

***Meditation by Rev. Edward Searl***

*There is a Mysterious Power that animates every living thing, a Mysterious power that sustains what we call Life. We do not know where we come from when we are born. We do not know where we go when we die.*

*But we do know the life we live between the two eternities of being born and having to die.*

*Between these two eternities is our world - our life.*

*Some call this Source of Life, this Mysterious Power, God. Some prefer another name: Eternal Being, or Creative Force, or Spirit of Life, or perhaps simply: Love.*

*Some of us do not know what to call this Mysterious Power, for all names seem somehow inadequate.*

*Yet we feel this power at the center of our unique beings. We experience it through the changes of our individual lives. We see and sense it at work in life and in the changes of every other living thing.*

*Like a flame passing from candle to candle, this Spirit of Life passes from being to being and from generation to generation. This power is the unity of the whole of creation, - past, present and future. There is a mysterious power that animates every living thing, a Mysterious Power that sustains Life through the unending cycles of generations.*

Homily: *I'd rather be Dancing.*

We are always, it seems, saying farewell in this world, always standing on the edge of a loss asking unanswerable questions. Some of you may remember the pleasure seeking, escapist character and the haunting tune in the old movie: *What is it all about Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live? Is this life all there is? What happens to us when we die? How can all we have become: our love, our pain, our discoveries, all that living and all we have learned at often great cost, how can all that possibly disappear in one second like a cruel magicians trick: puff, all gone!* In between our first cry and our last breath we string together precious moments of life as pearls on a string and then something or someone breaks the strand and the pearls scatter everywhere. And we fall on our knees on the floor trying to retrieve something that was precious and is now lost. Unlike a strand of pearls or a puppet however a human life cannot be restrung. But we can gather together the precious memories in deep gratitude for the time we did have together. Like the Universalists I refuse to believe that either God or the universe is cruel, that is a human characteristic. No instead I trust that nothing is ever lost. All past and present makes up this moment.

This is *All Soul's Day*, our Day of the Dead when we remember our ancestors, our special saints and dear or not so dear departed who gave us the gifts of memory and life. Let us then celebrate their lives and their presence in our hearts. In some traditions it is also a time to let go of any old hurts, any old resentments that we may still hold. It is my hope and prayer that you will allow this All Soul's service to be *whatever you need it to be*. If you have suffered a recent loss may you find comfort here. And if you, like so many of us, have an old loss that you just cannot let go of well may this service help you to open your hand and let the spirit free. If it is healing you seek, may this service in some way help that process. If you are simply curious about this day and what it means well then may your curiosity be satisfied!

Oh, the sacred mystery of life and death requires at least a good sense of humor! What the Mexicans call *Los Dias de Muertos* is a heady mixture of boisterous carnival, family reunion and solemn ritual. We invite the memories and spirits of the dead to return so that the living may honor them. The children get decorated sugar and candy skulls for the kids and those wonderful figures of comical skeletons are everywhere doing everything we normally do. We have all seen those bony dentists, doctors, rock bands, politicians, preachers and bridal couples for sale in Mexican art shops. But mostly it is family affair. Families gather in the homes

and at the cemeteries, clean and paint the gravesites, spread golden marigold petals over the graves and hang colorful paper cutouts as fluttering welcome signs for the spirits. Then all night long they eat rich and fragrant foods sharing stories and memories. Some of you may have visited a cemetery on this night in rural Mexico where this custom is still followed. What a wonderful sight it is as the city of the dead comes back to life with hundreds of dancing candles, the laughter of children, the gentle magic of music. It is a celebration, a joyous event even if it is tinged with sadness. Dancing skeletons are after all rather funny. It is a good custom.

After all why not laugh in the face of death? There is a popular song that goes something like this: *I'd rather be dancing on the edge of my grave! I'd rather be singing, marching, happy and brave!* Life will not be denied! Take this fear and dread and shove it! As long as we live, let us do it with a full and open heart.

Now this is not our way here in the North. Death is a stranger kept away from our sight much of the time. Out of sight separate from the living. Obsessed with staying young we keep trying to live forever. Denial is rampant. Others may die but deep in our heart we know that we are immortal. Scientists are trying to extend our life span. In the last issue of Scientific American they were seriously discussing how long we could eventually live: 159, 200 years or more. But what would really happen if we could do

this? Would we run out of food and space? It could be more of a nightmare than any grinning skeleton reminding us of our natural mortality.

