

Day of the Dead

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Today is the Day of the Dead. It is a time when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest. For the purposes of Halloween this means that spirits might haunt us or scare us. But in Latin American countries, a much more positive approach is taken. It is a time to talk to our loved ones whom we love and remember. Bring them food, clean their graves, and keep their memories alive. Indeed it is not a scary thing or even a somber occasion. Rather it is a celebratory remembrance of people who have passed away and the legacy they have left behind.

Of course our celebration is somewhat different. We should not misappropriate rituals on a whim without some sense of integrity from whence they have come. And yet there is an essence, a core spirit if you will, that the Day of the Dead has that I think resonates with Unitarian Universalism. Granted, the Day of the Dead is steeped in Roman Catholicism and early American spiritualism. But the power of remembering, simply remembering the dead, is a power that transcends culture, language, and rite. It is in this spirit that we offer our own version of the Day of the Dead this morning.

All of that being said, it may seem a bit peculiar to start off with the Upanishads! The Upanishads are the foundational scriptures for almost all Hindu theology and philosophy. Somewhere we took a wrong turn from Latin America and wound up in Ancient India. Of

course the Upanishads are not historically connected to the Day of the Dead, but the ideas expressed in them are not dissimilar.

The Upanishad talk about something called Brahman. Brahman is sometimes called “God” but that is probably not a great translation. Brahman is more like the Ground of All Being, to use Tillich’s terms, or Being Itself, to use Heidegger’s. Brahman is infinity, the unknown and unknowable mystery of the universe, it is not a personality or a consciousness per se, but just the presence of the Holy itself. If I sound foolish it is intentional. Hindus would say the very point is that you cannot describe in rational language the essence of the universe. Instead you practice your entire life trying to experience it.

The Upanishads also talk about the Ataman, the soul or self. It is that part of God or Goddess that is in each person. The claim is that these two are the same; the essence of the universe is exactly the same as the soul that resides in each of us. That is an amazing claim! I think of it this way. If you imagine all of the numbers between zero and infinity, you cannot comprehend it. It goes on forever. It also goes backwards forever, if you go in the direction of negative numbers. Now take the reciprocal of all these numbers. 2 becomes $\frac{1}{2}$ and so on. Thus in the number one there are an infinite number of fractions. This is how infinity of Brahman can fit inside each person.

Our UU heritage of individualism is often derided these days, but I can get behind this kind of individualism! Each and every person is unique and precious. Each of us is irreplaceable and unrepeatably. At no time every in history or in the future, will there be anyone like you again. Each of us has that infinity in our hearts. This is true of all of us in this room and all of the people represented up there on our altar.

There is a line in the Talmud that says that if someone saves the life of one person, it is as if they saved the entire world. You may remember this line from the movie Schindler's List. From the perspective of the person who lived, the whole world is experienced where it could have been shut off. Or as the Sufi poet once said, each one of us is the world looking at itself, becoming aware of itself, loving itself. Only in us.

There are many lives represented on our altar today. Each of them is someone's father or mother, sister or brother, friend, lover, or companion. The stories we could all tell about each person up there! Oh we would be here all afternoon I am sure, but what an afternoon it would be! Each story is rich with its own experience of this world, its own examples of the world becoming aware of itself. I want to share with you the person I brought to our altar today. Her story is no better or worse than any other story we could tell. But in telling her story we can see the depth and humanity of what our ritual means.

Jean Hansen was my mother's first cousin. I suppose that makes her my cousin too, but because she was the same age as my mom and my aunt, I always thought of her as my aunt Jeannie. Indeed the three of them acted like sisters. Jeannie was one of the funniest women I ever knew. She loved life. She loved dogs. She always had dogs all over, particularly Jack Russells. She would go camping, and host pool parties in the summer. We have great pictures of Thomas's first time in her pool screaming bloody murder. For a couple of years she lived in Montana, and driving out to her house once summer from Michigan became the vacation of a lifetime.

Jeannie was also the first person in my family, and to my knowledge thus far the only person, to come out of the closet as a lesbian. This is always a difficult decision for any person

of course, but Jeannie's sister was a Fundamentalist Christian. For a couple of years Jeannie was shunned by parts of her sister's family for being gay. I remember being so impressed with her courage to stand up and say who she was without pretending any more. Eventually everyone would reconcile and her relationship with her sister was very warm.

It was a cold and snowy winter in Michigan in 1994. I was home from college for the weekend because of my grandfather's funeral. Jeannie could tell that I was hurting so she invited me and my cousin Mary to spend the weekend with her at her place. It was a wonderful treat. We really didn't have much in mind for the weekend; just relax after an intense week with family around my grandfather's death. Besides the snow was piled high, and Jeannie lived in a small town in central Michigan. Even if you could leave the house, which was a challenge, there would be no where to go for any fun!

