

Sunday, November 2, 2014

El Dia de los Muertos

Day of the Dead

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Look, I don't want to wax philosophic, but I will say that if you're alive you've got to flap your arms and legs, you've got to jump around a lot, for life is the very opposite of death, and therefore you must at very least think noisy and colorfully, or you're not alive. – Mel Brooks

¡Presente!

Let us turn our thoughts to those of blessed memory, those whose lives and deaths we recall today. In Latin America there is a sacred tradition of calling out the names of the dead. After each name is called, the people respond, *¡Presente!*, meaning "present."

The *¡Presente!* ritual is an affirmation of the ways in which we carry forward our beloved ones – they are here in memory and in spirit, within us, and with us, and among us. Please join us now in a time of *¡Presente!*

We will begin by naming those people in our congregation who have died in the past year and we will respond, together, *¡Presente!*

John Lewis-McLaren
Earl Stimpson

I now invite you to speak the names of any departed loved ones whose memory and presence you want to recall and we will respond, together, *¡Presente!*

Let us now welcome those whose names we hold silently in our hearts, together one last time: ¡Presente!

Let us be in silence together.

Sermon

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Flapping Your Arms and Legs and Jumping Around a Lot

At this time of the year – All Soul's Day, Mexican Day of the Dead, the time of the year when the veil between the living and the dead is considered to be thin – it's worth reviewing our thought to ponder this morning, the words of no greater an authority than Mel Brooks:

Look, I don't want to wax philosophic, but I will say that if you're alive you've got to flap your arms and legs, you've got to jump around a lot, for life is the very opposite of death, and therefore you must at very least think noisy and colorfully, or you're not alive.

Yes, Mel Brooks is as much an authority as anyone, because he is human, and thus temporary and mortal. Each of us is human and mortal, and, thus, students of the inexorability of death, loss, and grief. And juxtaposed with those guarantees of experiences that will come to all of us, we are also students of life.

I know, as I am sure you do, that one can study what happens to the human body when it dies, and one can learn how to accompany the dying both psychologically and spiritually as they come to make their final goodbyes and transition. Such knowledge is useful and helpful when it's our turn either to die or to face the death of a loved one. I don't want to minimize the

mastery of such great learners. I merely suggest that each of us is an authority at the most basic level, for we are born containing our death. Right there with our first gasp for breath, our first cries, our first suckling, dwells our death. And that is not something to fear or regret, for without death, our birth would not be the wonderful miracle it is. Without death, the ensuing time after our arrival in this great mysterious plane of existence – whether minutes, days weeks, months, or years – would be meaningless.

What would life be if it went on forever? It certainly wouldn't be the treasure it is now. That is why it is important to face death squarely, consciously, every so often, to remember to flap our arms and legs and jump around a lot, for our opportunities for doing so are limited.

Yet most of us would just as soon *not* think about what is to come. Most of us, most of the time, live our days, conducting the ongoing business of our lives, without considering the silent, invisible deathly companion that walks always at our sides.

That is one reason why I love *Dia de los Muertos* – it reminds me of my finitude. It reminds me to do the real work set before me, to pay attention to the things that matter, to love fiercely, and to be grateful for the gift of time I have. It reminds me, not only that death walks beside life, but also that life walks beside death. I find it interesting and moving to know the monarch butterflies return to Mexico at the same approximate time that the people are preparing for the Day of the Dead. Life dwelling beside death. Death dwelling beside life.

For me, that understanding of how linked life and death are is expressed eloquently in Jane Kenyon's poem, *Otherwise*.

Otherwise

By Jane Kenyon

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.

But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

There is another truth the Day of the Dead reinforces – a truth I draw upon every single day of my life: That is that my dead, my beloveds, are not really gone from me. No, I cannot touch them, or see them, or hear their laughter or songs, but they are still with me in significant, meaningful ways. The notion that I can commune with them – that my whole community could commune equally with their beloveds – rings true to me, for I still talk to the ones I long to behold. I still tell their stories. I still learn from their wisdom and example. I still reach out to them when I am confused or sorrowful. They are gone from the physical plane, but they still dwell with me.

So, on the Day of the Dead, I celebrate the life I am privileged to have, and I also acknowledge and honor the blessings my beloved bestowed on me while they lived – blessings that still grace my days now.

Thoughts about death seem to come naturally this time of year, when the earth is dying. Perhaps that is why one of the clergy groups in which I participate has been discussing practices to honor the dead. One of my colleagues skillfully laid out the challenges she faces in her congregation: A beloved member of the congregation will die. Like so many Mainers, that person will have retired here so his or her children have no particular connection to the congregation. Thus in the planning, the children want to jettison parts of the church's practices and traditions that would have meant something to the deceased and to members of the congregation. My colleague spoke of how difficult such planning was and how often she rued the fact that the deceased left no plans.

