

**Remembering to Heal**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
November 1, 2009

**Call to Worship**

How good to gather together in this place made sacred by our love...  
to be reminded here of our highest aspirations,  
to be inspired here generation to generation  
to bring our gifts of remembrance, love, and service  
to the altar of humanity.

**Sermon**

Of all the Halloween costumes I recall wearing as a child – which included a seriously wounded football player and Pinocchio with a seriously extended nose – my favorite was also the cheapest and easiest, the old fashioned sheet over the head ghost. When was the last time you saw a sheet over the head ghost on Halloween?

Have we banished the ghosts from Halloween?

Aren't the ghosts the whole point?

For Halloween, All Hallows Eve, Samhain on the old Pagan or Celtic calendar, is that night during which it is said that the veil between the living and the dead is the thinnest, so that the souls of the dead might come closer to us on that night, might come to visit.

So here's a question: Does this idea frighten us or console us?

In many traditional cultures a place for the honored dead is set at the table, inviting the dead to dinner. So I suppose whether we are frightened or consoled has to do with who might be coming to dinner.

When I think of who might come to our table, well, what could be sweeter – than to have my father at the table with us, my father-in-law Charlie, my grandmother (the one who made tapioca pudding for every Sunday dinner and let me mix grape jelly into it), my grandfather, so kind and genial, or the grandparents I never knew, my grandmother of the beautiful contralto, my grandfather who gave me my middle name, the Presbyterian preacher of inclusive, ecumenical spirit, my piano teacher Ray Koos who became also a dear friend and support, professors who opened my mind to philosophy and my heart to service and love. The guest list grows longer by the minute! What a feast it would be! How many questions to ask! How many stories to hear and share! What could be sweeter?

Yet we, Americans almost all of us descended from those who came from somewhere else, who wanted or needed or were forced to get away from somewhere else, old ties sundered however sadly... we so easily forget to remember, fail to set a place for the departed at our dinner tables or in our lives. And what a loss this is. For we are also forgetting that in remembering can come healing.

Think of these two words for a moment, healing and remembering. Healing comes from roots having to do with wholeness, making whole. And remembering... we can think of it as re-

remembering, putting ourselves back together. And one of the ways we do that as human beings is to acknowledge that part, a huge part, of who we are has been given us by all those we have loved and who have loved or influenced us... many of whom have passed from among the living. The memories may of course not all be happy ones. But to the extent we are able to make the past part of our present, we will experience our lives at a greater depth, we will become more whole – more healed.

Many of you are familiar with the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead - Día de los Muertos. This year we have been encouraged to mark our own form of a similar celebration by creating altars to loved ones in the Fellowship Hall, which a few of you have done. Perhaps more of us will do this next year. And together we have created a shared altar of photographs and mementos here in our Meeting House.

In Mexico, such altars are created at this time of year in people's homes, feasts are shared, leftovers are brought to the graveside of the beloved ones who have passed. Picnics on the grave of father, mother, aunt, uncle, brother, sister... Mourning? Of course. But also festivity and celebration.

We lose so much when we forget to remember.

The president of our Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Peter Morales, puts it this way:

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, [while we] 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.

“Connected to the World Wide Web... we have cut ourselves off from the web of time.” And what a loss it is!

So, on our Remembrance Sunday, as we have done for the past seven years, we try to resurrect (pun intended) rituals of remembering: remembering to heal as we reweave the web of our lives across time.

Here at Old Ship if we take a moment to remember, we can reweave that web as a community. Let me remind some of you, tell for the first time to others who are newer among us, that Wilmon and Katharine Brewer sat in that pew over there – their spirits sit even now; and in the next pew over Jan Colby, along with Ed (who still lives, now in Pennsylvania); over here sat Percy Lee, in his later years (he lived to 101 – even, so not quite as old as Wilmon Brewer at 103) with old friend Libby Thompson. Back there was Ellen Blaser, a little earlier still with her dear husband Karcher. In the choir loft was Mike Vining. Right in front of me Larry Street... Ware Williams.

