

“All Souls’ Day”  
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton  
UUMSB  
November 1, 2009

Reading:

Our reading this evening is a meditation called “Expect Life!” from Elizabeth Tarbox.

Do not live too far in the past or the future. Live now.

In each moment expect a miracle: ten kinds of birds at the feeder, and the tracks of a fox in the snow.

Pick up a magnifying glass and scrutinize that crocus.  
See the pollen at the center of the daffodil, life’s dust, death-defying life. Be astonished at the flower, arrested by its beauty.

Run naked through the garden early in the morning and hope the wild geese fly by.

Get silly and laugh loudly with your grandchildren or your grandparents. Refuse to leave the dead behind, but bring their memory to all your chores and games and corners of quiet, warm tears.

Know always that joy and sorrow are woven together; one cannot be without the other. If you love, know that sometimes your love will bring you tears; if you grieve, know it is because at some time you were willing to love.

Do not be afraid to die today. But expect life!

Sermon:

My grandmother, Martha Greenlaw Allman was a hot ticket. She grew up on a farm in Windsor, Vermont. When she was a teenager she decided she was going to college, so she packed up and enrolled at Bates College in Maine. She told me she paid \$30 a year to go there, which she made by working while in school. She met my grandfather at Bates. He was a chemist and right after they were married in 1942, he had to go to Oklahoma to an army training camp. My memory is that he was going to be a teacher there, but I don’t know for sure. Anyway, they had to get from New England to Oklahoma and my grandmother had never driven and she certainly didn’t have a license. So somewhere in the mid Atlantic states, they switched seats, my grandfather told her what the various knobs did and went to sleep. Martha sorted it out and drove to Oklahoma. She was like that... a practical person, but also forward thinking. I don’t believe that there was a lot in her life that she didn’t do if she wanted to and I like to think that I inherited some of her spunk. My grandmother died six years ago after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s at a treatment center in Maine. She is gone, but when I am embarking on a new adventure, I remember her journey from a farm in southern Vermont to God’s country Maine to

go to college, and I imagine her in a 1930s black sedan, sitting on pillows (like I had to do when I was learning to drive) peering out the front windshield, driving across Ohio. When she had an opportunity, she jumped in with both feet.

Throughout human history, we have developed a variety of belief systems regarding what happens to us after death, and what kind of access the dead and the living have to each other. Afterlife is part of our Judeo-Christian and pagan histories. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, in their book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, explain, “Where and how the dead live on can be experienced in many ways. The book of Hebrews pictured the assembly of departed saints as a “great cloud of witnesses” who surround the living.”<sup>1</sup> They describe how in early Christianity, it was integral to the story of the faith that the dead came back to the living to impart wisdom and offer comfort. The most obvious being, of course, Jesus coming back to his disciples after his death and encouraging them on to form what would become Christianity. In the Jewish and Christian stories of the day, the dead were in an afterlife, a paradise that was wonderful and close at hand. Departed loved ones were not far away. Brock and Parker write, “For oppressed people, it was especially important to affirm that those killed by repressive regimes were not exiled to a distant, cold realm, isolated from the living. By affirming the resurrection of the dead, as Jewish texts began to do during the war-torn centuries of foreign occupation from 200 BCE to 200 CE, survivors of imperial violence defied the power of their persecutors and solaced their grief. They pictured their righteous dead in a place of consolation and vindication.”<sup>2</sup> Brock and Parker explain that over time and as the Christian faith became tied to an oppressive regime, rather than an instrument to subvert it, this connection between the living and the dead was severed and that paradise was replaced as a central tenant of the faith with the crucifixion.

Exploring the relationship between the living and the dead is also part of our Unitarian and Universalist histories. Universalists were a denomination *because of* their belief in Universal Salvation. There were different kinds of Universalists. There were some who believed that all people were immediately saved and in heaven after death. They were called ultra-universalists, as a slur they were called Death-and-Glory Universalists. There were also Universalists who believed that while all people would eventually be in heaven, there would be learning and spiritual growth required after death before people with significant sin were brought into heaven. They were called restorationist-Universalists.

Unitarians were interested in exploring the Bible using reason to discern what happens to us after we die, and to explore the nature of God. At the time of the formation of the Unitarian and Universalist movements in the United States, there was a flourishing of theological inquiry. Back at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was disagreement among Christians about how tradition should be interpreted and applied to faith life. Protestant reformers believed that Catholic tradition had been corrupted and broke off to form their own churches, like the Lutherans, Calvinists, and eventually the Anglican church. Under these Protestant denominations, there was unprecedented access to the Bible which lead to people coming up with alternative interpretations of scripture, or in other words, heresies. Some of these were Unitarian and Universalist heresies, but these heretical traditions were not really solidified into denominations outside of some small European pockets like Transylvania, and a few in England, until they flourished in the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unitarians and Universalists both believed that reason should be brought to bear on the Bible. At

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<sup>1</sup> Parker and Brock *Saving Paradise*, p 56

<sup>2</sup> Brock and Parker, p.57

the time they were forming, there was a whole new school of inquiry that began in Germany and spread out from there called Biblical Criticism. It was the radical idea that the Bible could be examined as a document, that translation and interpretation may have impacted doctrine and that interpretations of the Bible could be reexamined, without being heresy.

