

**Everything is United**  
**Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson**  
**November 1, 2015**

Everything is united: good and evil;  
day and night;  
the sacred and the profane;  
life and death.  
Everything is united.

We forget.  
We forget that everything is united.  
We think things are apart, separate.  
We talked about this last week, right?  
How emptiness means the emptiness of a separate  
self.  
But we make these distinctions, these categories.

Sacred. Profane.  
Man. Woman.  
Death. Life.  
Normal. Weird.  
Evil. Good.

This fiesta reminds us: no, everything is united.  
It is a revolution of the order of control.

So we come to this turning of the year,  
exactly halfway from the autumnal equinox and the  
winter solstice.  
This point in time,  
and something is in the air tonight.  
Some magic, some awareness, some ancient knowing.  
In the Celtic isles

the ancients marked the date,  
called it Samhain,  
when the dead came to visit.  
It was not sad.  
It was a festival: of harvest and memory and laughter.  
Of candy and parties and costumes.  
When the Christians came,  
they said "It is All Saints Day and All Souls Day  
to remember the ancestors."  
The Celts said, "We know."  
Call it All Hallow's Day, when memory is Hallowed.  
The night before, call it Hallow's Eve.  
Halloween.

Across the world, the ancient Aztecs read the same  
seasons,  
measured out the days,  
and made a sacred festival.  
To celebrate the dead,  
to remember, not in sorrow, in joy.  
To sacrifice - food and drink and all the things they  
loved -  
and to remind the living  
that everything is united,  
all is one, life and death.

And when the Christians came, they said,  
"This is All Saints Day and All Souls day,  
to remember the ancestors."  
And the indigenous people said, "We know."  
Call it Día de los Muertos - Day of the Dead.

Bring your sugar skulls and your marigolds,  
your drink and your bread,

your bright colors and songs of joy.  
Spend the day at the panteón, the cemetery;  
tell stories, laugh and remember.  
We know that we each will die,  
though sometimes we try to forget.  
The ritual remembers for us.  
It teaches us not to be afraid.  
For everything is united.

I love Betsy's story of Chinese families celebrating Día de los Muertos in the cemeteries of the Philippines. Chinese folk regions have a whole set of ancestor worship traditions, including the lighting of incense, creating an altar with their favorite things, and more. So there they are in the Philippines, and the Spanish Christians say, "We have the tradition; it is partly Christian, All Saints and All Souls, and it is partly Aztec" (they may have forgot to say that, but we know they should have). We remember our ancestors. We celebrate them. And the Chinese families said, "We know."

A lot of my colleagues shared an article this week about Día de los Muertos by Aya de Leon, a Latina writer. She talked about the dangers of appropriating this holiday. In the same way that most of our Halloween celebrations strip away the ancient Celtic spirituality,

she decried parties that stripped away the culture and spirit of her people's heritage.

So today, I want to firmly ground our observing in the spirit and heritage of the Aztec and Mexican people.

I'm so glad that Martha could set up our ofrenda, and share this with some of us who don't know these traditions.

I was struck by something that de Leon wrote at the beginning of her article.

She said:

"It is completely natural that you would want to participate in celebrating The Day of The Dead. You, like all human beings, have lineage, ancestors, departed family members. You have skulls under the skin of your own faces, bones beneath your flesh. Like all mortals, you seek ways to understand death, to befriend it, and celebrate it in the context of celebrating life and love.

There is a universal human impulse.

We know in our bones that everything is united.

We know it, and we know our culture forgets.

We know the dead matter to us,

and that life is precious,

but we forget.

Ritual remembers.

And for those of us without ritual,

we sometimes are tempted to grab on to someone else's ritual, life a lifeboat in the stormy sea.

And that's OK, but it is better to find your own boat.

Or learn to swim.

Today, Unitarian Universalism, our religious faith,

is proudly a multi-faith movement.

We affirm that there are many paths to wisdom and understanding.

So we have among us theists and non-theists.

We have liberal Christians and Buddhists and occasionally-practicing Jews.

We have among us Pagans, folks who have recovered and recreated

the ancient rituals of indigenous traditions -

Celtic traditions, Scandinavian traditions, American Indian traditions.

We have folks who find their meaning in scientific discoveries, in poetry or music,

in the world of justice, in friendship, and in the peace of wild things.

We are proudly multi-faith.

We are not all one thing.

But the sacred is one thing.

And we can learn from each other.

We can open our minds and hearts -

even to what first seems strange or odd to us.

We can see the longing in our bones that unites us and connects us,

rather than focus on the names and the rituals which we might do in different ways.

In this, Unitarian Universalism is trying to do something remarkable:

we are trying to show respect for the cultural roots of each tradition,

while recognizing our interdependence and the way that religion mixes and matches and moves.

Religious scholars call this syncretism -

putting different religions together -  
and sometimes they decry it.

What a mess!

We should keep it pure!

But, for more than a generation, we've said, bring it  
on.

We welcome the mixing and matching.

This was not always the case with our Unitarian and  
Universalist ancestors.

We've had times when the Christian Unitarians drove  
out the radical deists.

