

The Dead Within Us

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 22, 2023

We spoke to one another of treasured memories, held each other in embrace, and hovered around the body that lay in the center of the church. Amidst the icons of Jesus and Mary, amongst the burning incense and the overwhelming weight of mourning, we settled into the space for the memorial service of my beloved stepfather. We were immersed in the rituals of the Eastern Orthodox faith. His body was not cremated but held intact, each of those in attendance gave a final kiss on his forehead, and the choir offered ongoing chants, repeatedly lifting up the theology of the church - that AI awaited resurrection after departing from this fleeting life. Each chant brought me more tears of both lament and promise, not for the theology, but through shared song and voices lifted up in unison. I felt the thin veil between the living and the dead, between this realm and the next. And I held in my tender heart my stepfather's theology and the beliefs of the choir – something lifegiving and beautiful – that AI had simply fallen asleep.

While resurrection is not my theology, I know it brought him solace and meaning. There are a handful of basic theologies for what happens after death. There are those who find comfort in the deeply held belief that the dead will reside eternally in the wonders and awe of nature. Or of the belief of my father – who holds true that we simply end, our lives but a brief voyage between one abyss of nonexistence to another. Others find solace in a spiritual presence of the departed still among us, and still others in reincarnation, transitioning from one life to the next. There are those, too, who find comfort and meaning in the belief that the dead are held in another realm. No one knows, nor can we. It is a secret held amongst the dead. But what I do know is that they are all held alive within us.

In many ways, this is true of our memories. We remember those most poignant of times – arguments that left us in tears, tragic losses shared together. We still cry in our recollections – they are still very much present and alive. Just as tangibly we remember the life-giving – the

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith October 2023

first time we said, “I love you,” or a dance in a meadow – and our lips still smile. And it is more than this. It is the wisdom they intentionally imparted onto us – to make some semblance of good out of hardship, to love even though we will know loss, to live each day with as much joy as we can muster. And I believe there is some part of them still alive – that perhaps we can converse with in times of detriment. “Why?” “How?” we plead into our hearts. And in a whisper, we hear a wise and learned response, more than we could have known on our own.

This ties together in sacred ways with the refrains of Birago Diop, narrating death as held by African Traditional Religions. “The dead are not dead.” “The dead are not under the earth.” “Those who are dead are never gone.”¹ Below the earth lie their bones, yes. In an urn their ashes. And yet, in this tradition, this truly has never been the space they inhabited. Instead, they are in the rustling leaves, the grasses that weep, in the child who is wailing – in all of the mundane and all of the seemingly inconsequential, in all in the small wonders of nature. There are so many magical and life-giving ways to think of the dead. I think of the reflections of our anonymous poet, of “souls wandering to help those we wronged.” A reflection on reparations sought to be made after death. Or her imagery of the dead as “space and light and nothing” – as all there is and all that never was, all at once.² What thoughts do I have? What theology do I hold true? That of another realm. I hold this in my heart after years of asking, “What happens after death?” I posed this question to my departed beloveds, to my sacred, to the beautiful expanse of nature, to the small, still voice within me. I believe in another realm - a resting place of the dead, where those who have exhaled their last breath reside in a place of beauty and love held alongside the ancestors. Ideal? Yes. True? I do not yet know.

In my musings I wonder, too, of that which had never been communicated while our beloveds were alive. And so, I practice conversing with them, and invite you to do so as well. May we whisper to the wind the words we wanted to tell them, but never had the chance to. “I am grateful for you,” perhaps. Or “I know you tried your hardest.” May we listen in the breeze to

¹ “Those Who Are Dead Are Never Gone,” by Birago Diop

² “What Do We Become When We Die?” Anonymous

that which we wanted to hear, but never heard. “I forgive you,” perhaps. Or “I am sorry.” They are there, beyond us and within us. So may we find them in a prayer. May we light a candle whose flame reaches the heavens. May we immerse ourselves in those memories held sacred and eternal.

My relationship with a departed aunt changed after she died, and I offer my reflections in hopes of helping you craft meaning or theology or comfort within. Through the past twenty years, as I’ve grown from teenager to adult, I have kept in regular conversation with her. She has become a confidant – an essence of which I can share my deepest secrets. She slowly became a guardian angel – a spirit, of sorts, who watches over me in each of my days. Every day, even though I know pain and tragedy and hardship, I also know that I will ultimately be ok because of her presence. My mom and I spoke of this beloved sister of hers. I offered the question, “If you had the chance, what would you ask her?” There was a pause before her tender response. “Are you still here with us?” she replied. “Are you still with us?”

