



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Readings

This morning, I'm going to read three short pieces, followed by some very brief – and fairly random – musings.

The first piece is a column by Angela Zhao that appeared in *The Stanford Daily* in January 2019.

<https://stanforddaily.com/2019/01/18/on-the-importance-of-birthdays/>

The second item is a short Blog post by Parasteh, “5 Reasons Why We Celebrate Birthday[s]”

<https://p-arasteh.org/5-reasons-celebrate-birthday/>

The final piece is a Blog post by Seline Shenoy, on the **Project Happiness** website, and it expands the conversation to special occasions in general.

<https://shop.projecthappiness.org/blogs/project-happiness/5-reasons-why-it-s-important-to-commemorate-special-occasions>

Why Do Birthdays?

John DiLeo © 2nd October 2022

As I've mentioned a few times in the past, the themes and musings present in the services I lead tend to reflect things that are on my mind at the moment. In this case, it happens to be birthdays. Mine is this coming Tuesday. It also happens to be one of those “milestone” birthdays – I'll be turning 55.

We also just finished the *multiple* events that made up our children's celebrations, as both of their birthdays are in September. We've established a tradition within our family – on each birthday, we have a family dinner, which the birthday person gets to choose, along with whatever “cake” they want, and presents from the family.

This year's dinners were ham and mashed potatoes, with blueberry cheesecake, on Lari's birthday; and dinner at Archie's with chocolate

peanut butter pie, on Ali's. Personally, I'm looking forward to Korean barbecue on Tuesday.

The kids then get to have *separate* celebrations with their friends – this year there was an arcade trip for Ali and an afternoon at the climbing gym for Lari.

Amidst our family's month of celebrations, though, we also saw commemorations for two very somber occasions:

- The 21st anniversary of the September 11th attacks in the United States, highlighted by a Remembrance Ceremony held at the National September 11 Memorial Plaza in New York City.
- The passing of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8, which triggered an elaborate sequence of ceremonies and rituals around the royal succession in the United Kingdom, as well as a series of commemorations and memorials around the world, including the memorial service in Wellington (and accompanying public holiday) just last Monday.

All of this got me thinking – why, exactly, *do* we put so much time and effort into commemorating birthdays, anniversaries, and other family milestones? What makes our family traditions – both big and small – so meaningful and important to us?

Why do we, as a *species*, place so much importance on marking occasions? Throughout history, and around the world, people have created special days marking seasonal changes and annual remembrances of significant events – both victories and tragedies. They've grown to be steeped in tradition and ceremony, and are sorely missed if they don't take place as they're supposed to – witness the scramble in Auckland to mark ANZAC Day, without being able to have the traditional dawn gathering at the Museum.

To be clear, I'm not complaining about any of these things, or suggesting they stop. I just found myself wondering *WHY?* Why are they so important?

This morning's third reading summed up pretty well what I found in everything I read on the subject – they build a sense of community, they instill a sense of meaning and significance to our lives and the society in

which we live, they create lasting memories that serve as touchpoints we can look back on, and they help us connect with the broader human community through shared observance.

On reflection, I can see that in my own life. My close ancestors *did not* fight and die in any of the 20th century's big wars – my grandfather was exempted from service in World War I, because he was already over 30 and the sole provider for his wife and several young children. Conversely, my father was 16 when World War II *ended*, so he was never old enough to serve – though some of his older brothers (whom I never met) did. My older brother did enlist during Vietnam, but he ended up receiving a medical discharge before he ever left the country.

But still...I marched with my Boy Scout Troop in the Memorial Day and Veterans' Day parades *every* year. I remember bits and pieces of those events even now, 40 years later. I felt that sense of community and shared experience, as residents of a small Connecticut town gathered to commemorate those wounded and killed while serving their country on foreign shores. Even though I had no *direct* connection to those being commemorated, I still *felt* the bond we all shared in marking the occasion.

So, in the end, I got what I think is a pretty good answer...and realised I kind of knew it all along.

Conversation Starters:

- What are some of the most important occasions you commemorate in your life?
- What are important occasions in our life as a congregation?
- How might we make the commemoration of those occasions more impactful?