

When the Veil Thins, the Weight Lightens
Rev. Rita Capezzi
UUFM—10-31-21

It's a special time of year, friends, this one among many, of course, but still. The earth continues its course around the sun to a point where change is once more noticeable in our everyday lives. The cycle recurs, and we mark a season. It's once again mid-autumn, the season of tricks and treats, monsters and jack-o'-lanterns, of witches and fairies, spirits and ghosts, of harvest and rest, of the ancestors and memories, and the stories that can bring both laughter and tears in the remembering. Halloween, Samhain, Día de Muertos, All Souls. The celebrations and commemorations all converge at this time of year upon the relationship of the living with the dead.

At Halloween, Pagan and Christian traditions, from any number of cultures, collide. The children and teens look forward to tricks and treats, to the candies and the chance to dress as a favorite character or hero or maybe to drum up a few frights. Halloween, October 31, marks the evening before All Hallows, All Souls Day. And while All Hallows, November 1st, is a day once devoted exclusively to memory of departed Christian believers, Halloween is that time when maybe the dead aren't so sanguine and holy. It's that night when the dead might be monsters or evil spirits out to harm the living. That night when it might be a good idea to dress as a ghost to blend in or to disguise oneself so as to trick the devil from discovering you. Trunk or treat events and private parties enable our children to play at "scary" in a protected environment, while horror movies enable adults to safely process our fears of sexuality, of the less pleasant aspects of our human natures, of pain and loss in this life, of death and an uncertain afterlife. Regardless of candies and treats, of sweet-faced ghosts and witches, it is impossible to deny that Halloween as practiced in the United States includes a confrontation with death.

In contrast, the Celtic pagan celebration of Samhain embraces death as a manifestation of life. Samhain takes as self-evident that this is the time of year when the veil between the life and the death thins, when an exchange between the worlds of the living and the dead is briefly possible. In the Northern Hemisphere, harvest is ending. The land and the plants, appearing dead, enter their fallow period. Time to lay up stores for the winter and rest, just for a while humans, too, in a mimicry of death. And in the quiet, we may connect to our ancestors who have died before us. Here is a description of Samhain from the Rev. Kali Fyre, the most pagan Unitarian Universalist minister I know. "Graces and blessings of Samhain! Receive with gratitude the gifts of the final harvest. It is time now to put the fields and gardens to rest so they may produce again next year. And so too should we rest - when we source the natural world for guidance navigating through life, we begin to notice the signs and instincts to draw within and entertain silence, peace. We do this at a time when it's traditionally believed the veil between worlds is thinnest - rest and silence affords us the opportunity to hear the messages of Ancestors through the Veil, whispering encouragement and blessings upon our dreams, visions, hopes - and easing our fears and sorrows" (Fyre). There is a sense of continuity and communication, of goodwill, across time. And "Somewhere in a hidden memory, images float [. . .] of fragrant nights of straw and of bonfires," "The wind is full of a thousand voices," "dancing till the next sunrise" (McKennitt). "Welcome the Season of the Witch - May your Ancestors revel among you still and again" (Fyre).

In the quiet, in the mimicry of death, in this season of the witch, we might hear our ancestors calling encouragement and blessings to us. We may hear that the departed have not really left us. And with ofrendas, personal altars, decorated with sugar skulls, with photographs and mementos, with favorite foods and marigolds, some Mexican and Mexican American people celebrate family connection among the living and the dead on Día de Muertos. The three-day commemoration originated in the state of Michoacan, in the state where Mexico City is, and it spread wherever people originally from that region migrated. At this time, the people actively practice remembering. We hold each other in our hearts, in songs and in stories. The remembering we do, and the remembering by those who love us, keeps us alive and keeps us connected in life and through to death. Anything but gloomy, Día de Muertos is a celebration of life—of the life that comes before, of the ancestors who helped to make us, of the love that endures beyond the body even as that love works through our bodies.

All Souls, Halloween, Samhain, Día De Muertos. These celebrations don't really tell us anything we don't already know, do they. For any of us who has lost to death someone important to us, no one needs tell us they are not close to us, they are not part of our everyday lives, even if not in our minds every single day. How could we ever forget, especially when the loss looms large, when the grief is so powerfully strong. We feel the ache of loss in our bodies, in our longing that our people are not dead, in the wish they were still physically present. That we could sing a song with them or walk in rain with them. That we were once more dreaming together, if only dreaming up a trip to the store or baking an angel food cake or brewing a cup of tea.