Then, a hundred years later, the aggressive humanists  
tried to drive out the remaining Christians.

In some of our congregations, the skeptics have tried  
to keep the pagans out.

In others, the pagans have tried to push out the  
scientific humanists.

None of that reflects us at our best.

At our best, we are endlessly curious.

We expect integrity, not conformity.

And we don't use religion to divide,  
but instead look to the deeper human need below all  
differences.

This dance between exclusiveness and inclusiveness  
goes back to before we were called Unitarians.

Before the state-sanctioned churches of New England  
split into the Unitarian and Congregational  
branches,

we share a common history - one that goes back to the  
Puritans,  
the religious reformers and disciplinarians who had fled  
England.

We wanted religious freedom — but kicked out the Baptists, harassed the Universalists, and demonized the Catholics.

It was also our ancestors who used the power of religious fear to persecute those women who caused trouble, or were too independent, by accusing them of witchcraft.

I discovered a few weeks ago, when looking at the family tree my mom had created on [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), that my ninth great grandmother was Susannah Martin. That's her.

In 1692, caught in a dispute about the disposition of her father's will, she was accused of witchcraft and hanged in Salem, Massachusetts.

That's my ancestor, one of them, anyway. She wasn't a pagan, let alone an actual witch; she was just a strong-willed woman who challenged the political structure and was killed for it. She didn't back down, and spoke up for herself. Maybe that's where I get it from. I hope you won't hang me as witch.

That's just one of my ancestors. As my mom and I looked through the family tree, there were so many snippets of stories I wanted to know more about. The revolutionary war soldiers - a bunch of them. The young Kaskaskia woman: a member of the Illiniwek Confederation of American Indians and the

chief's daughter, her name is recorded as Marie,  
though who knows,  
she was married off to a French fur trader against her  
will sometime near 1703,  
not far from here;  
the immigrants from Norway and Germany and France  
and Ireland;  
so many ancestors.  
So many pieces of my story.

Speaking of her own complicated ancestors,  
the enslaved African woman and her white slave-holder  
who raped her,  
the poet Alice Walker writes,  
"Rest. In Peace. In me.  
The meaning of our lives is still unfolding."

The meaning of our lives is still unfolding.  
It is the ancestor's breath  
in the voice of the waters.  
The dead are not under the earth,  
they are in the rustling trees,  
they are in the moaning rocks,  
they are in the woman's breast and the wailing child,  
with us in this crowd.

They are with us in this crowd.

We have laid our ofrenda, our offering.  
We have welcomed the spirit of love and memory.  
We have overturned the order of things  
and remembered that everything is united.

The dead are not under the earth,

they are with us in this crowd.  
The meaning of their lives, of our lives, is still  
unfolding.

We give thanks for our ancestors -  
the beautiful ones, the complicated ones, the  
troublesome ones;  
known and unknown,  
history lives in our bones.  
Our choices matter, for we are not just descendants;  
we ourselves will one day be ancestors.  
It will be us that are remembered.  
This is no cause for fear, but for rejoicing.  
For mercy and love.  
For the telling of stories and the doing of justice.  
Someday, in a time and a place,  
with the usual customs -  
whatever they might be -  
someone will come to our grave, perhaps  
with sugar skulls and marigolds,  
or they will plant a flag,  
or bring a flower to the stream wherein our ashes were  
given to the water,  
or they will light a candle,  
or they will simply tell a story,  
and we will be the ones who rustle in the wind and  
sound in a child's cry.  
The meaning of our lives will still be unfolding.

You, like all human beings, have lineage, ancestors,  
departed family members. You have skulls under the  
skin of your own faces, bones beneath your flesh. Like  
all mortals, you seek ways to understand death, to

befriend it, and celebrate it in the context of celebrating life and love.

We are woven.

Woven of the strands of history:  
our history, and the history of the world.

As each religion and each culture is itself woven  
of many threads - pieces of culture mixed and mashed  
together,  
evolving, being reclaimed, being reborn -  
we too our woven,  
mixed and mashed, evolving, being reclaimed, being  
reborn.  
Everything is united.

We seek ways to understand and celebrate death -  
a part of life,  
a doorway,  
a step in the journey,  
and an invitation to make of this life,  
these days,  
meaning, beauty, and justice -  
for, yes, though we don't know when or where,  
our time will come.

Ritual reminds us.

We forget.

But ritual reminds us.

It brings the ancestors alive again for the night,  
and it brings us together.

Across culture and faith, across race and class and  
country,  
it brings us together:

reminding us that we are all mortal,  
all human,  
all fragile,  
all longing for love,  
all beautiful,  
all laughing crying wondering breath breathing human  
beings,  
all connected in one beautiful, colorful, wonderful  
world.

Let us give thanks.  
For life, for death,  
for hope, for memory,  
for the saints and the souls gone before,  
for our own lives and the lives of others,  
for the sweets and the smells and the rituals of this  
season.

Let us give thanks for our ancestors,  
who from their labors rest,  
and let us praise the mystery, the beauty, the joy of  
life and death.

For it is true,  
though we might forget.

For it is true:  
everything is united.

Let us sing.