In their exploration of afterlife, Unitarians and Universalists were also heavily involved with a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement of people called Spiritualists. Spiritualists sought to communicate with those that had passed on and sought the advice and help of mediums to make this happen. Some factions within Universalism and Unitarianism reasoned that they could prove themselves to have correct interpretations of scripture and tradition if they could devise experiments to prove their theologies. They joined with Spiritualists to ask beings who had passed over what happened to them. This is how a cadre of super rational Brahmin type Unitarians who one would not expect to be hanging out with mediums and seers, became some of their most staunch advocates and supporters. Universalists had disagreements over whether spiritualism was a valid form of religious inquiry and this conflict at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to a significant decline in membership numbers.<sup>3</sup> Universalism began as a heresy, but eventually many mainline Protestant denominations adopted Universalist theologies, if not in their creeds, in their practices and worship, which also led to a significant decline in membership in the Universalist church, as they were no longer filling as much of a need outside of the mainline churches.

This brings us to today. Today our Catholic and Protestant Christian neighbors are celebrating All Saints' Day, and tomorrow our Catholic neighbors are celebrating All Souls' Day which is also celebrated as the Day of the Dead in some parts of the world. Being a Unitarian Universalist all my life, I had no idea what the difference was between the two days, so I had to spend some time sorting that out. This may already have been part of your own religious journey, but just so that we are all on the same page, in Christian churches All Saints' Day is about glorifying God by honoring those who have passed on to heaven. All Souls' Day is out of the Catholic tradition, and it is about praying for the souls of those who have died and are in purgatory, waiting to enter heaven. The Day of the Dead blends All Souls' Day with the holidays that were a part of the traditions of the people of Mexico and South America, thousands of years before the Spanish Catholics came to their shores. On the Day of the Dead, as in festivals of the Dead around the world, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead thins, and many believe that those who have died can come back to visit the living. It is a celebration of that opportunity for connection and honoring of those who have passed.

Unitarian Universalists have no creeds or final understanding of what the relationship is between the dead and the living. We run the gamut from those who believe that there is nothing after death, those who believe we carry the memories of the dead among the living, to those that believe in heaven, reincarnation, and so on. But what really matters on this day, is that we take some time to remember those that have gone before us. We are able to be in open religious community because of the work and struggle of liberal religious leaders throughout Jewish and Christian history. As we remember those who we have loved and those who loved us, we also remember those in our church history who gave their lives for religious freedom, tolerance, and acceptance. As a religious movement we do not believe there is a process by which the dead must move through purgatory, or that the living can have an impact on the souls of the dead with their prayers. However, we do believe that we have the power to change the world. We do

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Larger Faith*, Charles Howe and "Spiritualism" on the Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography website

believe that we are tasked to do justice in the world and we honor those who have come before us. We share our personal grief in community.

How many of us have had the experience of feeling the presence of one who has died? How many of us have had dreams that seemed so real, where we had the opportunity to speak with our loved ones who are gone from us? It may be that these are simply dreams and psychological coping skills, but on nights like this, when the veil may be thin, it can seem easier to believe that there is more, and that perhaps we might glimpse it. If your lost loved ones were to come through your home tomorrow, what would you want to tell them? I would want to tell my grandmother how much I loved her and missed her after she had to move to Maine and was no longer herself. What would you want to tell them?

We learn from our past and we learn from those whom we have loved. Sometimes we learn what choices and ways of life we do *not* want to engage with in our own lives. Sometimes we have learned examples of lives well lived. I learned from my grandmother about openness to adventure and jumping in with both feet. I learned how to read music standing next to her in church as we sang hymns, I learned what a devastating blow it can be to lose your husband too young, as she lived through that in her early 60s. I learned that no matter what our plans are, sometimes we just have to roll with it.

What are some of the lessons that you learned from the people you are remembering today? How to parent? How cook? How to tie a bowline knot? What are some of the qualities of character they possessed that are now a part of you, or that you seek to emulate? Bravery? Compassion? Let's take a moment to briefly name some of these...

May we cherish our memories of those we have loved. May our lives be reflections of the best of those who have gone before. When we falter or lose our way, may we be strengthened by the wisdom we have learned from our loved ones. When we grieve may we remember that we are in community together, here to be support through our sorrows. In the words of Elizabeth Tarbox from our reading tonight:

Get silly and laugh loudly with your grandchildren or your grandparents. Refuse to leave the dead behind, but bring their memory to all your chores and games and corners of quiet, warm tears. Know always that joy and sorrow are woven together; one cannot be without the other. If you love, know that sometimes your love will bring you tears; if you grieve, know it is because at some time you were willing to love.<sup>4</sup>

So May it Be.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Tarbox, "Expect Life!", in *Evening Tide*, 1998, p. 54