Sunday lunch, just before I was to head back to school, we were going to have chicken wings. This was Jeannie's specialty, and one of my favorites. It is odd the things you remember—why chicken wings? But food is a big part of Day of the Dead, so Jeannie is remembered on our altar by a chicken wing. Which is somewhat ironic considering that we never actually ate them! We couldn't find Jeannie. We thought she was in the house, but was not around. Finally I found her in her bedroom sitting on the floor sweating like crazy. She couldn't talk. We were afraid she was having, what it turned out she was having: a heart attack.

If you have never seen anyone have one, I don't recommend it. That was the scariest thing I have ever seen in my life. You can keep all your scary Halloween movies, that experience topped them all. We got Jeannie into the car, plowed out the drive way, and my cousin Mary, who knew the way to the hospital drove. We got Jean to the ER, and they admitted

her immediately. My mom took me back to college that night. The next day Jeannie had bypass surgery.

The problem was that Jeannie could never quite smoking. I won't make this sermon into a PSA for smoking, but it definitely was the difference in why my mom who is older and still with us, while Jeannie is not. It would have been hard for me to believe it that day, but Jeannie lived another fifteen years after her heart attack. A couple of years ago she was diagnosed with kidney cancer. For a long time it was in remission and doing well. But in the past year, it flared up again, and eventually word came to me that she was in home hospice. She was being cared for by my cousin Mary and Jeannie's sister; the Fundamentalist Christian. My mom called me up last spring and told me I needed to call Jeannie very soon.

I will admit that it was a phone call that I procrastinated making, but eventually I did call Jeannie. It was just a couple of weeks before she died. It is an awkward conversation when you know going into it that it is the last time you will ever talk to this person again. How do you open that one up? "How is it going?" We know how it's going! In fact Jeannie didn't really want to talk about herself. We really didn't get into her condition too much. Understandable I guess. She wanted to hear about the baby, who would be born very soon. We talked about Sharon and Thomas and other family members. She told me that the boys would be fine because they had such wonderful parents. It was the perfect thing to say; a last gift she gave me. The whole time we talked, I knew that I just needed to say "I love you" one last time. And I did. Then we said good bye. I heard that it was a beautiful funeral. Jeannie planned it all herself.

Unlike the very impersonal force of Brahman, Forrest Church's God is very personal. He gives us a very basic Christian Universalist message: God is infinite, yes, but infinite in love and

forgiveness. Human sin and evil is finite. It is awful and horrible and cruel, but it comes from humans and therefore limited in scope. Infinite love trumps finite sin therefore everyone goes to heaven. Hell, Church observes, if it existed would have to be considered at worst God's failure, and at best his limitation. It would mean that God was not infinite in love and compassion. Thus the doctrine of hell is indirectly a form of blasphemy. It underestimates God's capacity to love.

Our Universalist ancestors, and contemporaries like Church, found this very compelling. I don't know what you make of it. To be perfectly honest with you, I have no idea what the afterlife is like. By definition you have to die to get there, and so far Hamlet has been correct in noting that death is that undiscovered country from which no traveler returns. I can't help but take conceptions of the afterlife with a grain of salt, be they from Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity and Judaism. I personally don't believe that heaven and hell are real places. I do not negatively judge those who do. I prefer to think of heaven and hell as symbols, poetic license if you will, that points to something deeper. So heaven might be a symbol of expressing peace, joy, and love. The people we loved touched our lives, sometimes for a long period of time and sometimes all too briefly. Regardless of the length of times, our lives are transformed as a result of that interaction. We are never the same afterwards.

Tim Russert wrote a book about his dad a few years back. And as a result of that book of stories about his dad, his readers would send him stories telling him about their dads. I thought the sequel was better than the original! One of those stories was from a man who remembered going to a baseball game with his dad. They were standing in line to buy tickets, when the boy saw some other people heading around a corner. Apparently there was a gap in the fence, and someone had opened it wide enough to shimmy through. People were entering the ballpark through this gap without paying for a ticket.

The boy takes a step out of line to go around the corner to follow these people through the fence. And as he does he feels his father's hand on his shoulder stopping him. The boy looks into his dad's face. "We don't cheat people." He says. "When you go to the ball park you pay for your ticket." Years go by of course, the boy grows up, and dad passes on. But whenever he has to make a tough choice, an ethical dilemma, sometimes he feels his dad's hand pulling him back to do the right thing.

That my friends, is the afterlife I know we get. I don't know about what St. Paul says or the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but I do know that each one of us is infinitely holy and we affect each other. Those who have died affect us very deeply with their memory. You know if all there is after death is my legacy to my two boys that they remember me as a tug at their shoulder reminding them of the right way to live; that would be enough. I am good with just that. I don't need to ride on a cloud playing a harp for all eternity. I just want someone to remember me.

And so that is what we do today. We remember. We share our stories, like the story I told of my aunt Jeannie. By telling these stories their memories are preserved, we are still connected to them in love. And what better notion of heaven could there be but that!

Let us celebrate their memories, and by celebrating them may they inspire us to live. We must remember to live each moment awake and aware and open to all the possibilities of life. Let us make this life as rich and as meaningful as possible. Amen Blessed Be.