

“Celebrate Life”
A Sermon by Alex Jensen
First Parish in Wayland
November 1, 2020

The first Unitarian Universalist service I ever went to—believe it or not—was a Día de Los Muertos service—a service for Day of the Dead. Back when I was in the third grade, I walked through the round doors of the First Unitarian Church of San José in California with my grandma, Torch. Before I say more about this spectacular service, my grandma Torch deserves a bit more of an introduction. She has hair the color of a red onion—and she’s got a fiery spirit just like her name! Torch also writes the monthly “gossip” column for the San José UU church’s newsletter. And even more special, my grandma has been a second mother to my mom and has been a part of my life since I was born. Although she’s technically my adopted grandma, she’s every bit of a grandmother to me. And she’s honestly quite the UU evangelist! She never lets me forget that she’s the reason I’m now on this track pursuing ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister!

Sitting in the service with my grandma that day, I was met with a gorgeous scene: the church had a large altar up at the front, decorated in yellows, pinks, reds, and purples of *papel picado*—the colorful decorative tissue paper—*calaveras*—decorated sugar skulls—and *cempasúchil*—golden marigolds. We sang hymns and recited the church covenant and opening words in both English and in Spanish. The Time for All Ages invited us youth to come to the altar and place things to remember our family members. After we were sung to our classes that day, we got to decorate paper *calaveras* and even cut them out into masks! It was such a beautiful celebration and experience for me as a youth.

This was a moment when I felt deeply affirmed in aspects of my own identity and family traditions. You see, you might not know it looking at me, but I am part Mexican-American. My mom, who is half Mexican, grew up very close to the traditions in her family. My mom cooked traditional meals and dishes growing up. She learned Spanish and spoke it at home with her mother. When she was a girl, her family would make numerous trips to Mexico and parts of Texas to visit family members and relatives. When it came to my younger brother and me, my mom wanted us to retain a connection to our family roots.

In California, we were lucky to have bilingual Spanish and English classes at our public elementary school. We grew up with many other friends who were Mexican-American. In our family, we sometimes celebrated Día de Los Muertos by putting up an altar in the backyard, sprinkling flower petals along the pathway for the spirits of our loved ones to be guided to our *ofrenda*.

The history of families putting up *ofrendas* and altars for their lost loved ones is rich. El Día de Los Muertos is a celebration with roots that go back three thousand years to pre-Columbian times¹. It has been shaped by both Indigenous roots with influences from Catholicism. Today is the first day of Día de Los Muertos, and it is often celebrated for many days after. This holiday encompasses two important dates on the Christian calendar: All Saints Day today and All Souls Day tomorrow.

¹ Read more at https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/dia-de-los-muertos/?fbclid=IwAR0ozgDCh2VAmHnXqrGs_xq-O57PUZ5a1OyHq6FwCF92eX5kCO2CPajx-wE and <https://dayofthedead.holiday>.

In this tradition, it is believed that on El Día de Los Muertos the gates to Heaven are opened up to allow our departed loved ones to return and be with us. Families in Mexico, the United States, and some parts of Latin America visit gravesites and decorate altars with favorite foods and drinks of their loved ones. In order for loved ones to find the altars, marigold petals are scattered in a path to lead the ancestors by their bright color and aroma.

Although this tradition speaks to the realities of death, this isn't a ritual of mourning. Instead, it's a ritual of celebration. It's about honoring a deep truth behind Día de Los Muertos: that the dead aren't really dead to us unless we've forgotten them.

Our reading this morning, "Mensaje en Colores / Message in Colors" by Julie Sopetrán² that Macrina and Lety read for us, is a poem that encapsulates the essence of Día de Los Muertos.

Sopetrán writes:

"Lit candles. Faces. Memories... It is the prime time of the celebration of death's needle, It is the decomposition of matter, transformed into art... Who could have imagined so much beauty on a tomb?... Mole... Copal [or Incense]. Prayers... Fruits. Bread. Music. Corridos [or Stories]. Romantic songs. It was before these ornate gravesites, when I knew...in my heart, those that have departed return every year to remind us of their love. And that only LOVE can save us."

In some ways, celebrating Día de Los Muertos as a family had the same emphasis on family as the other holidays. But this one was felt deeper. As we placed the photos of our departed loved ones and their favorite snacks on the altar; as we lit candles to light the way, we were reminded of our ancestors: my grandparents, my parents' aunts and uncles, our great grandparents. We would tell old family stories of these relatives my brother and I knew so little about. Día de Los Muertos was a way of remembering our ancestors and celebrating how they were with us still today, even in death. It helped us to keep their memories alive and to ensure that they weren't forgotten.

Día de Los Muertos was a special way we kept a connection to our family traditions. Yet even with this background, I still wrestle with my identity being both a white person and also Mexican-American. I wrestle with this because I experience the world as a white person with a lot of privilege. My identity seldom comes up in conversations. Often times, people assume that I am of European ancestry. I hesitate to mention other parts of my identity at times because I fear others won't believe me. I also know that there is so much of my experience that is different from non-white Mexican-American and Latinx³ people. I don't experience the systemic injustice and overt racism and prejudice against people of color in this nation. If I'm being honest, I approached this service with some hesitation. I knew what it might look like at face value: a white person leading a predominantly white UU congregation in a Día de Los Muertos service.

