

**Boney Hands:  
Touching on El Dia De Los Muertos  
A sermon offered at  
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist  
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By the Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia**

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about what it's like to put together a funeral or memorial service. It's always a privilege to be allowed into the life and history of a family – at least as far as they allow me to enter. I hear stories – many stories – and through the stories there is a real sense that, for moments, the one who has died has returned. As though we called to them and they reappeared. It's a moment. Often, I observe, it's the briefest moment of respite from the pain of grief – a moment when memory overwhelms the sense of loss. It is like a visitation – as though hearing themselves remembered so powerfully, the dead return and draw close.

Our connection is so strong that we feel their presence.

The song, breaths, that the choir sang before is both poetic and vivid and expresses this same feeling.

Those who have died, have never never left

They are in the rustling trees, they are in the groaning woods

They are in the crying grass, they are in the moaning rocks

The dead are not under the earth...

Four thousand years ago, Aztec societies, as so many other societies did, believed that the dead were not really gone – only living out the next chapter of their lives. And, like so many other societies around at that same time, the Aztecs dispatched the dead with the things they thought the dead would need.

There were two rulers over the lands of the dead – Mictecacihuatl (Mick- tech – asih – watti) and her husband Mictecacihuatli. The Goddess, Mictecacihuatl was a kind of protectress. She watched over the bones of the dead so that another generation of humans might be able to use their bones when they came into this world. I suspect that much of the meaning of this Aztec belief has been lost in translation over thousands of years of history and a continent of culture. And yet there is such powerful, present, resonant truth in this holy day risen from those beliefs.

The very durability of bones, the framework of our bodies, makes them seem powerful, durable enough for more than one lifetime. One of the hardest realities – thousands of years ago and a reality now – is that our lives are fragile and easily lost.

Life is and has always been especially risky for the first days, months and years of life. Yet, the times that I have spent in the neo-natal intensive care unit as a chaplain, minister, and aunt, have made it clear that even the briefest life has profound meaning. There were societies in which children were not even named until the first year of life had passed – but the infants were just as precious and beloved as they are today, the sorrow of parents equally deep. But, just as today, thousands of years ago – someone in relatively good health, in a time of peace, with access to good nutrition, and in a society that provided protection from predators could live just as long as we can – given the same variables now – even up to 90 years or slightly older. Truth is – dangerous as the world may seem now –

it was even more dangerous back then, impossible to take life for granted, impossible to hold death at arm's length. As it is, yet, today in many parts of the world.

Just as thousands of years ago, human beings saw the realities of life and death as great mysteries – so this path upon which we journey our whole lives remains a way of mystery. Fred Hoyle the astronomer once said: "Perhaps the most majestic feature of our whole existence is that while our intelligences are powerful enough to penetrate deeply into the evolution of this quite incredible Universe, we still have not the smallest clue to our own fate." He's right. It's thousands of years after the first Aztec went to visit the first grave, 4500 years after the pyramids at Giza were constructed to keep the mummified remains of the great pharaohs comfy, more than 2000 years after 8000 terracotta warriors, hundreds of terracotta horses, and chariots, along with acrobats and other entertainment, were buried along with the first Chinese Emperor, and we still say farewell to our loved ones in everything from shining, cushioned satin-lined, sealed caskets, encased in thick metal boxes, to winding cloths to return to the earth, ornate urns for ashes, to letting their ashes ride the wind. And still, the realities beyond the grave remain mysteries. But the fact that it is mysterious is no excuse for turning away and trying to ignore it.

We sometimes refer to our children and young people as having the attitude that they are indestructible – immortal. And with all our amazing medical technology, we've grown used to the illusion that we have some real control over life and death. Recently, I watched the movie of *The Fault in Our Stars*. In the movie a young woman with a terminal cancer meets and falls in love with a young man in remission. Through the movie it is as though Death is a third partner in their relationship – no matter how distracted they may feel in the moment – the knife edge between life and death cuts a pattern in their lives. The young woman in the film tries to discourage her suitor by yelling at him that she is a time bomb, destined to explode and destroy everything in her path.

But we know that everyone has that same ticking mechanism – set for a time, which we cannot predict.

In the celebration of El Dia De Los Muertos, people look death in the eye sockets, acknowledge that it holds us each by the hand, and admit that, while Life with a capital L endures – individual lives are – by evolutionary standards – brief. In the vivid colors and the honest practices of the holiday somehow, Aztec and many South and Central American societies, have created a way to live face to face with death – to see death as it is – an unpredictable and inevitable chapter of life.

The Catholic Church was unable to eliminate this ancient and existentially helpful holiday, so they moved it to coincide with All Saint's Day. Now all saint's day, I feel fairly sure was created by the church when it found that it couldn't eliminate the ancient holiday of Samhain – a time when, like El Dia De Los Muertos, the veil between the worlds of spirit and matter was said to be thin and the spirits of those loved and lost could be contacted. Death, whether we set it up on an altar and look into its boney eye sockets or not – always demands that we turn back and face it.

Where, in ancient time, the goddess – Mictecacihuatl, guarded the bones for the future generations to use – the grave becomes a place people visit, decorate, and tend so that there is a sign of those who came before for future generations to remember and feel a connection with.