In this hallowed time, overflowing with a complex convergence of celebration and commemoration, we amplify awareness of our dead ones and we acknowledge our interconnections. Writer and activist Alice Walker reminds us that, "To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves." We are all connected by an invisible thread. We are connected to everyone we love and everyone we have ever loved. We are connected to everyone who loves and has ever loved us. These invisible threads create a portion of the interdependent web of which we are a part and never apart from. We are connected to everything, of course. To all things. To all beings. The web is vaster than we can ever know, self-creating creativity spinning new threads and weaving new patterns of life, both alien and familiar. And love, what draws us together and knits us into relationship, love enables us to see our part in the co-creation.

Today is the sort of day when we dwell on our families and loved ones. The interdependent web becomes most visible when we think on these invisible threads connecting us to our loved ones. To those we love in simple and straightforward ways. Those spouses and partners who just get us and respect us. Those like-minded blood and chosen family who make shared time together fun and joyful, meaningful and fulfilling. And the web is visible, too, when we remember the invisible threads connecting us to those we love in complex, complicated, even vexed, ways. The family on the other side of the political divide. Those with bad habits, with problems that never get solved, with ways of living that cause us grief and make us shake our heads with shame or regret or fear. We did not make

ourselves, and we do not choose our families, not most of them. We are bound together in ways we cannot change and cannot control, but which helped us to become the people that we all have become.

Can you dwell with me now, in your own minds and hearts, on one of your loved ones, one of your ancestors. Would you bring them into fuller presence in this moment, remembering a story of your love, a scent, a moment of laughter, an image of their beloved face, like a photograph before you. Can you focus like a beacon your love, your love a strong and mighty light to bathe grief and loss and pain in tenderness. Would you linger on the gifts of your relationship, upon what you have gained and how you have grown because of knowing this loved person.

My father was ferocious, tenacious, and determined. I am so grateful that he developed these qualities, because he had so much work to do to break the cycle of abuse that was the norm in his family. When he was a boy, his own father beat him ruthlessly. His father encouraged he and his brother to beat on each other. His father beat on and cheated on my grandmother. My grandmother was so preoccupied with protecting herself that she had little energy for protecting her sons. I don't know how my grandfather got this way, but my father broke up that legacy. My father made a different way for himself. My father left behind the abuse. He left behind his inheritance too. And because he left all that behind, my father granted me a different legacy. My father began the work of repairing our ancestral line, of making a more loving section of the web. And I carry on the work as best I know how. To me, that is holy work.

My father taught me ferociousness, tenacity, and determination. These things have enabled me to be resilient in the face of disappointment, rejections, and resistance. I had to learn that these were qualities of his that he passed on to me, that are part of what make me who I am in this world. And so my father is always with me, even though he is has died. When I think about my qualities that are his qualities, when I think of ferociousness and tenacity and determination, I do not fall into pain and sadness and loss. My father is dead. He is ash. But he is also very alive in me. This aliveness allows me to cope with the grief that arises from the other two statements, states so final and unchangeable.

And this aliveness is an immeasurable gift. My father gave me the gift of life, and he bestowed gifts by which to make a life full of love. Thus, we remember that we are treasure to each other, of immeasurable worth at all times. That our love is an energy that can be changed but not destroyed. That the legacy of those who die before us is more than loss and grief. The American novelist Amy Greene writes, "It's not forgetting that heals. It's remembering." In times like these—All Souls, Halloween, Samhain, Día de Muertos—we practice remembering kinship in community. We practice with joyful frivolity and necessary solemnity. We set aside such special times and places as these because the weight of loss can be too heavy to think of all the time, because grief sneaks up on you when you least expect it and it is good to have muscles built up to be able to handle it. In times like these, we build sustaining muscles to survive the unbearable, we share the burden together, we channel the love that precedes us and that we can pass forward.

When the veil thins, the weight lightens. When we remember, we heal. And may you remember those you love and long for, with peaceful hearts held tenderly in companionship, as you remember also, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, "Amen."