

## DIA DE LOS MUERTOS: SOLACE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

A Sermon By  
The Rev. Susan Manker-Seale

It is an illusion that death doesn't walk with us every moment of our lives. I know there is an image in our cultural heritage of the Grim Reaper only showing up when you or someone near you is about to die, but really I think Death is more than an apparition that comes and goes, or an event confined to a particular moment.

If you think about it, you can bring into awareness the fact that people are dying all around the world all the time, every single second, as are people being born. Animals and plants and all life forms are constantly engaged in this dance, this cycle from life to death and from life to life. With every breath, with every bite of food, with every step upon the grass or desert soil, death is there. With every heartbeat, death touches a skin cell or a hair follicle or a muscle cell or a brain cell. We are not just life, but death walking upon an earth that is also life and death intertwined, interdependent, hand in hand.

Death is life and life is death. On the other hand, there is the complete death of the body, the ending of a personality and a presence, although people could argue with that as well. I know people who say they have spoken with their loved ones who have died. And lots of people in the world believe in reincarnation and life after death of some kind. So how would we define the ending of a life, if one is to separate the physical existence from the spiritual? Or for that matter, how would we define life itself?

That's one big question that faces us when we face the death of someone we love or even of our own death. As UU minister Forrester Church put it, "Religion is the human response to being alive and having to die." For Humanists, death is the end of both the physical and the spiritual, there being no separation, no "spiritual" to speak of, so the religious response is to ask ourselves how do we live our lives here and now on earth? For theists and those who believe in an afterlife, the religious response might be to ask ourselves how do we live our lives here and now on earth so that we accomplish what we were put here to accomplish and our spiritual existence may continue after the death of the physical? And for those who believe in reincarnation, the religious response contains the question how do we learn what we're supposed to learn so that the cycle of rebirth of both the physical and the spiritual can finally end? Those are some very simple summaries of a few points of view. Each has value to those who believe in them.

When faced with the death of the physical body, what do you believe? Do your beliefs bring you solace in the face of death?

Cultures develop ways to help people confront death and to heal from death, even to live with death. Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, is one example of the religious response to death. In Mesoamerica, death was not to be feared, but rather was seen as an awakening. Skulls and bones were part of indigenous temple worship. When Catholicism arrived, it brought a frightening vision of a death that included hell, and the temples were cleared of the skeletons. But in the eighteenth century, a cult of death began to evolve that combined the two views and the skeletons and bones came back in a more humorous way. Today, el Dia de los Muertos is celebrated in almost every

community in Mexico. (*Day of the Dead in Mexico: Through the Eyes of the Soul*, by Mary Andrade, p. 8)

In pre-Hispanic times, the ceremony was called Milcahuipil and was a time when the dead came to visit and families would prepare the best foods to give to them. That tradition remains in Dia de los Muertos. Each home creates an altar, and many of the altars are covered with photographs and mementos of loved ones who have died. Foods are placed on the altar along with yellow marigolds, called cempasuchitl, and other flowers and candles. The tradition includes cleaning and praying on October 31, going from house to house on the night of November 1 to ask for fruits and candies, as well as picnicking in the cemeteries on November 2 and cleaning and decorating the tombs.

The tradition is complex, but also clearly one of poking fun at death. Political cartoons using caricatures of death are printed in the local papers, and poems are written and shared. This one is from the book *Day of the Dead in Mexico: Through the Eyes of the Soul*, by Mary Andrade (p. 57). It is entitled "Message in Colors" and is by a Spanish poet, Julie Sopetran:

