

**Of Memory and Hope** A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 26 October 2008 Chip Roush 26 Oct 08

RITUAL, with READINGS Praise for living... Praise for living and praise for dying, which is always part of living. From atoms and molecules, to stars and galaxies, everything with a beginning has an ending. Single-celled organisms and vast civilizations, fruit flies, frogs, sharks and giant redwoods all die.

And—some of those deaths mean more to us than others. Some of them hurt more than others. Sometimes, the pain is nearly unbearable; sometimes, the death is almost a relief. Always, we are changed by the experience.

And so, once a year, we come together to name aloud our losses. Whether it is so fresh, that we have yet to fully catch our breath, or whether its dull ache has become a known constant, through years and decades of absence, we honor our beloved dead by naming them today.

First, we have some readings, and there will be music played, in and among the words, and then there will be a tolling of bells, and silence, and space and time for us to name those who are chiefly present through their absence...

"People" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko

No people are uninteresting.  
Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.

Nothing in them is not particular,  
and planet is dissimilar from planet.  
And if a man lived in obscurity  
making his friends in that obscurity  
obscurity is not uninteresting.

To each his world is private  
and in that world one excellent minute.

And in that world one tragic minute  
These are private.

In any man who dies there dies with him  
his first snow and kiss and fight  
it goes with him.

There are left books and bridges  
and painted canvas and machinery  
Whose fate is to survive.

But what has gone is also not nothing:  
by the rules of the game something has gone.  
Not people die but worlds die in them.

Whom we knew as faulty, the earth's creatures  
Of whom, essentially, what did we know?

Brother of a brother? Friend of friends?  
Lover of lover?

We who knew our fathers  
in everything, in nothing.

They perish. They cannot be brought back.  
The secret worlds are not regenerated.

And every time again and again  
I make my lament against destruction.

“Sonnet” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied Who told me time would ease me of my pain! I miss him in the weeping of the rain; I want him at the shrinking of the tide; The old snows melt from every mountain-side, And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane; But last year's bitter loving must remain Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide! There are a hundred places where I fear To go, – so with his memory they brim! And entering with relief some quiet place Where never fell his foot or shone his face I say, "There is no memory of him here!" And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

LITANY OF OUR BELOVED DEAD

{tolling of chimes, with names spoken aloud}

And all those who remain in our hearts, and all those of whom we had heard, but never met, and all those whom we never knew, and all and all... So may we be.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, memory to memory, love to love... Life pauses briefly, as one generation hesitates just long enough to give birth to the next, then fulfill their lives, and their deaths, and the new generation rolls on.

Love blossoms, sacrifices are made, people are hurt and people are healed, and there may not be a balance except that all things die, and all things try to live as best they understand...

In spring we plant seeds and tend births, in summer, we revel in the abundance life offers, and already, in fall, our hearts look toward the loneliness of winter. We remember those who are already gone, and wonder how many springs we ourselves have left...and still, with wonder and with gratitude, most of the time, we are pleased to have been part of the cycle.

SERMON Some time ago, the first time I lived in Chicago, I would often leave my air-conditioned, artificially lighted cubicle to eat my lunch outdoors. Sometimes I would go with friends; sometimes I would go alone. If I were alone, I would often end up a few miles away, in Saint Nicholas Cemetery.

I have always liked cemeteries. I find them peaceful, and beautiful. Yes, they can be melancholy, but their solidity speaks to people remembered, people loved, not merely people gone—especially in Saint Nicholas cemetery, which was a Ukrainian cemetery, so the headstones featured Cyrillic letters, and there were bright flowers virtually everywhere, and pictures of the deceased were somehow transferred onto the stone.

At other times, I have stood in quiet awe in front of the great boulder that is the marker on Ralph Waldo Emerson's grave; and I have felt blessed by the unseeing gaze of an exquisite marble angel standing watch in a cemetery in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

And, there is a monument in Indianapolis—each time I have seen it, I have been struck dumb by its power and depth of grief. There, captured in stone, a woman has thrown herself down upon a low table, her limbs and hair are thrust carelessly before her, and you can almost see her marble ribs heaving with her sobs. A Tennyson quote is carved nearby, lamenting a “loss forever new.” I am always moved by the ferocity of the sorrow, and I wonder if the person who commissioned that beautiful memorial ever came to terms with the loss.