What would happen were I to call upon the spirits seriously? You would worry about me maybe and I might even worry a little about myself. The trouble of course is that as with all family reunions the emotions are not all positive. One year I did make an altar with pictures of my father, my mother and my grandmother, aunt and uncle and cousin. And found that my emotions were very mixed. Do spirits quarrel? To honor our dead we must also be honest. A good memorial service gives us back the whole person, with flaws and gifts, imperfect but real and human as the rest of us. Forgiveness is part of it. It took me maybe twenty years to forgive my mother. It matters not really in this context exactly what she did or failed to do nor what I did or failed to do. Despite my best efforts and despite what I now realize was her best effort we never got over it. Oh, I did eventually forgive her but it was too late to make any difference in our relationship. Somehow through the

years we kept missing each other's intentions and somehow the anger was too strong, the fear too great of what would happen if we really opened the Pandora's box in which my childhood memories were kept. So we stayed on the surface, we talked pleasantries and she, who in her generation never spoke much about feelings, did not change her pattern. In the last few years we mainly spoke of her own diminishing world, her apartment and her health. She never asked me how I was and I would always have to hug her, for hugging was another thing she did not do easily or willingly. I was left with one overwhelming question: Who was this woman, I called my mother, who was she, really? And then left to forgive myself for my part in that sad dance we did around each other.

The reason I am sharing this is to invite you to ponder what in your lives may be unfinished and un-forgiven. Because as long as we hold on to resentments, they hold us in bondage, they color our lives and our outlook on the future by keeping us tied to the past. As long as we feel resentful and seethe in anger as we

remember some injustice done to us we are caught in the belly of the beast, a beast of our own making. A human life continues in the lives it has both engendered and influenced. My mother gave me many gifts: a love of beauty, a flair for style and she nursed me through many illnesses. She gave me life. My mother grew up without a father from the age of six and lived through occupation and war. The scars were hidden in her soul but deep. She was a survivor, a woman warrior for 91 years. Could I call upon her spirit today I would say: I love you and I forgive you.

All those we touch will be our legacy. So let us end with a celebration. Let us celebrate the power of memory to give us hope. Let us pray for the power of memory to help us heal. Let us honor the many gifts we were given by our beloved dead. In this last week wildfires raged out of control in California and ashes fell as snow from an orange dark sky. Every day it seems we hear of yet another soldier who died or was wounded in Iraq. It is easy to feel helpless and despair at these brutal reminders of our mortality. Our challenge is to affirm and celebrate the joy, goodness and beauty of life.

Seneca wrote: "We are always saying farewell in this world, always standing at the edge of a loss, attempting to retrieve some human meaning, from the silence, something which was precious and is gone." If we are, as Seneca writes, to *retrieve some*

*meaning from the silence* we must first acknowledge what we have lost. There is no way we can deny the grief or make amends for that loss.

But we can pray and hope that we will find the healing gifts of *courage, wisdom and thanksgiving together*. We need courage to accept the reality of someone's death. Sometimes it may take years to fully do so. And we need the wisdom to know that joy and sorrow are joined in this life and that we cannot have one without the other, it is the price we pay for having loved at all. But I believe it is grace that gives us the ability to give thanks for someone's life, to be grateful that they lived, for the time we did share with them. Grace in the sense that it is something given to us to make our healing possible.

Rabindranath Tagore writes: "*Life as a whole never takes death seriously. It laughs, dances and plays, it builds, hoards and loves in death's face. Only when we detach one individual death do we see its blankness and become dismayed. We lose sight of the wholeness of a life of which death is a part. It is like looking at a piece of cloth through a microscope. It appears like a net: we gaze at the big holes and shiver in imagination. But the truth is death is not the ultimate reality. It looks black as the sky looks blue; but it does not blacken existence, just as the sky does not leave its blue stain upon the wings of a bird.*" Let us keep dancing!

Now we will have our flower ritual:

Allow yourself for a moment to remember someone you have lost. What gifts have they given to you? What gift do you wish they could still give to you? This is a time for each of us to honor those who have gone before us. Take a moment to consider in silence what it is you need this All Soul's day. Gather your thoughts and feelings and then when the flowers are passed around take one. It can be a flower *in memory* of someone. It can be one last gift *of gratitude* for what they gave to you. It can be the liberating gift *of forgiveness*. It can be a flower of hope for comfort and healing. A flower in recognition of the power of human love. Let this flower be what you need today.