The ofrendas – altars – which may be set up at home as well as at the cemetery, often hold Calaveras – skulls – and esqueletos – skeletons that are often works of art. And

there are figures – a small sampling of which you can see here on the ofrendas – that show people in every facet of life. The young and the old, doctors, lawyers, artists, vendors in the market, whole families, I have a small mariachi band and a tiny dead Elvis. There is a whole category of romantic skeletons – tiny brides and grooms – and I’ve found tiny romantic same sex skeleton couples. I suppose the purpose of these is to remind newly married couples just what they mean when they say “til death us do part.”

On our ofrendas you can see a couple of the painted Calaveras – the amazing skulls – that soften the face of death without diminishing its dreadful aspect. The graves are often covered with marigolds – but the painted Calaveras take the idea of adorning the dead with flowers a step further.

So the ofrendas are covered with the mementos of the life of the departed, fragrant with the smells of favorite foods. A friend who’d once been in Mexico during this festival, described the guitar music that filled the cemetery – so that the spirit of the departed would draw closer and know that they are remembered.

With all the skeletons – it seems clear that no one is imagining the return of plump relatives, robust with life, sporting wings and rosy cheeks. The Day of the dead is a time that boney hands reach out and skeletal arms embrace us. But instead of this seeming unpleasant and deathly – like the bloody ghosts that go door to door seeking candy at Halloween – there is something in that boney embrace that seems, to me, life-giving. The sense of visitation certainly affirms the life that has gone before. But it’s more than that. El Dia De Los Muertos recognizes that the skeleton is there in each one of us – just beneath the skin is our own esqueleta – beneath our cheeks is our own calavera. If I reach out and hold your hand, and pay close attention, I feel the bones beneath the skin. Each year at this time, I remember a couple of meditations that I experienced led by Thich Nhat Hanh – the Buddhist meditation teacher with whom Melanie Terbovic – who conducts our Buddhism discussion group, spent so much time. In one meditation, he asks you to lay flat, becoming aware of the skeleton within your body and then imagining that body 80 years or more after your death. For 20 or 30 minutes you lay meditating on your skeleton and after a time you begin to meditate on the skeleton – and the death – waiting every one of us.

Just like the faces of the Calaveras this meditation is at first unsettling.

Friday I heard a rebroadcast of an interview of Stephen King by Terry Gross. I tuned in just in time to hear him say, “my childhood was pretty ordinary, except from a very early age, I wanted to be scared.” I listened to him and thought about the ways that we play hide and seek and jump out and laugh with delight as children and the way that people – not me – but some people – love roller coasters. I think this love of getting scared is quite naturally human. It’s not a fright that shakes you to the ground of your being – the roller coaster, the scary novel, the bizarre movie startle you and you get the immediate relief that, in reality, you are safe, alive – it’s just a movie, it’s just a “thrill”. But for a moment – caught in a quick fright, we are reminded that there is in us a true story.

The difference with the meditation, is that while, it is unsettling, it’s not frightening. In the meditation on the bones, I found a keen awareness of the impermanence of life and, at the same time, the depth of the present moment. Aware of every person in the room, I remember being filled with a tremendous tenderness – a sense of connection and compassion toward this whole fragile human community. The longer I meditated the more alive I felt. As though the encounter with the dry, dusty future made the present all the fresher and more alive.

And the time spent reflecting on death makes it less frightening and makes life feel more solid – something not to cover with bubble wrap – but to live fully. The ecologist sociologist Joanne Tippett wrote: “Fear of death is damaging to the ability to live fully. By attempting to create boundaries between death as life and distance ourselves from processes of decay, we cut ourselves off from the process of life, such as the process of growing food, of touching the earth (literally), making compost and the realization that rotting is the precursor of fertility and growth.” I say in response to her that El Dia De Los Muertos puts us face to face with the skeleton, the humus and the mulch, the dust of ages and the faces of the future. It brings people back at least once a year to grief and to hope – to the thin line between life and death – making our appreciation of life deeper, and our sense of belonging to this earth and this humanity stronger.

There is something about those boney figures and the gaping skeletons that make us more fully alive – that intertwine life and death in a way that makes both of them just what they are – mysterious, awe-filled, and incomplete without one another. Helps us to recognize the unrepeatable and passing miracles that sit beside us everyday.

El Dia De Los Muertos reminds us that we belong to those who came before us – because they are still with us – in our DNA and in the crying grass, in the moaning rocks and that we **also** belong to those who will come later. Stephen Levine, the wise teacher on the realities of death and dying wrote: “We have a will toward mystery, a yearning, greater even than our will to live. And lucky, too, because our will to live, our grasping at life, is killing us. The will to live is our fear of death, our clinging to pleasure, our dread of not becoming. The will to live keeps us holding each breath, the will toward mystery, the longing for deeper knowing, redefines life. A gradual upwelling of the still small voice within is heard. It is the completion of our birth. It does not come in time, but in timelessness, when we remember who we really are. It draws us to the edge and beckons us to surrender safe territory and enter our enormity.”

We sit awhile with death and grow more accustomed to that tremendous mystery. We eat sweets and feast, we sing, hold hands, hold one another, feel one another more tenderly, and feel the creative force of life moving in our bodies in this very moment in time. If you listen closely perhaps you can hear the voices and breaths of our ancestors. In their living they called us into being – invited us into life. In this moment – surrounded by life, we feel the pull into living, its full circle – let us respond to that pull – surrender safe territory and embrace and enter our enormity.