



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Ancestor's Breath

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Halloween, Samhain, el Día de los Muertos, All Saints Day. These fall holidays co-mingle together in our culture bringing our attention to the mysterious world beyond our lives. All of these holidays have a cosmological belief that the world of the dead is an active presence, and that those departed have the power to communicate with the living. At this time of year, it is said in many cultures that the “veil” between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors is said to be very thin.

In Mexican culture it is believed that the souls of our loved ones return to earth for these days of celebration and remembrance. El Día de los Muertos is a time to create hospitality for the ancestors, beckoning them to visit our world again with ofrendas, or altars, with practices of bringing loved ones favorite foods and other objects. For el Día de los Muertos, sugar skulls and skeletons are meant not to frighten but to enliven our imaginations to be curious about the world of the dead. In the Pagan spiritual tradition, the wheel of life is constantly in motion. Samhain brings us in touch with nature’s cycle of decay and regeneration. On Samhain, it is believed that ancestor’s spirits can more easily pass between the worlds. Similarly, meals are prepared to provide hospitality for the dead and a place set for them at the table so that they may feel invited to come join the living to share memories, wisdom and blessings.

These are interesting pre-Christian, pre-Columbian and indigenous practices for us to consider as Unitarian Universalists with a Protestant history. For most of us, our theological beliefs and practices largely focus on this life and this world—the world we can know with our senses and perceive with our mind. We attribute our views on death dually—one view largely informed from a scientific perspective, the other informed from a religious perspective. Our scientific view comes from our understandings of the cycles of life, the natural process of decay, death and regeneration we share with all beings. In the religious dimension, our beliefs are varied. Some of us as individuals find comfort in the Christian concept of a heaven. As a religion, we don’t affirm it as a part of our theology. Where the scientific and religious views on death comingle is our use of reason to discern our faith. Many of our views on the afterlife are influenced by our reliance on our senses to perceive reality. Because we can’t know for certain whether there is a heaven and haven’t experienced it, many of us don’t believe it.

While our contemporary movement centers largely in scientific and rationalist understandings, our theology originates in liberal Christianity. For our Universalist ancestors, heaven was everything, and they believed everyone should go there. The central tenet of universal salvation shapes the entire belief system. Universal salvation means that God’s love redeems all people in this life and the next. This was extremely radical for the time in which it was born in which strict Calvinism was king. Think back to Jonathan Edward’s 1750 fire and brimstone sermon “Sinners at the hands of an Angry God,” which emphasized that hell was in fact a very real and threatening place.

Our Universalist equivalent of Jonathan Edwards was John Murray. The choir sang an anthem called "Go Out" last week which interpreted his words: "Give them not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God." For Universalists like John Murray to say to their members that they were already saved by the grace of God's love diminished the punitive dimension Calvinist preachers seemed to relish. It also assuaged the fear and guilt often motivating religious practice. If heaven was not a place you didn't have to be terrified of not getting into, you could focus on living a good life. By the mid-20th century when Unitarian and Universalist churches merged to form our Association of churches, many mainstream Protestant churches turned towards liberalism and preached a softer form of Universalism, but still affirmed the doctrine of heaven as central to the Christian message.

For our Unitarian ancestors, a slightly different theological evolution helped push them closer to their Universalist neighbors in faith. By the mid-19th century, ministers like William Ellery Channing were shaping the theological context we now experience as normative. For Channing's Unitarianism, the key theological concept shaping the view of heaven was the nature of Jesus. Jesus was the moral exemplar for humankind, a relatable incarnation of God who encouraged the perfection of character in this life. Channing was very concerned with describing heaven as an ideal place of striving for the diligent. In his memoir, in a sermon called "Heaven, a progressive state," he described heaven as an ongoing perfection of earthly life.

The true view of heaven, that which the Scriptures give that which reason sanctions, and that which we can most powerfully realize, is, that it will not essentially change, but rather improve our nature. We shall be the same beings on earth; we shall retain our present faculties, our present affections, our love of knowledge, love of beauty, love of action, love of approbation, our sympathy, gratitude, and pleasure in success. We shall, probably, too have bodies not different from what we now have—the eye to behold creation and receive its beauties, the ear to hear the voice of friendship and to receive the pleasures of harmony, and even sense refined and purified. This we know, that Jesus in a form like ours ascended into heaven, and when Moses and Elijah conversed with him on the Mount, they appeared in the human form, differing from ours only in its splendor; and from these facts it would seem that our future bodies will bear a general resemblance to the presence.

