

Day of the Dead

Lucas Hergert, preaching
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, November 2, 2008

Reading: “The Young Dead Soldiers”

The young dead soldiers do not speak. □

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: □who has not heard them? □

They have a silence that speaks for them at night □and when the clock counts. □

They say: We were young. We have died. □Remember us. □

They say: We have done what we could □but until it is finished it is not done.

□They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished □no one can know what our lives gave. □

They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours, □they will mean what you make them. □

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for □peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say, □it is you who must say this. □

We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning. □

We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.

—Archibald MacLeish

I like scary, creepy stories. The kind that give you goosebumps and shivers. When I was a kid, I had three books called the *Scary Stories* collection. Maybe some of you have encountered these. My friends and I would take turns telling each other stories from this book. Sometimes we would get so freaked out that we would have to find an adult to tell us that, no, a monster would never roll his head down our chimney. And, no, there was no chance that someone's big toe would end up in our soup that night.

At the Halloween party that I had with the youth group, some tried to urge the group to tell each other a scary story or two. We ended up playing sardines, which I have learned is a lot like hide and go seek. Only a few youth wanted to tell stories about ghosts and corpses.

I don't blame them. Honestly I am kind of thankful, as I do not think that the youth group is the best place for me to get terribly freaked out.

I do have to say, though, that I think ghosts get a bad rap. Not the kinds of ghosts that show up in the *Scary Stories* collection, but the kinds of ghosts that live with us because we once lived with them. Not the scary ghosts that we would never wish to meet in our everyday lives, but the kinds of ghosts that we wish were here all of the time. The ghosts of loved ones. The ghosts that live on in our memories.

Around the end of October and the beginning of November is the time that many cultures believe the membrane that separates the world of the living and the dead is the thinnest. Samhain, All Souls Day, Dia de los Muertos, Fete Ghede—all of these are names for this special time of the year.

Some cultures put out food for their beloved dead. Other cultures light candles and put out pictures, invoking the names and memories of those who have passed. And still others make sweets and celebrate the lives of those who died.

Do I believe that the ghosts of the dead eat the food? Do I believe that they answer when we call their names into the darkness? Maybe, maybe not. The dead no longer need to be nourished. Nor do they need their names called out. They are gone, dead. Names and food are things that don't matter to them so much anymore.

What I do believe is that the food we set out for the dead nourishes us. The names we call and the pictures we set out recall memories that shape our lives, our present, and our future. The Day of the Dead is not a day *for* the dead; it is a day for those of us who have to live on after those we love have died.

In Haiti, many honor a spirit whose name is Ghede. The name for the Day of the Dead in that country is Fete Ghede, or the feast of Ghede. He is a funny spirit. He is thought to eat constantly, perhaps representing the idea that his work is never done. He is oblivious to pain, and enjoys rum with hot peppers soaked in it. He makes lewd jokes, and has no use for human etiquette. He is known as the spirit of the unnamed dead, all of those who have been forgotten. And he loves children, he is thought to be their protector.

There are the dead whose names we can call out into the silence and the darkness, the names of those who have shaped our lives. And then there are all of those whose names no longer matter, but who have contributed to making the world a better place while they were in it. Ghede represents all of those who made a difference for the future generations, and have now been forgotten. They, too, need to be held in our hearts as we carry on in this world.

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I met with someone for pastoral counseling not long ago, and she started to cry in the middle of a restaurant. Not many people were there, and I don't think that anyone noticed, but this person became really embarrassed

anyway. “I am so sorry,” she said, as if she had done something terribly inappropriate.

I thought for a moment, and then responded to her: “I have no idea why I don’t see more people crying in restaurants.” We both laughed. But it’s true. As a minister, I know that more people are hurting in their day-to-day lives than they admit. I know that we carry sorrows and burdens locked in our hearts, as if reaching out would impolite. And I know that our nation and our world is hurting, with over 4,000 soldiers and over one million Iraqis dead. I think that if we were honest with ourselves there would be more crying in restaurants.