Oh, I'm going to leave out so many more than I am naming. Yet all their spirits are with us even now, not *haunting* us, but *helping* us if we would allow them into this sacred space, allow them back into our hearts if we had let them go, forgotten for a time to remember, the look in their eyes, the love and wisdom in their hearts and minds.

Then, we can at least begin to imagine all those we never knew who sat in these pews long before us.

Yet they all helped to shape who we are in this Old Ship community of ours now. And in a real sense they *are* with us still, if we would let them be, if we would invite them to the table of our lives.

Just as those loved ones closer to our hearts are with us still, if we would let them be, let them in, remember to remember, then remembering too such wisdom as was theirs to share: What would my father do? What would my friend have to say about this? Of what would my teacher remind me?

Why *do* we forget to remember, neglect sometimes, perhaps too much of the time, to keep the departed as much in our lives as we could? To some extent it is just that we have allowed our lives to become too busy, too full, too pressed, too fast in the midst of this culture of people who have come from somewhere else.

But there is of course another reason, as yet unspoken this morning. A reason as ancient as human consciousness. To remember those we loved who have died is to be reminded that someday we will follow them across the veil that separates the living from the dead. This is no easy reminder. Yet paradoxically, if we push this reminder of our own mortality away, we at the same time draw away from a fuller experience of life.

Storyteller Madronna Holden tells us of an old European tale which warns of the dangers of pretending that death has nothing to do with us:

In this story, a man searches for the land of “life without death,” and eventually finds it. He sequesters himself in this land, where he does not age or die. At last loneliness overtakes him and he seeks to return to his family and friends, but he returns a desperate stranger to the world where those he loved have aged and died in his absence. Further, when he re-enters the real world, time catches up with him, and he crumbles to dust.

To try to escape from the reality or consciousness of death, Holden comments, is to isolate ourselves “from time and the cycle of generations that flows from it” – cut off from the web of time, as Peter Morales put it.

Holden says further that the man in the tale has paradoxically robbed himself of his greatest longevity, “the longevity that, as the Chinese saying has it, is measured by how long we remember into the past and how long we are remembered in the future.”

In other words, our human wholeness is not just a wholeness in the here and now, but a wholeness across time, linked across generations. Which is why cultivating our remembering of the beloved dead helps us to be more whole even in the shattered brokenness of our grief... and helps sustain a culture of re-remembering forward through the generations.

But a culture of remembering is created one by one. In Stanley Kunitz’s evocative poem “The Layers,” the poet asks “How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?” The response comes through “a nimbus-clouded voice” which speaks the message:

“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”

Life isn't always easy, and no one said it would be. We all have our losses, and some have more losses or more painful and tragic losses than others.

But not only do we have each other along the way, to hold, to help, to heal. We can also find healing by setting a place at our table for those who have gone before and who are with us still if we let them be, if we invite them in to our lives. For, as Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn has written, "as long as we live they too shall live, if we remember them."

Our lives will indeed be the richer for this grateful remembering, for the healing which comes with remembering, for this greater wholeness that comes from living in the layeredness of our lives... even in the midst of our brokenness finding a larger wholeness.

So may it be.

### **Benediction**

Let the horizon of our minds include all people:  
The great family here on earth with us;  
Those who have gone before and left to us the heritage  
of their memory and of their work;  
And those whose lives will be shaped by what we do or leave undone.  
*(Samuel Crothers)*

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### **A final reading:**

"We measure time by its deaths, yes, and by its births. For time is told also by life. As some depart, others come. The hand opened in farewell remains open in welcome. I, who once had grandparents and parents, now have children and grandchildren. Like the flowing river that is yet always present, time that is always going is always coming. And time that is told by death and birth is held and redeemed by love, which is always present. Time, then, is told by love's losses, and by the coming of love, and by love continuing in gratitude for what is lost. It is folded and enfolded and unfolded forever and ever, the love by which the dead are alive and the unborn welcomed into the womb. The great question for the old and the dying, I think, is not if they have loved and been loved enough, but if they have been grateful enough for love received and given, however much. No one who has gratitude is the onliest one. Let us pray to be grateful to the last."

-- *from Andy Catlett Early Travels, by Wendell Berry, 2006.*