

## **Grief and Acceptance**

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“Unitarian Universalism is a good religion to die in.” So claimed my good friend and former UU History professor Charles A. Howe. Charles taught Unitarian and Universalist history at Meadville Lombard Theological School when they were in between history professors. Although he was not on the faculty, he was the obvious choice as a guest lecturer. Charles Howe was an accomplished academic and a prolific writer. He wrote two books that are required reading for all perspective UU ministers and interested lay people. “The Larger Faith” is a history of Universalism in America, and perhaps the first of his books to earn Howe his reputation as one of the premier UU historians of the late twentieth century. More recently he wrote “For Faith and Freedom” a short history of Unitarianism in Europe. Both of these books distill Unitarian and Universalism down to the essence of the story; the parts that are meaningful and significant. Other authors wrote multivolume works that were more comprehensive than Howe’s, but they remained out of reach for most people. Quite literally in some cases because these multivolume histories became very rare and expensive. But Charles

Howe took UU history out of the exclusive hands of the ivory tower and placed it firmly within the grasp of regular UUs whether they had gone to seminary or not. In a very real sense, Charles Howe is the voice of our history for many of us.

Howe had a passion for Universalist history, having been raised in that tradition. He would go on to serve as a Unitarian Universalist minister, himself a graduate of Meadville Lombard. He loved the Unitarians, and his book “For Faith and Freedom” was inspired by Howe’s extensive work with international Unitarians and Universalists. But we all knew that Universalism was his first and true love. Charles Howe was inspired by Clarence Skinner, after whom our publishing house “Skinner House Press” is named. Clarence Skinner was the last great Universalist theologian before the Universalists merged with the Unitarians. In many ways, Skinner brought Universalism into the twentieth century and his theology would be quite influential in the newly merged denomination. Skinner was one of the first people to consider the religions of the world to be a valid and important source of religious understanding for Universalists; a fact I am very grateful for as a UU Buddhist. Charles Howe edited two books on Clarence Skinner, and worked diligently to ensure that Skinner would be enshrined ever after in the Unitarian Universalist pantheon.

That was what I knew of Charles Howe when I met him in 1998 on the first day of my UU history class. He was a tall fellow with white

hair and a permanent grin on his face. I don't think I ever saw him cross or angry; always affable and positive. He extended his hand and said, "Hi I am Chuck Howe." "Chuck?!" I remember thinking, "Wow! THE Charles Howe wants me to call him 'Chuck'!" Even though "Charles A. Howe" was the byline on his books, he was always "Chuck." The man I met and got to know had more in common with Mr. Rogers, in a good way, than some stuffy professor-type. He was a great teacher to listen to. When you met Chuck Howe you were instantly his friend, and he was instantly yours.

As it turned out, his UU history class was the last one I took before heading off to my internship in Chapel Hill North Carolina. The Community Church of Chapel Hill was also Chuck Howe's home congregation. He was retired from the ministry by then, of course, but he agreed to sit on my internship committee. That was the committee of lay people that would give the new intern feedback on how they thought they were doing. It was here that I really got to know Chuck well. He was a fixture at the church and at ministers' meetings. Even though he was devoting himself to writing at this point, he still had some game when it came to ministry. He was a part of a new start congregation that was happening down the road in Durham. This was a project that was envisioned as an intentionally multicultural UU church. As one of the sponsoring congregations the Community Church of Chapel Hill "donated" some key lay people; a practice this church has done many

times when we have sponsored new congregations. Chuck Howe was a “donated” member for that cause.

About a year later, I graduated from seminary and was about to be ordained in Ann Arbor. It was Chuck Howe who flew out to give the charge to minister, one of the most important elements of that ritual. He was my internship church’s representative to the ordination; an event they played a significant part in making happen. He brought to that occasion his usual warmth and grandfatherly charm, and I was honored that he was a part of it. A veteran of World War Two, a lifelong Universalist, a Unitarian Universalist minister of note, a scholar and teacher of great renown, and a good friend, Chuck Howe died on April 13, 2010. On our altar are his obituary, a picture of him giving me the charge to minister at my ordination, and my copies of the two UU history books I mentioned.

Chuck Howe would have loved our Day of the Dead ritual. “Unitarian Universalism is a good religion to die in.” he said following the memorial service for one of the pillars of the church in Chapel Hill. What he meant by that was that Unitarian Universalism reflected and celebrated people’s lives in our memorial services. He liked the way the story of a life was told. He felt it did them justice. The tenor of such an event is more celebratory than somber, yet death is not denied or glossed over either. Rather we celebrate the lives of those who have passed away precisely because we have a finite amount of time. Death as a

guaranteed ending makes all of our days numbered and therefore they are extraordinarily precious. Often we forget this until we are reminded of how blessed we are to be alive and to be connected to those we love, both living and dead. Like our memorial services, the Day of the Dead captures those emotions and those sentiments in perfect balance.

This is the second year we have done Day of the Dead here at First Unitarian Church. Last year it was brand new to me, if not to most of you. So I called up a colleague of mine who had been leading this ceremony in his church for three or four years, and I asked him how it worked. While his comments were somewhat helpful regarding logistics, which is often my primary concern, he went on and on about how he spent the first few years essentially apologizing for doing Day of the Dead. He was paranoid, in my view at least, about cultural misappropriation. UU feelings on this topic have waxed and waned over the years, and what in one era was acceptable seems to be judged as horribly racist or classist in another era, only to have the pendulum swing back the other way in a few years. My official view is that it is all in the eyes of the beholder.