Now, I don’t mean to say that if, every second of every day, we are not grieving our losses, there is something wrong with us. Far from it. I think one of the beauties of being in community with one another is that we can share our joys as often as we share our sorrows. But I do want us to share our sorrows when we need to. If the first part of the Day of the Dead is a time to remember, then I think the second part is a time to mourn.

Those who have died, writes Archibald MacLeish in our reading this morning, “have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.” A silence that signals an absence so powerful that it can overtake us. It is the silence, the absence, that we call grief.

Grief means that our entire world has stopped. It feels like our heart has caved in. It is like being held underwater after we have given up trying to breathe. There is no end to the metaphors for grief, no end to metaphors that can never entirely capture the crushing difficulty of the experience.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross pioneered the idea that there are stages of grief. These include denial, acceptance, anger, depression, and bargaining. I am less convinced than some that these stages happen in any sort of order. As someone who has been there, and is still there on some days, I believe that these stages can happen in any sort of order. One moment we have accepted the death of our loved one, the next we are bargaining for that person to come back. We can be simultaneously angry and depressed and in denial. Grief reminds us that time is just a convenient way that humans understand their world, an understanding that crumbles when we lose those who anchor us in this world.

“It seems that grief is never clean,” write Pat Schwiebert and Chuck Deklyen in their book *Tear Soup*. “And to make matters worse,” write the authors, “grief always takes longer to cook than anyone wants it to.” This illustrated book is a helpful exploration of grief for children and adults, depicting a grandmother who shows her grandson how to make tear soup. The book reminds us that everybody has to learn how to make his or her

own special recipe for tear soup. There is no list of ingredients that each person can use. Every time someone dies, we enter a new and uncharted territory.

However, the authors write that there are a few things we can do for each other that will make tear soup just a little easier to swallow. We can let people use as many tears as they need, and not get worried that they have used too many tears this time. We can avoid telling our friends that their tear soup isn't so bad, and that they need to finish making it and move on. We can let people get angry while they are making tear soup. And most of all, and this is the blessing of being in a religious community, we can reach out to the person in need. We can stand with her if she needs it, and give her space if she needs it.

None of these things will cure another's grief. But they may make the burden just a little lighter.

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Archibald MacLeish writes this of the young dead soldiers, "Whether [their] lives and deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing [they] cannot say; it is you who must say this."

This, I think, is the third and final part of the Day of the Dead. What are the memories of the dead going to push us toward? How are they going

to tell us to live in this world? Indeed, many celebrations of this time of year end with a reminder of all of the work that we have yet to do.

There are many ways that this work can be done. I am thinking today of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. These are women in Argentina whose children slowly disappeared during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983. Abducted by the government, many of these younger people disappeared because they protested its abuses of power. These people were then secretly killed and placed in mass graves.

Several mothers wanted to know what happened to their children. Were they dead? Did they flee to another country? These mothers banded together and began a regular demonstration outside the government building of the Plaza de Mayo. Garnering international attention, they were able to discover the truth about what happened to some of their children. It is one step, they feel, in making sure that the disappearances do not ever happen again.

Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo stand as an example of how we can be faithful to the lives of those who have passed. Las Madres took up the struggle that their children could not finish. They refused to forget. They made the memory of their disappeared children a living memory, a visible memory, so that the forces of injustice would be called to account.

How will we heed the challenge of the dead? How will we be faithful to the vision that they held, to take up the work that they left undone? I am thinking of many people from our Unitarian and Universalist heritage who died with their work left undone. James Reeb, the Unitarian minister who heeded the call to Selma, and was killed for his march for civil rights. Miguel Servetus and Francis David, Unitarians in Europe who were imprisoned and suffered death in struggling for religious freedom and tolerance. Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who fought against slavery. Susan B. Anthony, a Unitarian laywoman who struggled for women's rights. What will be done to carry their message forward today? What will we do to continue the work that they could not finish?

These are questions that they cannot answer for us. We have to answer them on our own, or in community with one another. "We leave you our deaths," they say, "give them their meaning."