

***On the Threshold***  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill  
Sunday, October 30, 2022  
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

**Part One *Thresholds***

Some people are summer people, while others like the winter, but for me, right now is the very best time of all the seasons of the year. This season is magical, it is mystical, a time that invites us to reach beyond what is right in front of us and consider what more there might be in this amazing universe. At this time of year we find the Christian holidays of All Hallow’s Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day; Día de los Muertos in Mexico, the Babylonian feast day of Nippur, Scandinavian fire celebrations to honor the start of the Winter Nights, and the Celtic festival of Samhain. Some believe that in ancient Ireland, Samhain was the central feast day of the Celtic calendar, “a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet.”

Samhain begins at sunset on October 31st and ends at sunset on November 1st. It is the celebration that is the origin of Halloween. Samhain was first observed by Celtic Pagans, marking the Celtic New Year, the end of summer, the end of the growing season, the beginning of the annual decline into darkness, cold and death. As one author described it, “By the halfway point of fall we are surrounded by an ambient prescience of impending death. Death and decline. Death and disappearance. The Sun seems to be dying as we approach the winter solstice six weeks away. Our world is steeped in deep shadows, the light decreases daily, dimming toward the shortest, darkest day of the year. And the year itself is reaching the end, drawing to a close. Another cycle conducting its course.”

It says something about the Celtic world-view that while our Western calendar celebrates the new year in January as the world begins to get brighter, with the light returning after the winter solstice, the Celtic new year is celebrated as we are in the descent into the dark and cold of winter. Winter is often associated with death, but we can also think about it as going deeper to where life begins, the true starting place where the seeds prepare to sprout, where life comes up through the roots. On this day, the Celts believed the veil between the living and the dead was especially thin, allowing the spirits of the dead to visit the living. This is a time when life and death are joined in a beautiful dance.

I have named this season as a threshold time, so taking an example from Miss Paula, I ask, what is a threshold, where does the term come from? A threshold is a door sill, the wood or metal strip at the bottom of a door, marking the point of entry and exit. A threshold is a barrier that must be crossed to move from one room to another, or between the inside and the outside of a building. Threshold was originally two words, thresh and hold: the hold is a barrier, and the thresh is the material left on the floor in the threshing house after the grain harvest is processed. The threshing floor in ancient writings is a place of separation and revelation; the place where the harvest was prepared by separating the nourishing grain from the useless straw, collecting the valuable part of the crop. So the word threshold means a barrier that separates the good stuff that we can eat from the useless straw and husks of the grain – separating what supports life from that which does not, the crossing point between life and death.

Today let us celebrate this threshold time, imagining that the gates are open between the worlds of life and death, connecting in love with those we have lost and celebrating the deep mystery that is our life in the world.

## Part Two *Loss and Celebration*

This time of Samhain, of Halloween, is a study in contrasts. The warmth of the sun and the chill in the wind; the brilliant glowing leaves and the lacework of bare branches against the sky; the sadness of the growing dark and our remembrance of loved ones who are no longer with us, alongside the merriment of dressing up in costume and going from door to door – or from car to car – demanding sweets, with joy and laughter ringing through the air. We notice the contrast as we move now from the litany of those we have lost from our community and our families this year, from the weeping requiem *Lacrymosa*, into a joyful celebration of rhythm and dance, reveling in our costumes to celebrate the season.

The Mexican celebration of *Días de los Muertos* brings together those themes of sadness and joy, loss and celebration. *Días de los Muertos*, Days of the Dead, is an ancient celebration of the Aztec people, a celebration which lives on today in Mexico, and in places where people of Mexican heritage live. As a website describing the Day of the Dead tradition explains, “Daily life in ancient Mexico was so uncertain and difficult that death was expected at every turn. Death, in fact was revered, believed to be the ultimate experience of life, life's own reward, even welcomed as a better option when people are struggling for survival. . . . The Mexican views death as a transition of life, a normal stage in the circle of life on earth, a natural progression, not an ending.”

Writer Barbara Kingsolver describes one such celebration in her novel, *Animal Dreams*:

*Every able-bodied person in [the town] ... climbed the canyon roads to converge on the cemetery. The families traipsing slowly uphill resembled harvester ants, carrying every imaginable species of real and artificial flower: bulging grocery sacks of chrysanthemums and gladioli; tulips made from blue and pink Styrofoam egg cartons; long-stemmed silk roses bouncing in children's hands like magic wands; and creations out of fabric and colored paper and even the plastic rings from six-packs. What I remembered best . . . was the marigolds. Cempazuchiles, the flowers of the dead. . . .*

*. . . Most families divided their time between the maternal and paternal lines, spending mornings on one set of graves and afternoons on the other. . . . Some graves had shrines with niches peopled by saints; some looked like botanical gardens of paper and silk; others had the initials of loved ones spelled out on the ground in white stones. The unifying principle was that the simplest thing was done with the greatest care. It was a comfort to see this attention lavished on the dead. In these families you would never stop being loved.*

*Grandmothers everywhere, who at lunch had set out extra plates for the dead, were now indiscriminately passing out the sweet remains of their picnics. . . . There were an infinity of distractions: Calaveras, the little skull-shaped candies for children to crack between their teeth. . . . Little girls and boys played “makeup,” standing on tiptoe with their eyes closed and their arms at their sides, fingers splayed in anticipation, while a grownup used a marigold as a powder puff, patting cheeks and eyelids with gold pollen. Golden children ran wild over a field of dead great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers, and the bones must have wanted to rise and knock together and rattle with joy.*

“In these families you would never stop being loved.” And so, in the spirit of this time, we move from the sorrow of loss to rejoice that those who have died are still among us, and at this special time of year we can greet them and welcome their spirits with joy back into our lives.

Sources:

Dhruti Bhagat, *The Origins and Practices of: Samhain, Día de los Muertos, and All Saints Day* retrieved from <https://www.bpl.org/blogs/post/the-origins-and-practices-of-holidays-samhain-dia-de-los-muertos-and-all-saints-day/>

*Lessons from the Threshing Floor* retrieved from <https://moms-hope.org/lessons-from-the-threshing-floor-2/>

Fitzgerald, Mitch *Cempasúchil, The Marigold and Day of the Dead* retrieved from <http://davesgarden.com/guides/articles/view/245/>

Kingsolver, Barbara (1990) *Animal Dreams* New York: Harper Collins

Hernandez, Aracely, *Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)* retrieved from <http://www3.niu.edu/newsplace/nndia.html>

King, Judy, *Day of the Dead*, retrieved from <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1427-los-dias-de-los-muertos-the-days-of-the-dead>