

## “All Saints and All Souls”

As you may be aware, the monthly theme for consideration at the Society this November is “Connection.” My hope for this morning’s service is to recognize and appreciate with you some connections we have with loved ones who have died, as well as with “explorers and pioneers” from previous generations. The poem “Breaths,” by Borago Diop says:

“Those who have died have never, never left. The dead have a pact with the living.... Tis the ancestors’ breath when the fire’s voice is heard. Tis the ancestors’ breath in the voice of the waters.”

Communion is another word used to describe connections between living beings, and between the living and the dead. We are in communion with those who have died in everything from the genes in our bodies to the quirks and perks in our psyches.

The channels for connection between the living and the dead are numerous and varied: dreams, music, mementos, ongoing conversations, visions, old jackets in the back of the closet, favorite recipes, grandma’s quilts, going to cherished places or visiting the cemetery - all these are possible, and common, means of connection. Taking time to read a faded note tucked into a book.... Carrying on a family tradition intentionally fosters connection; rituals connect generations of families and communities.

Being part of a faith tradition is a way to be in communion with the wisdom and inspiration of our “ancestors.” The second source of our Unitarian Universalist “living tradition” is “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Prophetic women and men are our spiritual ancestors. We connect with them **and** with the transforming power of love when we take up our ancestors’ challenges and dreams.

Although on the face of it, it may seem that death silences all communication and severs all connection, if you look at how often our memories are touched, or a person’s inspirational or sustaining presence comes into our minds, or even note the aging patterns of our own bodies, a very natural connection between the living and the dead may be seen. The play goes on. Those we love who have died are often present within and around us in a real way. If there are those we cannot forgive, they may grate at us. Most importantly, we don’t stop loving the people we love when they have died - it is unnatural to try. LOVE - the essence of connection - survives death.

Is there anyone on “the other side” of death holding on to the lines of connection we cast over the chasm of the grave? Do any messages, dreams or signs originate from over there? Is anyone holding up their end of the conversation when we ask for guidance or support from our predecessors? Each one of us has their own response to these age-old questions:

“I don’t know if there is life after death” is a forthright and time-honored response.

“I know loved ones on the other side communicate with me and with others” has always

been popular, and is my own personal favorite.

“I simply keep faith with my loved one’s memories” is a beautiful and wholly sufficient affirmation as well.

Our questions and answers regarding death may change over time, or not. The dead’s pact with the living is that they continue on with us, in whatever form we allow.

For millennia, human beings from many cultures have made efforts to honor the dead in this season. It seems healthy, somehow, to designate a season to honor the dead and the role they have in our lives - and to acknowledge the place that death, itself, has in our lives.

The phrase “Near Death Experience” has been used to denote occasions wherein people have been physically dead, had some kind of experience during those minutes of clinical death, then have revived and returned to life to tell about it. I would say, however, that every one of us has had some kind of “near death experience.” Death is a natural part of our lives, for as long as we live. I recall my daughter’s first formal meeting with death. After the two of us laid her goldfish to rest in the black earth of the back yard, Johanna said “God, we are sending Goldy **down** to heaven now, so please meet her.”

Death is a character in our day to day living. We encounter it in nature, in the news, and in our own experience. Like birth, it is an experience universally shared by all beings.

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It is very hard to just sit with the reality of death. At a certain level, there are no words. We human beings soon try to find some way around or through the power of that fathomless transition. Psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton identified five modes through which human beings seek immortality - five modes, if you will, through which we stay connected and a part of life, even after we have died. I have found his ideas to be most helpful. His book in which he describes these “modes,” or categories of connection, is The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life.

First, Lifton identifies the “biological mode,” meaning our families. This is the most universal and fundamental way of “staying connected” after death. The “family” can also mean clan, country or nation; as humans evolve, there is a widening awareness of “family” connections extending through all life. Ghandi, who said - and meant - “All men are my brothers” tapped a living, transforming source of love- this love does not die. Our grandchildren, or the young people here in this congregational family, or the children in a New American family with whom you may volunteer - whatever it is in us that identifies with them, will live on. [Lifton, p. 18]

Second in Lifton’s list of connective modes which survive death is “the theological or religious mode.” “There is at the heart of religion,” says Lifton, “a sense of spiritual power. That power may be understood in a number of ways - dedication, capacity to love, moral energy - but its final meaning is life-power and power over death....The state of possessing (or of living under the protection of) this power, rather than the concrete idea of afterlife, is the more universal to religious experience.” [Lifton, p. 20]

Theologian Forrest Church, who served for almost 30 years as Minister at All Souls

Unitarian Universalist Church in New York, described this power a few weeks before he died:

“Love never dies. I’m not certain about life after death. I know, however, that love is immortal, that every act of love we perform in this life extends like a little catena of pearls. It’s carried on into one life and then passed into another, so that centuries from now, not named with our name nor signed with our

signature, but initiated by us and borne by our heirs, our love lives on. That’s the work of religion. The work of religion is to make sure that the love we

spread carries further than the division and hate.”

