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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – October 28, 2007

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The blazing colors of autumn herald the gateway between the vibrance of summer and the starkness of winter. Here in this part of the world, we are fortunate to be the recipients of this annual natural spectacle—but throughout the Northern Hemisphere, days are getting shorter as our calendar approaches the Winter Solstice.

In many places, harvests are being brought in, and people are preparing for the time when the Earth rests for a few months.

Many cultures throughout time have responded to the dwindling daylight of autumn by celebrating the transitions of life, most especially the passage from life into death.

The ancient Celtic people of Northern Europe celebrated a holiday they called Samhain at this time of year. Literally “summer’s end,” Samhain is still marked by Wiccans today. Many years ago, it formed the basis for the Roman Catholic Church’s celebration of All Hallow’s Eve—a name that gave birth to our modern-day Halloween.

Rebecca Kelley-Morgan writes that:

“The religion of the Celtic people was very concerned with life and death. And the year was divided into two parts: light and dark. The light time of the year, beginning in the spring, was the time of life, of crops and harvest. After the last harvest, at the end of Autumn, this time of year, people moved into what they called the dark time, when everything seemed to be dying and lifeless. And there was one day, the holy day of Samhain, when the great wheel of life shuddered and turned. This day was the time when people stopped between worlds, between light and dark, between life and death. The day when they looked both backwards and forwards.” (<http://archive.uua.org/re/reach/worship/samhain.html>)

In the Wiccan tradition, the veil between life and death is at its thinnest at Samhain. It is at this time that we allow ourselves to touch and be touched by those who have passed into death before us. It is at this time that we mourn, it is now that we remember, and it is now that we celebrate our ancestors.

Catholic people celebrate All Souls’ Day on November 2, a day on which they pray for souls who have died without atoning for their sins—souls caught in Purgatory, outside of heaven. On this day, Catholic people go to the All Souls’ mass to pray for their ancestors, that they might reach salvation in heaven.

In Mexico (as well as many places where people of Mexican descent live), the All Saints Day and All Souls Day holidays are combined into a festival called Dia de los Muertos—the Day of the Dead. The Rev. Peter Morales of the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado, writes about this holiday that is a part of his cultural heritage. He says:

“The Día de los Muertos is an annual November holiday that combines the Roman Catholic All Saints and All Souls days rituals with 2,000-year-old Mexican Indian traditions. Unlike Halloween, where the dead are seen as threatening, the Mexican holiday honors and remembers them with two days of feasting, processions, pageantry, and religious rites that sometimes include fireworks.

“Preparations begin in mid-October, when markets and shops begin selling all sorts of paraphernalia: delicate paper cut-outs of skeletons called papel picado, decorated wreaths and crosses, sweetened breads, sugar or chocolate skulls, and macabre toys such as miniature coffins made of paper or wood and containing skeletons that sit up when a string is pulled. In rural Mexico the holiday involves placing the dead person's favorite foods, photographs, flowers, and mementos on a home altar. Many families also keep all-night, candlelight vigils in the graveyards where their dead are buried and attend open-air memorial masses. November 1 is commonly devoted to remembering infants and children, November 2 to remembering adults.”

(<http://www.uuworld.org/2000/0700feat3.html>)

Dia de los Muertos is a pure celebration. Our altar, with memories of those who have gone before us, is in honor of this tradition—one which many Mexican and Mexican-American people are happy to share with others. Though we honor this tradition, we have specifically chosen not to try to replicate it, for to do so I believe would be insensitive.

The religion of Santeria has its origins in Cuba and some nearby Caribbean islands. It was developed there by enslaved peoples, and, like Voudoun in Haiti and Candomble in Brazil, it is known as a “syncretistic” religion. These religions combine the religions of the Yoruba, Bantu, baKonga and Dahomean peoples of Africa (the native religions of those who were brought to this hemisphere as slaves) with elements of the Roman Catholicism of the Spanish slaveholders, and, in some cases, native religions practiced by those who were there before colonization.

One of the the major parts of Santeria, a religion widely misunderstood by those who do not practice it, is the veneration of one’s ancestors.

“Ones ancestors, called Ara Orun (People of Heaven) are referred to for moral guidance and example. Their names are recited at family ceremonies.” (Ontario Consultants on religious tolerance, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/santeri3.htm>)

In this tradition, ancestor worship and veneration of the dead takes place all year round, but there are special meanings to this time of year as well. October 1 is the day dedicated to Saint Theresa in the Catholic faith, whose Santerian counterpart is Oya, the goddess of change and the underworld. Oya is again celebrated between October 31 and November 2.

