

## The Spiritual Practice of Remembrance

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I begin with the words of the UU minister Robert T. Weston:

Autumn, we know, is life en route to death.  
The asters are but harbingers of frost.

The trees, flaunting their colors at the sky,  
In other times will follow where the leaves have fallen,  
and so shall we.

Yet other lives will come,  
So may we know, accept, embrace the mystery of life we hold a while

Nor mourn that it outgrows each separate self, but still rejoice that we  
may have our day.

Lift high our colors to the sky!  
And in our time, fresh glory to the earth.

The pagan earth-based traditions celebrate this time as the New Year and name this time, “The Feast of Life in Death.” Samhain (sawen) is the time of year when we, “stop in order to begin again.”

Traditions from around the world name this seasonal slowing down time as a time of increased intuition. If we stop and rest in this season of time—this time that stands between the dead past and the potential future, then an intuitive voice within whispers possibilities.

All religions are a response to this mysterious moment—the moment of life in death, the moment when intuition speaks. The rituals we practice—from carving pumpkins, to dressing up as ghouls and ghosts, to naming our dead and celebrating their memories, are in the service of containing that mystery.

Our rituals teach us how to enter this stopping time between the dead past and the potential future. The various understandings of ghosts and spirits, of

saints, and of souls gives us a language to describe our intuitive encounters with the living energy of the past that seeks to persist into the future.

Today the symbols of two rituals of remembrance enhance our worship. We have the colors, the flowers, the pictures of the Mexican Holiday, the Dia de los Muertos, a holiday that combines the Roman Catholic All Saints and All Souls days rituals with 2,000-year old Mexican Indian traditions. And we have the communion silver, the altar cloth, and the cross that reminds us of the Passover seder meal that Jesus celebrated with his friends 2000 or so years ago.

In Mexico, preparations for the Day of the Dead began last month when markets and shops begin selling all sorts of paraphernalia: delicate paper cut-outs of skeletons, decorated wreaths and crosses, sweetened breads, and sugar or chocolate skulls. In rural Mexico the holiday involves placing the dead person's favorite foods, photographs, flowers, and mementos on a home altar.

Here in Brookline, the ritual of Communion, celebrated today after this service, began with a trip to the Museum of Fine Arts to pick up our the antique silver, a trip filled with memories of other trips to pick up the silver.

It is possible to see either or both of these rituals as primitive or quaint or superstitious. If I were to create an altar for my mother and father and lay out their favorite foods and play their favorite music do their spirits celebrate and dance? Is Jesus really present when we share bread and wine as he did on the night before he died? Peter Morales writes in the Unitarian Universalist World: "if we dismiss the Day of the Dead as pure superstition, we can easily miss the profound spiritual and psychological insight that makes this tradition powerful. A Mexican boy spending the night at his uncle's grave has a connection across time with his forebears that our children do not. While we dwellers in a technological age are connected to the World Wide Web, cellular phones, and cable TV, have message machines, voice mail, pagers, and call waiting, we have cut ourselves off from the web of time. Traditional cultures, with their mediums and ghosts and reincarnations, have understood intuitively something we've repressed: the dead don't die; they live on." (UU World, July/August, 2000)

Perhaps the generation that has grown up with the web will understand the reality of that living presence of the dead better than my very modern

parents generation could. For modern minds, Isaac Newton's world space is empty. In the postmodern thought world, space is a non-material ocean of connections. In the world of quantum physics space the space in which we live is alive with waves of energy that influence and connect us.

So I would add to Peter Morales' notion that rituals give us practice with time travel the notion that rituals teach us to make conscious our connection to the energy fields in which we swim, the energy fields embedded in our bodies and beyond. Like the reading Jim shared from Jung, I like to think of each of us as a rooming house of characters some visible, some locked in the attic.

Who are the spirits alive in the house of your self? Are you feeding them with celebrations and conversation? Do some spirits arrive unbidden and jump into the driver's seat of your life?

Marge Piercy captures the motion of the past living in the present in these lines from her poem, "My Mother's Body":

My twin, my sister, my lost love,  
I carry you in me like an embryo  
as once you carried me.

...

This body is your body, ashes now  
and roses, but alive in my eyes, my breasts,  
my throat, my thighs. You run in me  
a tang of salt in the creek waters of my blood,

you sing in my mind like wine. What you  
did not dare in your life you dare in mine.

As we age, this doorway between our ancestors and our daily lives can become "worn at the sill" as our hymn suggests. Once we learn how to make the connection to the living past we can carry on a conversation that can change the future.

I encountered this wise understanding in a letter of condolence I read some time ago: "She who was always there, is gone. Now the talks and understandings you wished to have with her, but couldn't because of her, can begin to take place, where you and your memories, wishes, regrets,

gratitude are stored. The catching up, reconciliation and love will increase as you get older.... I know from my own life that this is one aspect of immortality. She is gone, but you will get closer to her and she to you. You will know it when she starts saying things to you she never could (before), because of you. Keep talking.”

As long as my friend can keep the door open between this life and the world of the dead in which his mother now lives, his relationship with her will continue to grow.

Rituals of remembrance are a way of keeping that doorway open so that the past doesn't have to sneak in or behave in shadowy ways out of our consciousness. Rituals do not need to be elaborate or communal. They can be simple and private.

Ironing and dusting are rituals that bring my mother forward for conversation. I can feel her pleasure in doing things systematically when I iron the collar first, then the front opening, and then the sleeves. Her growing up was chaotic and so knowing how to iron a shirt properly was an achievement of order for the chaos that still lurked in her mental attic.

On the other hand, my Dad grew up in an overly controlled and predictable home. Listening to jazz invites my dancing and singing Dad to the table. I like the chance to free him from the jail of his solid predictability. Lately I've been sharing their presence with others—Frank, our sexton, has come to know my mother in these dusty days here in Brookline. He likes to do his work properly too. A gathering of UUs who'd been talking all day saw glimpses of my Dad as we danced to “When the Saints Come Marching In” at the end of the Fall Conference. It was good to break out of the jail of convention for just a bit. I can feel the doorway between the living and the dead swinging both ways. My life redeems the past. The past keeps me good company in times of transition.

The postmodern, quantum truth cries out in this time when the doorway between the living and the dead swings both ways. We are the living past for a future that is already alive within us.

Take a moment to notice that we are the ancestors for the generations to come. Imagine for now that the people of our past are cheering us on, asking us to make good choices, reminding us that we matter to them. Our

ancestors depend upon us to carry them forward and the future will keep us good company in the transition.

Lift high our colors to the sky and let us sing to their minds like wine “For All the Saints,” #103.