In the midst of our grief, we may not know if we will ever come out of it. And, of course, some few of us never do—some people are so undone by their loneliness that they never really recover.

Most of us do, and the only rule of thumb I've been able to figure out is that it takes exactly as long as it takes. Some of us need weeks and months to recover some sense of our “normal” self; some regain it in days and some really do take years.

In our second reading, Edna St. Vincent Millay accused her friends of lying to her, because time had not yet eased her sorrow. It sounds like it had only been a year in her life, since his death, so perhaps time was only then beginning to soften her grief.

It takes as long as it takes; we cannot will it to be any different. Although, sometimes, we can participate in cultural stories and rituals that may help us recover. Many of those rituals involve sharing memories, and telling stories about our beloved dead. We knit their lives more fully into our lives, as we make those verbal connections.

With the caveat that sometimes, the deceased has done us harm, so that our memories can be painful, even toxic. Sometimes, the wounds we suffer last longer than the person who wounded us. Even in such cases, however, remembering can bring healing—if it is done with the guidance and support of professionals.

More often, our memories are not so harmful, and recalling them is more affirming and joyful.

In many religious traditions, rituals have developed and evolved over centuries. Participating in such rituals provides a number of benefits: it honors the specific person who has died; it provides support for the people mourning that person, giving them a way of expressing their grief, and a structured way of sharing stories with others; it teaches and re-affirms the central narratives of that tradition, how they understand death, and make meaning from the fact that we all die, eventually; and it weaves them more tightly into the fabric of their community—as they perform the rituals for their specific loved one, they recall those same rituals, performed for others... Even as we experience our grief as individual and specific, we also understand how it is an absolutely universal experience, that our sorrow binds us to all humanity.

In some Jewish communities, there are many regulations and rituals around death. The body must be prepared and buried in the proper ways, in the proper timeframe. Mourners greet each other with specific customary phrases. Some rip a garment, or a ribbon on their garment, as an expression of their sadness. There are many prayers to be said, at specific times, throughout the first year after a death.

For seven days after the burial, family members who were closest to the deceased sit shiva, doing little but staying home and receiving visitors and telling stories about their now-dead loved one. For the first day of shiva, they are not supposed to even cook, but their community is supposed to bring food to them. On the one-month anniversary, and the one-year anniversary of the death, there are more rituals to be performed. Again, all these processes give a structured way for the mourner to make meaning in her or his own life, and they demonstrate how every person is held within a web of communal relationships.

Many Buddhists have similar rituals, for the first 49 days after death, and again on the one-year anniversary. Because many Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and because the most spiritually advanced Buddhists might take more than 40 days to completely leave this existence, to be reincarnated into their next life, prayers and teachings are recited for a full 49 days, so that the soul of the deceased is properly supported on its journey.

Originally celebrated in Oaxaca, Mexico, and now celebrated in many places around the world, El Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, takes place every year. Families cook special foods, and make altars in their homes, honoring the family members who have already passed away. Neighbors visit neighbors, and everybody goes to have a picnic in the cemetery, among the graves of their ancestors, as they share stories and memories and emphasize the ways the dead have shaped and influenced the living. Not just for a week, or month or even a year, the dead are a continuing presence in the lives of people who celebrate El Dia de los Muertos.

Even people who are not traditionally “religious” have rituals around death. I have an atheist friend whose father died, soon after we had graduated from high school. Jim and his father were huge fans of classical music. So every year, on his father’s birthday, Jim would listen to all nine Beethoven symphonies, in order. It took the better part of the day, but being thrown out of our usual routine is part of what makes a ritual so potent. The power of Beethoven’s magnificent music, the liquid emotion poured into the ears of the listener, and the visceral connection to his father, really helped Jim make meaning of his loss.

Others create something, to honor and memorialize their deceased loved one. Niel Gow played a lament on his fiddle; Yevtushenko and Millay wrote poems; urban artists spraypaint murals; and avid gardeners

plant special trees. People like John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur create foundations; Candy Lightner honored her daughter, Cari's death by founding "Mothers Against Drunk Drivers;" some of us in this room have walked or run or ridden a bicycle in honor of people we've loved who died of Cystic Fibrosis, or cancer, or some other disease. Over 40,000 men, women and children have contributed a section to the AIDS memorial quilt, now larger than 16 acres of love.

