



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Meditation on Día de los muertos

Clay Nelson © 29 October 2017

Decades before he was diagnosed with cancer, the late, great Unitarian preacher Forrest Church described religion as “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”

Día de los muertos is a celebration of that reality. Most of us know from an early age the reality of death, even if it is a burial at sea of our pet goldfish in the bathroom’s toilet. But no matter how long we live can we ever comprehend it? It is a transition we may try to prepare ourselves for but about the best we can do is being at peace with not knowing the mystery that death hides.

It is an occupational hazard of my profession that at times of death when I am invited into the intimacy of a family grieving their loss, I’m most asked questions about life after death. “I don’t know,” is not the answer they are looking for as they struggle with their loss. My alternative answer is to say death reminds us to prepare for the mystery death by celebrating life before death. That is what Día de los muertos has to teach us.

According to the Día de los Muertos tradition, it is said that during this time of year the spirits of our ancestors return to us. And so, family members gather at the graves of loved to feel the presence of their spirits. They clean off the graves and bring gifts for the ancestors, flower and favourite items like chocolate, sweet bread, photographs of the deceased.

There is a carnival energy to these holidays. Even though they are focused on remembering our ancestors and loved ones, they are not marked by grief, as much as celebration. It creates a spirit of liminal time. Liminal time is the opposite of ordinary time. Liminal means a threshold. The veil that separates us from our ancestors is at its thinnest--and that is what is celebrated and experienced during Halloween, Samhain, All Souls in the Christian tradition, and Día de Los Muertos. Celebrate being alive, drawing breath, celebrate that you are achingly sad today and that it will pass. It is good to be able to feel feelings. Celebrate that there was a love so big and good that it hurt to lose it. That there was a time so sweet that you ache, remembering it.... Honour the ache of your heart and the tears falling. Life is mostly ordinary time. Ordinary time shot through with light and pain and love.

It is true that death is a serious matter. It is true that our hearts are wrung and scarred by the losses we sustain in our lives. This is a fact for all

human beings, we who are born here only to die a seemingly-short time later. No amount of sanitizing or revelling can change that very difficult fact. Dying is exactly as much a part of life as is being born.

But: we are human, and we can choose so much. We can choose, as do the Mexican people, to laugh and sing and dance with death, life's unfailing companion. We can throw an arm around the shoulder of Catrina Cavalera, the dapper skeleton who presides over the party for the dead, and stroll down the street of life with her clanking beside us, loose-boned and grinning. And we can know that we are the same as she is, she's just a little farther along.

If we change our habits and begin embracing death as a part of the Great Scheme of Things, we might well find ourselves in the middle of a fuller, richer life. If we look old Death straight in the eye, right in the middle of living as fully as possible—if we know it will visit every single one of us—we are likely to be more loving, more forgiving, more connected with the rest of humanity. More connected to Source of All, the mystery some call God. If we really know that our death and everybody else's are inevitable, we may follow the advice, "Carpe diem." Seize the day. "Carpe vivam." Seize life. Carpe everything.

Let us take inspiration from Dia de Los Muertos. Let us not only refrain from avoiding death, let us give parties for it! Let us know that, when we celebrate a birthday, we are also celebrating getting that much closer to that mysterious event we call death.

I began with Forrest Church, let me end with him as well.

Death is not life's goal, only life's terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for. This is where love comes into the picture. The one thing that can't be taken from us, even by death, is the love we give away before we go.