to articulate the ways in which the one who has been lost to us will be carried forward in our lives. This is the great challenge of life in the face of loss: Can we make of our lives altars to our dead, and so, through our lives, give them life?

Who lives on in you? In small part, when I am patient, funny, or generous; when I tell stories or talk about the weather; when I am kind, especially to children and elders; when I love without condition, my grandfather lives on in me, and among us, and my grief gives way to joy. So may it be for us all: May our grief give way to joy.

THEY ARE NOT GONE

A Sermon for the
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Celebrating All Souls/ Samhain/ El Dia de los Muertos
Sunday, October 28, 2007
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Some of you have heard this before, but it's too good a story not to repeat. A few years ago my father died. It fell to me to talk to my mother about whether she was comfortable with the requests he had made: that he be cremated, and his ashes scattered out at sea, since he'd been a marine engineer and shipbuilder.

"Well," she replied, looking up from her wheelchair, "cremation is fine. That's what I want to. But I don't scatter his ashes on the ocean. Not just yet. I want you to wait until I'm gone, too. Then I want you to take my ashes and mix them with his, and then take them out to sea. I've been in this chair so long, it'll be our first trip overseas together!"

Mother is 87 now, and still remarkably resilient. The other day, when I took her out to lunch, we spent much of our time talking about her parents, who each came to America as orphans, both still as teenagers, just about a hundred years ago this autumn. They came from Slovakia, through Ellis Island, and each made their way out to Kenosha, Wisconsin, where relatives had settled, and where they met, married, and started a family. But by the end of the influenza epidemic of 1919, they had buried their first four children. Mother was their fourth, born two years later.

"I think of them," she said, "and I know that no matter what challenges and losses I've had to face, they had to face more." And immediately I could see the face of my grandfather, John, for whom I'm named. He'd never had more than three years of schooling, yet spoke eight languages. Raised with Slovak, schooled in Hungarian, he learned Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian doing child labor in coal mines; Czech and German as an apprentice cabinetmaker, and English as factory worker in Kenosha.

As a college senior, I went to see Mother's parents for the first time on my own, because I had an interview in nearby Chicago. My train came in at one in the morning. Taking a cab to the house, I found Grampa asleep in his chair in front of the television. He snapped awake as I tip-toed in.

“Janni!” he said, “You want drink? You need money?” When I graduated he gave me enough to go to Europe that summer. I tried to get to the villages where his parents and my grandmother’s are buried. But it was 1968, and I was in Vienna, on my way there, when the Russian Army invaded Czechoslovakia, and closed the border. I didn’t get to those graves until many years later, when a friend asked me to do a wedding in Vienna, and I rented a car afterward, and completed the pilgrimage.

We grieve, but we can be glad that no life goes on forever. Just before taking Mother out, I’d visited a woman now nearing 101. Once a vibrant part of my discussion group at the retirement community where she lives, she’s now in the nursing facility, ailing, blind, and, as a life-long Universalist, completely unafraid of anything after death.

“John,” she said to me, “I wake up in the morning these days and I don’t know whether to be amazed, grateful, or horrified to still be here!”

“Priscilla,” I replied, “*be grateful* that you can still discern what the options are!”

She shared with me an image that she still remembered from the best Universalist sermon she’d ever heard. The British author, John Ruskin, one evening in his later years looked out the window and saw the lamplighter must be doing his work, lighting the gas streetlamps around the square where he lived. It was dark enough so that he could not see the man himself. But he could see the lights start to gleam as each one was lighted. Ruskin wrote of this in a letter to a friend, “That is what I mean by real persons of faith. They don’t require fame or recognition. But you can trace their course by the lights they leave burning.”

“At times our own light goes out & is rekindled by a spark from another person,” said Albert Schweitzer, in words we often use as we light our chalice. “Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

Last week Gwen and I saw the Boston premiere of an opera by the contemporary composer Osvaldo Golijov that seemed to illustrate that theme. Called *Ainadamar*, it’s named for the place in Granada, Spain, where the poet Federico Garcia Lorca was taken to be shot in 1936 by the Fascist soldiers of Generalissimo Franco. His crime? Writing a play dedicated to the memory of an ordinary woman, Mariana Pineda, who died resisting oppression a century before, a heroine to Spanish defenders of liberty and justice. In the first scene of the opera, the actress Margarita Xirgu, sung by soprano Dawn Upshaw,

plays the part of Mariana. In the second, she tries to persuade Lorca to go with her to Havana, where she is taking the play on tour, to escape the Fascists. But instead he goes home to his native Granada, where he is arrested and killed, along side a bullfighter and a teacher, near Ainadamar, *El Gran Fuente de las Lagrimas*, or “Great Fountain of Tears.” And in the last scene, Margarita, who has framed all of this by telling her understudy, Nuria, about the meaning of the play, and about Lorca, and about her life-long effort in Latin America to keep alive his poetry and devotion to human liberty and creativity, realizes that she is now too old and ill to go on and perform the play one last time. But before she dies, she secures Nuria’s commitment to keep the flame alive.