Shortly after last year's Day of the Dead, I was hanging out with a different group of colleagues and we were comparing notes on how we each did the ritual. What I learned from them was quite interesting. Day of the Dead as we know it usually comes from Mexico or South America. However it is also a common practice in Europe as well,

particularly Eastern Europe. One of my colleagues who has traveled extensively among the Unitarians in Transylvania, told me that Day of the Dead is one of the holiest days of the year among the Unitarian churches in Romania. While we in America think of it in terms of Latin America, it is by no means restricted to those countries. Thus we have a legitimate claim to the practice. Chuck Howe would love that too; a call back to our Transylvanian past.

It is believed that from October 31 through November 2 the dead come and visit with their families. The tradition during the Day of the Dead is for families to spend all day cooking special foods, such as *pan de muertos*, and have a picnic at the graveside with their dead relatives. Now for those of you considering doing this yourselves, bear in mind that in the old days people didn't move around like they do now. It was reasonable to expect most of one's relatives to be buried in approximately the same area. They would offer the dead some of the food, and talk to them, sort of like a family reunion of sorts. Catch them up with what is going on.

Do the spirits of the dead come and visit us during this three day stretch? I suspect some folks take that pretty literally, but personally I don't. That does not mean that I don't get something out of the Day of the Dead. I think it is a very important holiday, and one that does us an invaluable service, regardless of whether or not one literally believes in the spirits of the dead. You see I have an aunt that talks to the dead. OK

I may have made that sound creepier than it is; today is Halloween after all. My aunt keeps pictures on her mantle and on the shelves in her living room of her mother and father, grandmother, and other relatives that are no longer among the living. When she is cleaning her house, she sees these pictures and starts talking to the relatives pictured there. “Hi Mama how are you this morning...” That sort of thing. Something to do while she is dusting off a shelf. She tells them about her day.

Obviously my aunt knows these people are dead. I am not sure if she believes in ghosts or if the spirits of the people she is addressing can hear her. It wouldn't matter either way. You see theology here can trip us up. If we worry too much about the metaphysics of it all we can easily miss what really is at the core of the Day of the Dead: relationships. Relationships, obviously, have two participants, each of which “own” 50% of that relationship. As any parent of a teenager knows, you cannot make the other person in your relationship do what you want all of the time. You can only control your half of the relationship; they are in control of the other half. Now when one of the two people dies, then 50% of the relationship dies too. However, I still have this 50%, my half, of the relationship. So much of the grieving process is about healing from that loss, as Mitchell and Anderson tell us.

The Day of the Dead is a ceremony that helps us remember those we love who have died, and in our remembering we are given the opportunity to revisit our grieving process. Some of us may be in the

thick of it now, the emotional wound still raw with pain and hurt. Others of us may have paused or pushed away our feelings. Still others may have avoided any loss this year. Don't worry though; it will come all too soon. Wherever you are in your grieving process, the Day of the Dead gives us a chance to check in with ourselves. Pause and think about the ones we are missing. Are we in denial of their death? Are we still angry or depressed? If you want to, feel free to talk to them. If you are embarrassed to do this in front of other people, don't worry I have you covered. Just go get one of those blue tooth ear things that people use on their cell phones and put it in your ear. You need not actually own a cell phone or even turn this thing on; just stick it in your ear. Now it will be culturally acceptable to talk into thin air to someone not present, and no one will bat an eyelash at you.

The Day of the Dead gives us the opportunity to work on our 50% of those relationships that are leftover after a loved one dies. Talking to pictures of people is not crazy; indeed it is a sign of acceptance. If you are addressing a picture, then you are acknowledging at some level that you will never again speak to this person in the flesh. Only someone deep in the denial phase of their grief would refuse to speak to their loved one's picture, because they are secretly waiting for them to return in real life. To talk to a picture as if it were a person means I have to be real about the fact that our relationship will not continue as it did in the

past. The symbolism of the ritual we are doing today speaks directly to our grief and to our healing.

I don't know if I will start talking to my pictures of Chuck Howe. I am probably more likely to talk to him while reading, yet again, his books. I do agree with him though: Unitarian Universalism is a good religion to die in. We don't deny death, we sanctify death. We sanctify it by celebrating life, knowing that life becomes precious precisely because there are a limited number of days allotted to each of us. The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes how even in a religion that believes you get another shot at life, it is still precious. Buddhists believe we have karmic relationships, meaning your husband or wife may be your child in the next life or your accountant will become your car mechanic. In other words you are tied to these people, and if they die before you can resolve your 50% of your relationship with them, then you have to work it out some other way in a future lifetime. They also say that this applies to your teacher, so that you can continue to learn from them in the next life.

I suppose that means that I will be seeing Chuck Howe again! Here again, I tend to take doctrines like karma and reincarnation more at the symbolic level than at the literal one. They have more meaning and make more sense to me as symbols rather than literal descriptions of the laws of the universe. I believe that I will see Chuck Howe again. How could I not think of him any time I write or preach on Clarence Skinner?

When I see pictures or watch the video of my ordination, reminisce about my internship, or hear the song YMCA? You have not lived until you have seen your 70 year old UU history professor, revered throughout Unitarian Universalism, stand up next to you at a baseball game and do the hand motions to the song “YMCA.” That is a priceless memory. It makes my half of my relationship with Chuck come alive again, and I have to smile even if it is through tears. All of the folks we remember today are a real presence for us, and perhaps they always will be. That is truly something to celebrate.

So let us join our brothers and sisters around the world, south of the border and across the pond. Let us not turn away from death but turn toward it. Let us not shrink away in fear this day, but rather extend our hand to death and celebrate with those we love and of those whom we have lost. May this Day of the Dead be a joyous one for you. Amen  
Blessed Be.