All of these things help us cope with the hole in our lives that used to be a person. On the first Christmas after her death, the first Valentine's Day after his death, the first birthday, anniversary, on the date one year and two years and ten years later, our hearts will still grieve.

And, if we are lucky, it may become less painful, and bittersweet, and, eventually, such memories and moments may provide a pleasant reminiscence of the person who made us who we are.

As we unpack a box of holiday "stuff," and we come across the piece that was always mother's favorite... as we handle the tool in exactly the way that grandpa taught us... as we stand and applaud for our child's accomplishment, and we reflect how proud our parent would be... as we face a difficult decision in our life circumstance, and mentally appeal to our aunt, or uncle, or parent or close friend, seeking their advice as we remember they would give it... when we see a face at the airport that looks *exactly like her*, except she's been gone for three years now... when your adult child says something that is not only the same words, but with the same cadence and intonation, as did your dead parent...

These things which only remind us of absence, at first, eventually may remind us of presence. We only miss them because they were once here, and they did influence us then, and they continue to affect us now. Yes, it may be in the shape of our face, or the color of our hair, the genetic disposition toward or away from certain conditions, but our beloved dead have also shaped our personality.

Do you pay your bills as soon as you receive them, or file them according to due date, or shove them in a drawer, and think about them only when absolutely necessary? Was that behavior influenced by someone you know or knew?

How do you keep house, or drive your car? Do you always adjust the rearview mirror the way she did, or tackle the laundry in the same way he did?

Do you handle stress in the same way, or in the exact opposite way, as did the people who influenced you?

These people may be dead, but they still live on, inside us. William Faulkner wrote, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." Some of our relatives and friends may be dead, but they are certainly not past.

When my favorite professor died, during my last year of college, I received permission to take home the nameplate from his office door. But I do not need to look at the piece of plastic that says "Arthur H. Benade" to remember the balanced way that he approached everything from music to scientific equations. I still see the world the way he taught me.

I consciously adopted the way I write the numeral "5" from the man who taught me chemistry and physics in high school. Because of him, I will never lean out of a chair in such a way that would hurt my back, and I teach others not to do it, too. And anytime I pour liquids from one container to another, I am emulating his steady hand and confidence.

My maternal grandfather never met a person he couldn't talk to. The servers at the local restaurant all greeted him by name, and asked if he wanted his usual table. When Emily greets me at Poppycock's, and knows that I want to drink decaf, I feel connected to my grandpa Chuck.

I am most indebted to my Aunt Berniece for her advice to find a church, and find a wife. And what also lives in me is her genuine care for every person she met. On my best days, I am as warm and open as she was.

I keep statistics on Cleveland baseball, just like my grandmother used to do; and I try to make scrambled eggs like she used to. I understand the importance of family, because she taught me.

I teased my stepfather, Myron, mercilessly, for his appreciation of the music of the Sons of the Pioneers. Now I occasionally find myself singing their "Cool Water" in my head. Every time I turn down a thermostat, or turn off the lights in a room as I leave (even if I'm coming right back in a few minutes), I feel Myron

echoing in me. And when I face adversity, absorbing the body blows that life deals to all of us, and continue to walk forward, one step at a time, I do it partially because of his example.

I was not able to attend Myron's funeral; I was a long way away, and we lacked both the money and time to get me there, but I eventually sobbed in the shower, my face more wet from tears than from the showerhead. And as long as I am alive, and I am able to think and feel and recall, Myron and all these people will still be living inside me.

As long as we are alive, so do our beloved dead live in us; and so do we affect and influence the lives and the world of those who come after: our descendants, our neighbors, our friends. May we live out that responsibility well. So may we be.

CLOSING HYMN I say again: praise for life. Praise for death, and praise for life. I acknowledge absence, and grief, and honor their power in our lives, and I acknowledge the presence and the love that is prior. The word "alleluia" is a form of praise; let us give praise, to life and death, to absence and presence, to the fact that we are still alive to feel the things we do.

{singing *Alleluia Chaconne* }

BENEDICTION Yevtushenko wrote, "Not people die but worlds die in them." The worlds do die, but those of us who have traveled to those worlds, who have communicated with them, and been influenced by them, still remain. Let us be grateful for all our world travels.

So may we be.