² "Message in Colors," Julie Sopetrán, <https://eltiempohabitado.blog/poemas-en-ingles/>.

³ "Latinx," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Latinx>.

Right now in our Association, we're wrestling with how to honor holidays and traditions, like Día de Los Muertos, without causing hurt and harm through cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is what happens when one culture, usually a privileged culture, takes elements from a disadvantaged culture out of their original meanings and contexts⁴. The UUA has published resources and materials on Día de Los Muertos, but Latinx UUs have cautioned congregations against celebrating it unless it's shared from people connected to the culture. The Rev. Marisol Caballero speaks to how it feels when predominantly white UU congregations celebrate this tradition without an authentic connection⁵. She writes: "When white people 'celebrate' el Día de Los Muertos not as the personal, invited guest of Mexicans, it feels to me like someone has crashed a family funeral or a wake". In other words, it feels disrespectful and even insensitive.

It's deep in our theology to look to world traditions and faiths for inspiration. Our Fourth Principle invites us into a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning"⁶. The third source of our living tradition maintains that we seek inspiration from the wisdom of the world's faith traditions to enhance our understandings of an ethical and spiritual life⁷. Yet, this must be done delicately. When we look to other traditions as sources, we must avoid taking rituals and celebrations out of their culture and context. At that point, we become accomplices and agents in cultural appropriation.

However, there are moments when we celebrate rituals and traditions authentically in our tradition. In fact, when we do this right and we honor traditions shared by people connected to them, we can create some truly transformative and affirming worship spaces. I experienced this as a kid that Sunday I went to church with my grandma Torch. I felt deeply affirmed in my identity. It felt authentic to have people connected to this tradition share it with the wider community. In a way, having a service like this showed me that I belonged. It showed me a Unitarian Universalism that could hold all of who I was, even with identities in tension with one another. And this is the beauty of our tradition as Unitarian Universalists.

We hold a deep vision that it is possible to hold all of who we are in community together, even when so many of us come from different identities, beliefs, cultures, and perspectives. We have a great opportunity to honor and appreciate the richness of this vibrant tradition. We can pay respect to how meaningful this ritual is for those who celebrate it. We can also take some deep lessons from our own theology as Unitarian Universalists and where that theology meets Día de Los Muertos.

A question at the heart of Día de Los Muertos for me is that wider question of *Who are we?*—In Spanish, *¿Quiénes somos?* Who has come before us? And how can we honor their living memories? I see an intersection with Día de Los Muertos and how we also

⁴ "What's Wrong with Cultural Appropriation? These 9 Answers Reveal Its Harm," Maisha Johnson, *Everyday Feminism*, 2015, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/06/cultural-appropriation-wrong/>.

⁵ See more at <https://www.uua.org/worship/holidays/dia-de-los-muertos>.

⁶ "4th Principle: A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning," *Unitarian Universalist Association*, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/4th>.

⁷ "Sources of Our Living Tradition," *Unitarian Universalist Association*, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>.

view death in our tradition. Especially in the wake of the upcoming election, we can honor those who have gone before us by voting for a world they would be proud of. We can hold their memories close to our hearts as we discern who should lead us in the years to come and what decisions should be made that best manifest our values.

We can honor the many generations who have gone before us by ensuring our voices are heard and that we make it out to vote. Día de Los Muertos reminds us of this reality: That those who have passed away aren't truly gone. They are with us still. Our ancestors are a part of our living community. We who are living carry their flames with us throughout our lives. Those who have died are alive in us just as we keep their memory alive.

Friends, our UU theology calls us to celebrate life. This doesn't mean that we should be afraid of death. Rather, as the title of this service suggests, we ought to see death in light of celebrating of life—*una celebración de la vida*. Whether we celebrate life with altars or marigold petals, with calaveras or corridos, or even simply in gathering together and keeping the memory alive of those who've gone before, we're reaching back to our ancestors and remembering more of who we are today.

As the hymn we are about to sing next tells us: "*We are our grandmother's prayers and our grandfather's dreamings. We are the breath of our ancestors*"⁸. We can say yes to life through honoring death, realizing that while death is at times scary, there's nothing to fear. They are with us still. We honor their living memories by voting for and manifesting a world in which each of us might live out our fullest lives.

So my closing for you all this morning is this: In the spirit of Día de Los Muertos, may we be ready to answer "yes" to life. May we, as Unitarian Universalists create a vibrant, living tradition in which all of us find welcome, inclusion, and affirmation. May we mourn those who have died but celebrate their living legacies that are still with us.

As you go into this next week, I invite you to remember those you love who have died. Look for the ways that you still see them showing up in your life. And more importantly, to those of you heading out to the polls this week, and those of you who have still yet to have your voice heard, *get out and vote!* Carry your loved ones with you as you participate in this sacred rite of democracy. Vote for a future that reflects our shared life-affirming faith. Vote for love. Because, as Día de Los Muertos teaches us, it is only love that can save us. May it be so. Amen.

⁸ "We Are..." Hymn #1051, *Singing The Journey*.