

## All Souls

In the world outside these walls, it's very much Hallowe'en that's getting top billing this weekend... but over the next ten minutes or so we're going to put all the pumpkins aside for a bit, and take our cue from the actual Pagan and Christian festivals that are coming up over the next few days.

For pagans, today is Samhain – in the old Celtic traditions this was apparently considered to be the time of year when the veils between this world and the Otherworld were at their thinnest, and when the spirits of the dead could mingle more freely with the living. In the Christian church calendar, tomorrow – November the first – is All Saints Day. This is a day when Christians are called to celebrate the lives of all the saints and martyrs who aren't high-profile enough to have a dedicated day all to themselves. The day after – All Souls Day – is when the mainstream church remember the 'faithful departed' and pray for the souls of those in purgatory. To take a liberal religious tack, though, and make it our own, I'll quote a Unitarian Universalist minister, Carl Seaburg, who puts it like this:

*"[All Souls] Day is set apart in many churches for the commemoration of those 'holy souls' who have graced our lives and passed from our living circle. Their radiance, their works, their memories, are still with us – and on this day we meet to celebrate them fondly. And thoughtfully too, remembering that we also some day shall follow where they went."*

These words from Carl Seaburg put me in mind rather more of the Day of the Dead, as celebrated in Mexico, when (as I understand it), whole families will visit the graves of their beloved dead, taking picnics and decorations... as well as the sorrow of loss, there is a kind of joyful remembering, and a sense that the loved ones are still very much amongst us and included in the ongoing circle of community.

My hope is that today's service will have that kind of tone – honouring and celebrating the lives of those we have loved and lost – but at the same time I don't wish to simply brush aside the pain and despair that we may feel when a loved one dies. It may well be that some people here in the congregation today are recently bereaved, and are right in the midst of the raw grief this very moment... if this the case for you, today, I hope that we can gently hold you in the warmth of this community during your time of deep sorrow.

It occurs to me that there may also be some present here today who haven't ever experienced the death of anyone who they were particularly close to. Just over two years ago I was in that position myself. In October 2008, Sarah and Michaela were running a short course here at Essex Church, looking at issues around death and dying. I clearly remember coming along to one of the sessions and saying that I had no particular fear of my own death, but that the thought of losing a loved one was quite unbearable, and reflecting on the fact that up to that point I had never known the death of anyone I'd been close to.

Within a week of that conversation, my beloved friend Simon John Barlow died suddenly, without warning. He was out shopping, and he collapsed, and never regained consciousness. He had been the absolute centre of my life for five years – I had thought we would grow old together – and then he was gone.

It was with Simon John in mind that I particularly wanted to lead the service on this theme today and indeed I used a prayer he wrote earlier on as I wanted include him in today's service somehow.

I want to own up to a certain cowardliness at this point. I made a conscious decision not to wrangle with the usual questions of the afterlife in my sermon today. Instead, I'd like to offer a few words on that subject from Forrest Church, a much-loved Unitarian Universalist minister, author and theologian who himself died just over a year ago. He says:

*"Whatever happens to us after we die, life doesn't end in oblivion. It continues in love, our own love, once given, everlasting. After death our bodies may be resurrected. Our souls may transmigrate or become part of the heavenly pleroma. We may join our loved ones in Heaven. Or we may return the constituent parts of our being to the earth from which it came and rest in eternal peace. About life after death, no-one knows. But about love after death, we surely know. The one thing that can never be taken from this world, even by death, is the love we have given away before we die. Love, I swear it, is immortal."*

In those words from Forrest Church there are echoes of the message in the May Sarton poem we heard earlier:

*"Dear child, what has been once so interwoven / cannot be raveled or the gift ungiven."*

And also of the silent verses from Henri Nouwen on the front of your order of service:

*"You have to trust that every true friendship has no end... those you have loved deeply and who have died live on in you."*

That's at the heart of what I want to say today. Each time we deeply connect with another – truly meet a friend or lover at soul level – we are changed by the encounter. We learn and we grow. And this process doesn't end, even after our loved one has died.

It's not all starlight and roses, however. In any true, authentic, relationship there's bound to be an element of tussle and grit – we are challenged by each other, we move apart and come together again, our worldviews are shifted and hopefully enlarged by the interchange – all this is in the very nature of letting down our defences and being real with each other.

Of course, I hope, there's joy too – pure delight in each other's company, the unique, beautiful, manifestation of the divine spark that we have recognised and met in another – but any real-world relationship is bound to contain light and shade. And, I'll say it again, this doesn't end with death. Here are some words from another Unitarian Universalist minister, Victoria Weinstein, on the matter:

*“There is no need to end our relationship with our dead, for they are still ours: still ours to struggle with, to learn from, and to love. There is no timeline for grieving them and there is no finitude to loving them. Through time – as long a time as it takes – we take their dreams and their desires and their issues and integrate them into our own; we make use of whatever hard-won wisdom they were lucky enough to gain while they lived. We continue to forgive them, if forgiveness is called for. We continue the work of their hands.”*

So says Victoria Weinstein. And, for me, that's what we're called to do on All Souls Day: to cherish and keep alive the gifts we have been given by our loved ones. We may have memories, photographs, mementos – and, if we're lucky, our loved ones might have left behind something they have created, maybe art or writing, in which they've expressed something of themselves, their wisdom, their message for the world – but whether or not these artefacts remain, we who have truly known and loved them can carry something of them onwards. We might take on particular projects in their name, as a memorial, or we may simply let their influence continue to guide our steps in more subtle ways.

The other side of All Souls Day, though, is to bring into awareness the prospect of our own ending – one day it will be our time to go. What will we leave behind in our turn? People who have had a brush with a life-threatening illness often speak of how it has focussed their mind – they resolve to live and love without holding back, to do whatever good they can while there's still time, to create and express themselves, and share whatever wisdom they have gained with others – to live more boldly so they don't die regretting those things unsaid or undone. We don't have to have been to the brink ourselves, though, to try and live this way. Reflecting on death and loss, as we're called to do on this day, can remind us to truly live more deeply now.

Today, then, let's remember the lives of those who have given us inspiration, strength, comfort, and love. Let us give thanks for those whose presence is always with us and honour their memory with a ceremony of remembrance. I invite you to come up and light a candle – or several, if you wish – to remember beloved friends and family who have died, or maybe those people who have touched our lives through their work, teachers and inspirational figures from across the generations. I ask you to simply come up and speak the name of the person you are remembering, or to light the candle in silence if you wish, and perhaps leave just a little pause between each of the names to honour their memory.

*(time for lighting candles)*

All of these holy souls live on, in us.

To close our ceremony of remembrance, I'd like to offer some words from the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC, Robert Hardies:

*“Every year, All Souls Day affords us the opportunity to remember the dead, and to remember also that one day we will join them, that one day people will sit in this very sanctuary - or perhaps another - and call out our names.*

*In death, all borders are erased, and our souls return to that one soul from which we all have come. This is death's lesson, that what unites us is far greater than what divides us. The great challenge for us is not to wait until death is knocking on our own door to discover this, but to see it now... and, with that vision, to live into the promise of the great family of all souls.”*

**Amen**