From Channing's musings on heaven, I take that while a Unitarian Christian minister, the heaven he is most concerned with is the heaven that humans can create on earth, through moral perfection, appreciation of beauty, and human companionship and love. As a "progressive" state, to move into heaven was to move into a sublime state of spiritual maturity. You can read in his writings that he can't make the leap towards thinking of heaven as a "place," merely a "state of being," which can be emulated in this life. While it is difficult to pinpoint when heaven stopped being a topic of passionate sermon writing and debate, my guess is that the World Wars of the mid-20th century produced a curiosity about nature and the larger universe beyond our earthly conflicts, and an ever-stronger reliance on reason and the

scientific method. For many people of faith, the extreme loss of life of the World Wars were so devastating that formerly Christian concepts of heaven seemed of little comfort.

Our theological ancestors can give us clues to what they believed happened after we die, interpreted through the liberal lens of their time in history. What the practices of the holidays we observe today help us to do is similar to the writing of our ancestors, to cultivate a religious imagination about what lies beyond our living, and the legacy we want to leave for generations to come. It is a time for us to think about our own deaths and our wishes for our final days and beyond, if we are fortunate enough to have the time to shape them. We can use this sacred time to call to mind to also consider how we want to be remembered, about what kind of ancestor we want to become. What will our legacy on this earth be? How do we want the living to remember us?

Last fall, a woman in her 90s came into my office. She was a stalwart volunteer in All Souls' Monday Night hospitality program, a feeding program for homeless and hungry people that had gained a reputation amongst guests as the most welcoming environment in the city. This woman wanted to discuss her own death. She had strong ideas about how she wanted her memorial to be, a gathering of friends and family which celebrated the love which she strived to give away in her life. She was not a member of the church, but someone who saw the church as a way that she could express what she believed about life—that all people deserved the hospitality of a warm meal and a kind word. She did not believe in heaven, but did believe in God and that she was doing God's work. The gratitude and relief she expressed to me in discussing her wishes for her memorial service and legacy was clear. Just months later, I received a call from one of our members that the woman had been airlifted back to New York while on a vacation for a medical emergency, and was not going to live much longer. I visited her in the hospital, and received the same gratitude for my presence. "Oh reverend, you came just in time." She was ready to die, and didn't want to suffer. As those she loved gathered around her to say goodbye, she remained positive and hopeful, content with her life, even as it was drawing to a close. Her memorial service was a wonderful testament to her life, a gathering of all the lives she touched, pointing to her greater message of service.

One of the most prominent functions of the liberal church is to offer a spacious and open way for people to face death and what lies beyond. It matters that we can be a place to question the meaning of life and death, to be companions in our doubt and our belief, to celebrate our lives and grieve our losses. In this way, we often call our end of life rituals "memorials," not funerals, and often call them "celebrations of life." We don't ask you to ascribe to a theology about heaven or the afterlife, but to lean into the questions and the mystery of the inevitability of death we share and to create the best heaven we can in our lives. The task of the religious community is to help our lives to be remembered, to say our names aloud to one another again and again and have our legacy of love continue long. This word, remembering, is instructive to us—our liberal faith literally helps us re-member the community of the living with the community of the dead.

“Religion is the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die,” the Rev. Forrest Church, former senior minister of All Souls New York City often said in his writing and preaching. While we never served together directly, I began my ministry at All Souls just one year after his very public death from esophageal cancer, chronicled in detail in his writing and preaching to the congregation. A scholar and pastor, Forrest felt that his most important work was the work of witnessing to the dying process of members and loved ones. His remarkable legacy was to leave Unitarian Universalists with a lasting theology of what he called “love and death.”

His book by the same name, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*, merged our rational and religious views on death into a moving testament to love’s power to transcend death. I leave you with a final quote from an Easter sermon from 2003, foreshadowing his own journey towards the eternal.

After death our bodies may be resurrected. Our souls may transmigrate or become part of the heavenly pleroma. We may join our loved ones in Heaven. Or we may return the constituent parts of our being to the earth from which it came and rest in eternal peace. About life after death, no one knows. But about love after death, we surely know. I learned this from my father, as he did from his father and grandfather before him. I learn it also from each of you. The one thing that can never be taken from this world, even by death, is the love we have given away before we die. Those fortunate enough to complete life’s seven acts may die sans teeth perhaps, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything but love. For love, I swear it, is immortal.

Love, what endures from generation to generation. Love, what makes the loss of our ancestors so painful, and yet so meaningful. Love, the thing felt and seen with our senses that will not let us go, even when death separates us. Love, the force by which we create heaven on earth. May we strive together to become ancestors who leave a legacy of love on this earth.

Amen and blessed be