Interestingly for me, our clergy group was talking about planning funerals at the same time I was preparing a memorial service for Earl Simpson. Actually, Earl had given me a few plans to go on. Most particularly, he told me exactly what music he wanted: He wanted people to sing his favorite hymn, *Morning Has Broken*. He wanted the service to end with us singing, *When the Saints Go Marching In* – because he loved the idea of New Orleans jazz funerals that end with that burst of exuberance. He wanted Brad to play *September Song* and *Send in the Clowns*, two songs he particularly loved.

That service was truly Earl's service. His stamp was on it, his character represented, his wishes gifting us one more time with his unique, inimitable character. So I reflected with my clergy group how it felt to plan a service for which the deceased had made his wishes known.

I know how my clergy colleague felt, though, about putting together memorial services in a sort of vacuum. In my experience, Earl is the exception, not the rule, where it comes to planning memorial services.

This is my 8th autumn in this church's pulpit – and at least my 7th Day of the Dead service here. At most of those services I have made available forms for people to fill out to list their important contact information and describe their wishes for when they die. In all these years, I have had – maybe – six of those forms returned to me. For most of you, I have no clue what you want. I say that not to scold you, but to invite you once again to think about your wishes and make them known to me. If you change your mind later, you can always change your plan.

True confessions: I have never filled out that form myself. When I faced up to that fact as I was planning today's service, I viewed it as an opportunity.

After all, how could I ask something of you that I hadn't done myself? Thus, I have made some plans. I share them as an example of what kinds of information might be helpful.

I want memorial donations to be made to this church.

I want a green burial. A couple Maine cemeteries have green burial plots in which a body that has not been embalmed and has been laid out in a biodegradable coffin of some sort – wood is fine – can be laid to rest directly into the ground. I want to return as fully as possible to my beloved earth.

I want a simple service. Clergy colleagues are invited, of course, but I don't want them processing in and out as they often do at services held for ministers. I don't want any fuss from the UUA, although they may send a floral arrangement, as they tend to do.

Aside from those flowers, I don't want cut flowers. I would invite folks to bring flowers that are still attached to their plants, still living, growing in pots. African violets, fine. Clivia, fine. Begonias, fine. Chrysanthemum, fine. You get the idea.

I want three hymns: *Blue Boat Home*, because I love this earth (and because I love that hymn):

*I've been sailing all my life now,
never harbor or port have I known.
The wide universe is the ocean I travel,
And the earth is my blue, boat home.*

My mother's hymn, *Our Church is More than Framework*, should be included because it became so surprisingly significant to me and others

during the course of my ministry. I would like to include the fourth verse I wrote for our building dedication service this past September.

And I want *Come Down, O Love Divine* because it was sung at my ordination and my installation here and because it has old fashioned words, which I love, and because it expresses my utmost prayer – a prayer I continue to pray in one way or another just about every day because I am so fallible and often fall so short of the mark. (It's the only hymn I know of that includes the word, “shortcomings.” I have plenty of those, and I want them to show up in my service.) I have tinkered with the words of that hymn, so I want my words to be sung.

If there are one or two family members or friends who want to give a reflection, fine. If not, fine. But no more than two. And I am content if only the minister gives a eulogy. I don't want the microphone passed for spontaneous, extemporaneous sharing.

My work as a minister is sure to be commemorated in such a service, as it should be. I consider it an honor and a privilege to serve as a minister; that work represents a deep calling of my heart. But I don't want that work to eclipse the fact that I am a wife, mother, sister, and friend. I want people to wrap their arms around my family, most of all.

That is my latest, best thinking. Pondering my plans made me reflect on the many ways I have flapped my arms and legs and jumped around a lot throughout the course of my days. Thinking about it gave me an opportunity to talk about it with my spouse, and that provided us with some close moments together.

I have no plans to put this into action any time soon, I hasten to assure you. But the one thing I know about life is that you never know. You really just never know.

So I will put these thoughts into the church file. I invite you to put your own thoughts in the church file, too. What would represent your arm and leg flapping and your jumping around? Let me know – I'm open to most anything except this: Whatever you do, do not request no services. Speaking from personal experience as a minister and as a family member, you will do your loved ones a disservice if you ask them not to mark the cataclysmic shift your death is sure to represent to them.

One last thing: I want the following poem read at my service. It's one of my favorite poems and a great comfort to me. I close my thoughts with these words.

***Let Evening Come* By Jane Kenyon**

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

***Benediction**

Our time draws to a close,
Let us release our loved ones,
called into our space this morning,
with these words by Judith Anderson:

Remember us,
you who are living,
restore us, renew us.
Speak for our silence.
Continue our work.
Bless the breath of life.
Sing of the hidden patterns.
Weave the web of peace.