

Love Like a Carefully Loaded Ship

A reflection by Rev. Jackie Clement

First Parish in Malden, MA

November 2, 2008

... one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

These words from Antoine de St.-Exupéry point to the reason we come together to day, to celebrate the Day of the Dead, to celebrate the love that crosses like a carefully loaded ship between one generation and the next, between one person and another.

The Day of the Dead, el Día de los Muertos, is a Latin American holiday celebrating life and honoring the dead. Actually it is Los Días, two days. The first day honors children and the second adults. Tied in Mexican Catholicism to All Saints and All Souls Days, Día de los Muertos is based on an ancient celebration, over 2,000 years old. Although it is marked in a number of countries throughout Latin America, the story we read earlier with the children told us a little bit about the many ways Día de los Muertos is celebrated in Mexico—in public with processions, visits to the graves of ancestors, with music and dancing and fireworks, and at home with altars decorated with flowers, sweet sugar skulls, bright candles, and fruit. No matter how it is celebrated the Day of the Dead reminds us that death and life are one.

Because they occur at the same time of year we can confuse the Day of the Dead with Halloween, but they are very different holidays. Halloween is based on the idea of a clear line between life and death, Day of the Dead on the idea that they are united. As journalist Dana Joseph writes, “The difference between Halloween and the Day of the Dead are like, well, death and life...while Halloween comes from a medieval European concept of death as punishment – a scary night populated by demons... – Day of the Dead offers a positive view of death, and even finds humor there...which is nothing like a pillowcase full of Mars Bars.” The Day of the Dead does not offer treats to the spirits so that they will go away and leave us unharmed, but rather offers the favorite foods of ancestors to invite them to return and enjoy the things they liked in life.

All religions have customs and rituals of mourning, of remembering. Some are done in private in the home, some in public. Some are fearful, meant to appease troublesome spirits that can wreak havoc among the living or to nurture the spirits of the departed so that they do not become troublesome. Some, like the Day of the Dead, are meant to honor and celebrate the lives of the ancestors, to offer to their spirits things that will ease their journey into the spirit world or remind them that they are still loved here in this world. Sometimes both rituals of fear and celebration exist within the same religion.

Our secular culture has lost many of the rituals of mourning. We embalm, we hold the memorial, we cremate, and then it is back to life as usual. But the loss lingers longer than its

fleeting acknowledgment. And we are left with the need to remember, with the need to mourn and to celebrate. We may feel guilty if we need to ask others to join us in our individual pilgrimages of loss, or feel that we are somehow inadequate that we need the mourning at all. But we all do. And we need each other in that mourning. We need to be able to tell the stories and voice the regrets. We need to laugh together and to cry together, to see our own pain reflected in the faces of others.

We need to forgive past hurts and let them stir our hearts to a different future. We need to come back again, perhaps each day, each week, each year, and remember because only with the insight and inspiration of memory can we continue on with what was worthy and noble; only with memory can we be moved to change what needs to be changed.

This is what the Day of the Dead offers us—a chance to not only honor but continue what was good about the past, about those who loved us and shaped our lives, not in some misty sentimental way that glosses over shortcomings and regrets but a way that affirms that even amidst all the pain we can laugh and sing and dance and hold each other close in body or in spirit. Today we pay honor to those who deserve honor. We do not deny the pain and our shared need for comfort, but neither do we deny life. Rather we come to affirm that the connections of life and love stretch across time and across generations. We come to acknowledge that the choices of our ancestors shape the lives we now lead just as our choices will shape the lives of generations to come.

When we look in the mirror the DNA of our ancestors is right there returning our gaze even if we do not know who they were or the forces that shaped their lives. When we look into the faces of our children we see reflected there a bit of our own lives, our own choices and the values we have passed to them. We come today to honor that not all our ancestors were biologically related to us; but that “each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”¹ May we, in our turn, light the flame for others.

Whether you know this tradition of remembrance as All Souls, Yarzheit, Todos los Santos, Obon, Chuseok, Qingming Jie, Gai Jatra, Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead, today is a day for remembering.

We come not to simply mimic the tradition of others, but to draw from its wisdom. There is sadness in our loss, but there is happiness, too, as we celebrate the lives of those we have loved, and know that love lives on long after death.

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¹ Albert Schweitzer