
LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

A sermon by the Rev. Jackie Clement
Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL
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I hope you've noticed the quilt gracing the front of the pulpit today. It comes from Mary and Bill Zeller's 40th anniversary party. A friend who could not be present sent Mary fabric for the party guests to sign and later made this quilt from them. It contains the names of some church members here today, but also the names of some who offered dedicated service to this community and who are no longer living. Charles Bassi, Ned Jefferson, Pax Bowers and Francis Irvin are a few of the names you'll find there, and it is fitting that their names hang here in the sanctuary today as we celebrate el Dia de los muertos, the Day of the Dead. For today, we reach out across time. We look back to the lives of those who shared life with us, who shared love with us. We remember them anew and honor them in doing so.

But as much as we look back, we cannot turn back. As the song we just sang urges us we must keep on moving forward, never turning back. But looking back is not turning back. To illustrate the difference I offer this story from the theologian Jim Carse.

Carse and his family were visiting a lakeside summer camp where he met another family who were there to consult someone who channeled communications with the dead, what would be commonly called a medium. The family regularly did this to keep their lost loved one connected to the life of the family and to involve them in making decisions about family life. While Carse was sympathetic to the loss this family suffered he was astounded when he asked how long ago the person had died and was told 29 years.

We know there is no time limit to grieving. You do not forget someone, stop loving them or stop wishing they were with you because 29 years has passed. But Carse saw the continual inclusion of the person in family life through the communication of a spiritualist as more than remembrance. He saw it as a denial of death. He wrote these words:

These were people who had sought to have death taken away – and death was taken away. Death was now but one event in an unbroken cycle of events, and therefore no longer death. Death no more ended anything in their lives than a leap from the diving board ended the swimmers' play. Life and death had merged into a timeless whole that nothing could disturb. I could not help feeling that when they got what they asked for, it was not death that ended; it was their lives that had ended. I could not know them where they lived. I could only look on with an indulgent smile. I sat next to them that afternoon – but twenty-nine years away.

This family so wanted the life they knew to continue that they sought, by whatever means, to keep the connection alive. They wanted life, but without the pain, without the loss. They wanted to banish death, and in so doing they sacrificed precious truths – that our lives are finite, that the

years we have should be treasured all the more for being limited, that to live in the past is to sacrifice the present and the future.

The Day of the Dead also teaches that death is, as Carse wrote, an “event in an unbroken cycle of events”, but in a very different way, in a way that is almost the antithesis of what Carse saw in his summer acquaintances. Day of the Dead teaches that life and death are both part of the natural cycle of human existence because we must live with the knowledge that death cannot be banished. Indeed Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church defined religion as the “human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” He wrote these words:

We learn from history, pay homage to those who have gone before us, and acknowledge our own mortality. At the same time, we teach ourselves two important lessons: 1) life is complicit with death and 2) meaning is divined within life’s narrow margins.

I add to Church’s thought the question that if life had no margins would we divine as much meaning within it? And in there lies the difference between looking back and turning back, the difference between acknowledging cycles and banishing death. And so, today, we look back to all that our ancestors, our loved ones, friends and family now gone from us, gave to us. We remember them as they were in life. We shed tears that they are no longer with us. But we know that we cannot go back to what no longer is. We take what we have been given by those who have come before us, we take the wisdom, the kind words and gentle memories, we take even the hurts and slights forward with us. From these we make meaning; with these we build our present and seek our own way forward. And we allow the very finite nature of it all to make life more precious.

That which moves our spirits forward, that from which we make most meaning is not always pleasant, not always easy. It often requires us to meet pain head on; to acknowledge the dual reality of being alive and having to die. In 1919, at the conclusion of World War I, the war to end all wars, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote these words:

If in the general darkness and incertitude that have descended upon all things human, I can still see one paramount task before me, independent of all else, it is this: to use the deepest joys and splendors of life to strengthen our trust in Death, and again to make him, who was never a stranger, more known and felt as the silent sharer in all life’s processes.

This is what the Day of the Dead is all about, not the banishment of death, but looking it squarely in the face in a way that might take away some of its sting. It is about strengthening our trust in Death as a silent sharer in all life’s processes to deepen our appreciation of today and inspire our way forward.

And may it be so.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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