### Message in Colors

Lit candles. Faces. Memories  
and an entrance that's a rainbow: protection for the place  
of rest and meditation.  
Necklaces. Cempasuchitl, pre-Hispanic links, songs,  
paper medals, flames talking to the wind  
the diverse language departed.  
It is the prime time of the celebration  
or death's thread, threaded  
through time's needle.  
It is the decomposition of matter, transformed into art.  
It is the final curtain awakened from death in Ocotepc.  
Yes. An eternal dream of uncorrupt flowers and of gibberish.  
It is death's lament, fading away  
and it is also the respect made a tribute.  
Who could have imagined so much beauty on a tomb?  
Mole. Glass of water. Copal. Salt. Prayers.  
Firecrackers. Fruits. Bread. Music.  
Corridos. Bolas. Romantic songs.  
History, praised. Creativity expressed  
in its most raw form...  
And it is the color purple, elegies in white, blue and pink.  
It is a blow from grace so heightened as artificial fire  
that reveals the soul's presence in the darkness.  
Something like the flowering of martyrdom in flames.  
An arrangement for the end or the posthumous splendor.  
In Morelos everything is possible  
gloom battles with life and its victor,  
it is once again for a little while, happiness, live tradition

which overcomes reality.

It was before these ornate gravesites, when I knew  
that in Ocotepc, as in my heart,  
those that have departed return every year to remind us of their love.  
And that only LOVE can save us.

What a wonderful expression of solace in the face of death! And I was moved especially by his last line, “that only LOVE can save us.” I was pondering the ways we find solace, and loving deeply arose as the most powerful way we can be sustained through such hard times.

It is related to faith. We can love the world and love each other, as well as accept the love of those around us in our grief. Feeling love for the world brings a sense that life is what it is, a sense that all that happens, happens, and life and death are part of our beings, not to be avoided or rejected or feared, but embraced when they must be personally present in our lives as they so often are.

Elisabeth Kübler Ross wrote about the five stages we go through in confronting death, which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I’m not going to talk about them all—you can look them up if you wish. But I did want to mention the first, which is denial, since it may be the most familiar response to all of us. It’s not the kind of denial as in refusing to believe that someone has died, but rather a way our beings cope with such an intense change and loss of love. We can’t take it in all at once, so we go about our days forgetting that that person is gone, expecting to see them around each corner. It is a period of adjusting which allows the grieving to begin.

Grief is described by David Kessler, grief counselor and co-author with Kübler Ross, as “the internal part of loss, how we feel.” He says, and I’m sure we all agree, that “the pain of loss is so intense, so heartbreaking, because in loving we deeply connect with another human being, and grief is the connection that has been lost.”  
([www.davidkessler.org/html/elis.html](http://www.davidkessler.org/html/elis.html).)

It comes down, of course, to love again: Love that connects us and love that saves us. In losing the love connection with someone, we need to be present to the love that is in the world all around us all the time, whether that is in the form of family and friends, or pets or nature, or the faith that sustains us and grounds us in the rightness of the universe.

What about love when we are faced with our own deaths? I found out this past week that Forrest Church, my colleague who wrote that “religion is the human response to being alive and having to die,” is now facing his own death from esophageal cancer. He wrote a beautiful letter to his congregation which he shared with our Ministers Executive Committee, expressing the peace he felt from the beliefs he had formed and honed over the years with them, his parishioners. At least, that’s what I remember from his letter which I only read once as it was being shared.

It is our relationships which give us solace. All of us are facing death over and over in our lives. Some of us know the relative ending point as we deal with illness. Others have experienced the death of someone close to them. Others know that any moment may be the last for them and for those they love. It is so much a part of our lives that we can’t think about it all the time, but many of us do for a large part of the time.

I was thinking about it Friday night as I flew 35,000 feet above the world and looked down in the darkness at the clustered orange lights of towns across Wisconsin. How crazy is that?

And those who are facing their own deaths neither need nor want to focus on it all the time either. Some who are dying do find distraction in goals they set for themselves, such as planning their own memorial services and coordinating family visitors to the extent they can. But we who sit with them can also bring solace with the ways we love and the reflections we bring of the world outside the sickroom. Confronting death can distract us from the reality that every moment is life, that life is lived in seconds, from second to second, and celebrated in the wonder of being alive even in the face of illness and death.

The deeper you love, the more grief you will find in the loss of that love, but so too, the more solace you will find as you once again embrace the love that is present all around you every moment you are alive.