The native peoples of this region have special celebrations at this time of year as well. October 29 marks the Feast of the Dead in the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, tradition in which offerings are made to those who have died in order to help them in their journey to the land of the dead. The six nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora nations—are the original inhabitants of most of what is now upstate New York, southern Quebec and Ontario and northern Pennsylvania. Several other Native American nations also celebrate the cycles of birth and death in this season as well.

While some cultures and religions, including Chinese Buddhists and Eastern Orthodox Christians, celebrate the passage between life and death passage in the Spring, at the gateway on the other side of winter, the list of peoples for whom the growing night of autumn marks the time to recognize the passage from life to death is long.

Today, we, too, mark this gateway, the passage from life to death.

There are those who might contend that death is, in and of itself, and end. As far as consciousness goes, as far as any discussions of the soul, or wonderings about an afterlife, they may be right.

Today, however, I ask you to pause for a moment and think about these words of Senegalese poet Birago Diop, so beautifully adapted and put to music by Unitarian Universalist composer and singer Ysaye Maria Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock:

*Those who are dead have never gone away.
They are at the breast of the wife.
They are in the child's cry of dismay
And the firebrand bursting into life.
The dead are not under the ground.
They are in the fire that burns low,
They are in the grass with tears to shed,
In the rock where whining winds blow.
They are in the forest, they are in the homestead.
The dead are never dead.*

*Listen more to things
Than to words that are said.
The water's voice sings
And the flame cries
And the wind that brings
The woods to sighs
Is the breathing of the dead. (excerpt from Breath, by Birago Diop)*

Open your imaginations for a moment to this thought: Are the dead really dead, or might they somehow live on in this world?

It is possible that death is not an end, but a change in the way we are in this world.

It is possible that life and death are, in the words of Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a “twisted vine sharing one root.”

It is possible that though what we call “life” may end at death, existence does not.

Surely, our molecules do not die—whether they are burned and scattered, or buried in the ground, the molecules of our being become part of the Earth.

They are recycled in the clouds and the rain, falling into streams that sing as they rush towards the sea.

They are reclaimed by the bacteria of the soil, reused by the tree that grows in that soil, and then consumed and changed by the flame that feeds on the wood from that tree.

Any student of advanced chemistry can tell you that matter is neither created nor destroyed.

Again and again, our molecules will cycle through all of life, for all of eternity. They will change and be changed, they might be converted to energy or infused with more through complex pathways. But our substance exists long after our life has ended.

Surely, our actions do not die—they are remembered in the thoughts and deeds of our loved ones, they are used by people seeking to learn, they serve as inspiration or lessons, memories or building blocks for something new.

Our deeds live on in the lives of others. Our presence here in this time creates a different future for all those who would follow us.

So, even if the conscience dies, if there is nothing of a soul to carry on after we are gone, can it really be said that the dead are really dead if there is someone to remember and celebrate them? If there is someone, somewhere that carries their genes or something, somewhere that is using their matter?

Can it really be said that the dead are no longer with us if there is someone among us who reads what they wrote, or cooks from their recipes?

Someone who is warmed by the quilts they stitched by candlelight or who treasures the picture of an ancestor they never met?

Someone who has been inspired by their life, someone who has made better by their work, or someone who has learned from their mistakes?

Today, we are reminded those who are dead might no longer be alive, but neither are they gone from existence.

On this day, in this season of dwindling light and cool nights and blazing autumn colors, let us pause to celebrate and remember.

Let us celebrate and remember those who have gone before us, those whose lives, in the words of poet Maya Angelou, have paid for us to be here.

Let us feel the presence of our ancestors, in the rustling trees, in the child's wail, in the moaning rocks, and in the beating of our hearts.

Let us understand that those who have died live on through us—as memories, as spirits, as DNA, as traditions and stories and jokes, as sources of our empathy for others, and as inspirations for our being.

Let us look through the veil that separates the time of living from the time of death and feel all that comes up within us—for there is sadness, mourning, and loss, but also gratitude, love and joy in the memories we carry.

And most of all, let us use this time of year in which cultures around the world recognize the spiritual and ethereal around us to remind ourselves of our tangible humanness, to remember that we can still be fully alive, agents of change, creative forces in the universe, and most of all, both sources and objects of love.