Having seen Golijov’s magnificent *Pasion Segun San Marcos*, “The Passion according to St. Mark,” performed out at Tanglewood a few years ago, I was struck by how this opera seemed to be a secular passion story – an artistic assertion that it is not just Christ whose courageous and creative life is victorious over death.

And, indeed, at this season, that can be said to be the message implicit in the festival of All Souls. All Saints Day arose in the Middle Ages to remember all those saints who didn’t have “name days” on the liturgical calendar. And to Christianize the pagan festival of Samhain, which marked the “thin time” between the falling leaves and the falling snow, when the line between life and death, and the ability to commune with and remember the dead seemed natural. But not everyone is a saint. So All Souls Day was placed on the following day, November 2.

There is something democratic and universal in that observance. “I am a living member of the great family of all souls,” declared William Ellery Channing. Leading some of our largest UU congregations to name themselves, “All Souls,” as a reminder that, as Native Americans would put it, we are all related. “All souls are mine,” says the Hebrew Bible. We are “children of God,” says Christian wisdom. The pity is that we don’t often enough remember that. Or that everyone we meet is a sister or a brother.

So it would be selfish today only to remember our own dead.

This week, as I spoke at Olin College about the folly of pre-emptive war, as played out in Iraq already, yet now already being planned in relation to Iran, I thought of the words of Archibald MacLeish:

“The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:
who has not heard them. . . .
They say: Our deaths were not ours; they are yours;
they will mean what you make them.”

And about the deep division in our country between those who stubbornly believe that the only way to give those deaths meaning is to add to them, and those of us who say, “Those deaths, and even the deaths of those who have died because we sent them to die, those deaths say: “Stop! in the name of God, stop!” And think:

Preemptive war, said as hardheaded a realist as Otto von Bismarck, constitutes “suicide from fear of death.” One may *believe* that one sees where the dangers lie from one’s enemy; one can *never* see where a first-strike in war will end.

In his new book, *The Ethics of Memory*, the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit quotes a writer who asks, “Why do we not erect monuments for the unknown [peace activist] or social democrat or for the unknown liberal?” And he answers that such people try to love humanity as a whole, which is only thinly yet a “community of memory,” and who were never interested so much in remembering as in hoping. And that was both their strength, and their weakness. “Secular groups,” he writes, “perhaps more than religious groups, face the problem of who will remember [what the poet Siegfried Sassoon called] “the unheroic dead.”

Our task, it seems to me, in a secular age, is to be a religious community of both broad hope and broad memory. Remembering not only our own. This may be why we Unitarian Universalists so often claim as our own, forebears who were only on our fringes -- fellow travelers on the journey from birth to death, who devoted their lives to the possibility of taking the now thin relationships we may feel with others and making them thicker and more ethically commanding.

What gives me joy on a day that might be otherwise devoted to grieving is remembering how great a cloud of witnesses has gone before us. How many people through the ages have done more than grieve and mourn and seek revenge for their own. How many have helped to thicken the ties of imaginative compassion, so that people whose families and histories are quite different can discover how much we have in common, we who have suffered and lost; and, therefore, how much compassion is needed in this old world we share.

Yes, that's it: let's wake up. Let's be both amazed and grateful, not horrified, that we are still living members of the great family of all souls. The world, even our own lives, may be full of sorrow, but the sum of human labor is still to love our neighbor, and the stranger, and to see in them all our sisters and our brothers. Not all of them were perfect. Neither are we, of course. But for all those who have shown us the way, the known and unknown, present and absent, remembered and forgotten, and for the gifts of grace that allow us still to witness to humanity's unfulfilled dreams and hopes, let us be grateful. Always. Amen and amen.

*Hymn 103

For All the Saints

How/Vaughn Williams

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!

Thou wast their rock, their shelter and their might,
their strength and solace in the well-fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness deep their one true light.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O blest communion of the saints divine!
We live in struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the conflict long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Benediction

adapted from Barbara Pescan

Because of those who came before, we are;
In spite of their failings, we believe;
Because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,
We too hope and dream.
Let us go forth remembering to praise,
 To live in the moment,
 To love mightily,
 To bow the Mystery that enfolds us all.
Amen.