We are entering a time when various cultures and faith traditions honor and commemorate the dead who are not dead. Pagans will soon celebrate Samhain, a somber and benevolent time. The tradition follows the seasons. In the fall vegetation dies with cooling temperatures and evening frost, green trees transition to brown and flowers recede into the dirt – death is in the earth, the foliage, the breeze. So is it with the presence of the human dead – our departed in the wind and the cool night air. Samhain is a sacred time when the veil between the realms of the living and the dead is thin, allowing us better able to contact and communicate with our beloveds who have left the realm of the living.³ I imagine we can better close our eyes and know their presence, hold out our hands and feel their touch, whisper the sweetest of words, “I miss you,” pause in the silence and hear their response in return. As leaves descend to the earth below, may the reminder of death serve to intentionally connect us to those of whom we miss so much.

³ Selena Fox from www.circlesanctuary.org

In this spirit of cultural seasons of death let us pause and reflect on our connections with the dead as joyful – as joining with beloveds not by tearful mourning or through prayers of lament but by intentional celebration. In delight and jubilation, celebrants of Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, invite and welcome the dead into their midst, drawing in departed beloveds with petals, incense, and their favorite foods. Altars are decorated with flowers and photos of those who have died. It is a celebration – of parades and food and decoration – of graveside vigils and gifts for the departed.⁴ What can we garner from that which is not sorrowful, but joyful? Not detrimental, but celebratory? Not of lament, but of welcome? Can we raise our voices in song? Move our bodies in dance? Eat cakes and cookies and, while doing so, invite those of whom we have lost to join us? Can we do this?

They may be with us as the veil between the living and the dead remains thin. They may be with us in celebration, song, and dance. They may be with us in the beauty and awe of nature or within our very hearts and souls. They shape and mold who we are, forever a piece of our heritage. And yet they are no longer truly in this realm, breathing and moving with us, but somewhere beyond, somewhere we cannot access until we, too, are dead. We will lose someone we feel we can never live without. Our hearts will be broken. And while they will begin to mend, they will never fully heal. Beautiful, in that we are forever changed. Yet we must learn to live in this realm without them. No more phone calls, belly laughs, hugs, or shared tears. No longer can we smell their hair or hold their hands or place our lips upon their cheeks. But our lives will reach a semblance of normalcy, beauty will return, and they will be a part of it. I see my aunt in the strength of her daughters, the memory of my departed friend makes our favorite music forever sweeter, my stepfather's gold-plated icons connect my husband and me ever closer to the divine, hearing Al's tender words of faith whispered in our ears.

⁴ UU World <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/halloweens-ritual-roots>

“Hold on to what is good,” writes poet Nancy Wood. “Hold on to what you believe,” she pens. “Hold on to my hand, even if someday I’ll be gone away from you.”⁵ I think of touching the cold, stiff hand of my stepfather once warm and wrinkled. What was living is now dead. Love is vulnerability, faith, trust, and hope. Love ends – whether with intentional separation, or death. How can we enter that vulnerability of loving someone knowing that they will die? We can cherish each touch, each kiss, each laugh, each word of solace. We can immerse ourselves in the joyful moments, for we do not know when the last joyful moment will be. And we can know, even when they leave this realm, that they are never truly gone.

There are unexpected ways the dead visit us. I felt a beloved childhood friend suddenly with me on a walk around a lake, her love enveloping me in the wind. I have a cousin who knows her mom is present every time she encounters a deer. My own mom saw the figure of her departed sister slowly walking away from her in the distance. In instances like this, it feels like they are here with us. And sometimes we bring them to us with intention. We pray to the ancestors, we strike a match and illuminate a candle, we close our eyes until we feel them with us, we sit in a sacred, holy space where the veil seems thin. They never truly leave.

So may we offer those who have left us a blessing, for to have loved them was a true gift. May we say thank you for having graced my life, may you rest in eternal peace, and know you are forever held within. Whether held in nature or in an empty abyss, whether a spirit among us or sleeping until resurrection, whether, as in my heart, residing in a different realm, they are a piece of us. Whether we touch their hands through a thinning veil or invite them to join us in dance, they have shaped and molded who we are. So may we notice when they visit, and may we light a candle when we need their presence. We are broken and yet we are just right. We are never alone.

May it be so, and Amen

⁵ “Hold On” by Nancy Wood