[The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology, Forrest Church, p.176]

Not surprisingly, Forrest Church’s beautiful UU theology blends into Lifton’s next mode of immortality, which he calls the creative. Creative acts of kindness, service and “any form of acting upon others” contain “important perceptions of timeless consequences.” “The creative - whether through great works of art, literature or science, or through more humble influences on people around us...has long been recognized as participating in...immortality.” [Lifton, p. 21]

I have a picture on my wall - a seascape - painted by my Aunt Muriel. She wasn’t a great artist, but it doesn’t matter. She was kind to me. The picture reminds me, not of the sea, but of her kindness. She created a life-giving connection with me that outlasted her death. I imagine you have creations or stories from your loved ones which speak to you of similar loving kindness.

Fourth in Lifton’s list of modes of connection is “nature itself: the perception that the natural environment around us, limitless in space and time, will remain.” We are connected with those who have died through the very air we breathe. And for many of us, the knowledge that we return to the earth to continue in the cycle of the elements provides our clearest sense of immortality and connection.

Lifton notes “No wonder that survivors of Hiroshima, struggling to absorb their holocaust and to establish their own sense of continuity, so often quoted the ancient...saying: ‘The state may collapse but the mountains and rivers remain.’ Indeed, immediately after the bomb fell, the most terrifying rumor among the many that swept the city was that trees, grass, and flowers would never again grow in Hiroshima....The subsequent appearance of early spring buds, especially those of the March cherry blossoms, symbolized the detoxification of the city and (in the words of its then mayor) ‘a new feeling of relief and hope.’” [Lifton, p. 23]

Whether in the garden, or by a stream, or in the woods, sometimes the connections folks sense with loved ones are felt most clearly in nature. When we, ourselves, are gone, I imagine most of us, if given the opportunity, might seek to send a message to our loved ones in the song of a bird, in a gust of wind or by some simple, beautiful means at hand in nature.

Lastly, Lifton says we seek to stay connected with the Life which underlies the rift of death through the experience of transcendence. “The crucial requirement for feeling ecstatic - ‘outside of oneself’ - would seem to be” he says, “the breakout from prosaic psychic complexities into a state of pure focus, of inner unity and harmony.” This state

is found in religious mysticism, and also in more down-to-earth experiences; among those cited by Lifton are “song, dance, battle, sexual love, childbirth, athletic effort, mechanical flight, contemplation of the past, and artistic or intellectual creation. Characteristic of the ecstatic state in all of these activities is a sense of extraordinary psychic unity, and perceptual intensity, and of ineffable illumination and insight.” [Lifton, p. 25]

I think most folks have moments when we feel ourselves to be at one with life within and around us. Whether we call these moments “being in the now,” or “transcendent,” the quality of experience is one of peace and connection. When we identify primarily with who we are in those timeless moments, we are “who we were before we were born,” as the Sufi mystics say. Birth and death are complementary opposites. The transcendent person lives from the place of seeing birth and death, both, as a part of living.

Here’s a saying I learned some time ago which speaks from that wider perspective:

“Life is eternal, and love is immortal, and death is only a horizon.

And a horizon is nothing, save the limit of our sight.”

These words were written by a prophetic man named Rossiter Worthington Raymond (b. 1840- d. 1918), a captain in the Union army, Secretary of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgy, and Petroleum Engineers, poet and hymn writer. A prophetic, transcendent fellow who took the long view.

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Death has been described as a tear in the web of life. Certainly it seems that way. When you love people, dogs, trees, oceans - whatever it is you love - it hurts to see them die. We miss the company of beings we know who have died, plain and simple. In some way, perhaps there should always be just a small tear in our image of the web of connection, in honor of the dead and the mystery which surrounds them.

In Judaism, folks tear a bit of their clothing to signify grief. Muslims and Navajo rug makers alike intentionally weave a flaw into their beautiful rugs; they leave a small space open in the weave.

There are also so many strands of connection we have with those who have died. They are as close at hand as appreciating a flower which has the same name as your grandmother, and realizing that - drawing strength for living from it. When we give ourselves permission to be connected, the lines of communication that are natural for us are cleared.

For our own part, death is a character we know all our lives, one way or another. And it could come to us at any time, that is just the way of life. But there are creative, life-enhancing connections we can forge now which will endure past death. There is a faith we experience which will carry us on over the horizon: Love never dies. AMEN