

First Unitarian Church

October 17, 2021

We're coming up on Samhain now. That's the European pagan name for what has more or less morphed into Halloween. And we are coming up on Día de los Muertos, Day of the Dead. Both traditions have their roots in ancient cultures that would later be overtaken by Christianity, and both traditions retain their pre-Christian imagination and pre-Christian values.

Both Samhain and Día de Los Muertos include rituals of lighting candles and preparing special foods to connect with deceased loved ones in the spirit world.

Our desire to connect with the spirit world is part of who and what we humans are. Writer and modern witch Bri Luna, who is also known as the Hood Witch says, "We know deep down that [the Realm of the Spirit] is not supernatural. It the most natural thing there is and we are yearning to bring that part of our spirit back to us."ⁱ So we're going to look a little closer at that today.

Before we go there, though, I want to hold space for the fact that some of us are experiencing acute grief right now. Some of us are experiencing grief over a recent death. It has been particularly painful to lose loved ones in the last eighteen months, when our grief rituals and ability to gather have been so disrupted.

As we prepared to return to the sanctuary last month, I also experienced grief. At least two dozen members of our church died while our physical sanctuary was closed. Some of them (Alicia, Janelle, Larry, Linda, PJ, and others) were regular attenders and I feel their absence in that/this room, as I'll bet some of you do, too. We didn't know we wouldn't see them here again. If you are grieving, I hope today's message brings you some measure of comfort.

The Covenant of UU Pagans, our congregation's pagan group, has created an altar in back of sanctuary for remembering loved ones who have died – of any cause- since the beginning of 2020. [\[Slide 1, CUUPS altar\]](#) You are invited to add names to it.

If you aren't able to visit the sanctuary in person but would like me to add your loved one to the altar, send me [or the care team?] an email with their name anytime this month. I'd be glad to do it.

The group is also hosting a Samhain ritual on Zoom on Saturday October 30th. All are invited to join them to honor ancestors and others who have died. There was information in this week's eBroadsheet about that, but if you missed it you can contact the church office. Our pagan group holds beautiful services. If you've been thinking about trying it out but haven't visited one yet, I recommend it. They are a treasure at First Unitarian.

We also have a couple more rituals of remembrance coming up. On Sunday November 7, both the zoom and in person services will include a candle lighting ritual for remembering our beloved dead, no matter how long it has been since their death. If you will attend on zoom, have an extra candle handy during the service. You can even make a little more of an altar for it

if you'd like. [Slide 2, home altar] I made one on my grandmother's birthday last week. She would have been 96. I nestled a tealight in a circle of coffee—because she loved coffee; sugar—for her love; and salt—because she was a hard-working, salt of the earth kind of person.

Also on November 7, we'll also hold our annual memorial wall ceremony in memorial garden [here] on the church campus. This is when we remember UUs whose names are on our memorial wall, many of whose ashes are also there. We'll all be wearing masks for this simple ritual, which includes music and prayer.

We are holding space for grief and for remembering this season.

But what do UUs believe happens after we die? Or as one of you put it in the survey we sent out a few weeks ago,

The big question about 'spirits' (disembodied) is their ontological status--in other words, where or how do they exist? Are they part of the mind of the experiencer, or do they actually have their own independent existence?

To that I would add, or are those two things as different as we imagine? What does it mean to "exist?" In terms of mass, a human being is about half water. On a cellular level, we are biomes that contain more non-human cells than human ones—about 90% of the cells in a human body are not actually human. The human ones are just larger. On an atomic level, we are made up of space and energy. So what does it mean to be a person and to exist or not exist?

Well, since Unitarian Universalism does not have metaphysical doctrines, there is no specific church teaching about life after death. At least, not about the logistics of it. UUs bring many different understandings. I love that about us. Sometimes non-UUs wonder how on earth it works to have so many different beliefs in one congregation, but to that I say, it works great. There is so much richness in our diversity.

That's why I wanted to hear from you this month. So I created a survey. 113 people had responded to it by the end of this last week, when I downloaded the data. A few more trickled in after that, but not enough to change the overall balance. Here's what you had to say.

The first question was:

[Slide 3]

1. Do you believe the souls/spirits of humans continue after death?
47.3% (almost half) say yes
25.9% say no
The rest, 26.8% are not sure

[Slide 4] Second:

2. Do you believe we can communicate with the dead?
42.9% say no
32.1% not sure

25% yes

[Slide 5] Third:

3. Do you believe the dead involve themselves with the events of our lives?
Half, 50.9%, say no
27.7% not sure
21.4% yes

[Slide 6] And fourth:

4. Regardless of your answers to the above, have you personally ever received a “sign” from someone who died or saw the dead in some spiritual form, such as an animal, object, or apparition?

I asked the question this way because, as one person explained, “I’m not really sure I believe in this sort of thing, but I have experienced it.” I totally get that.

In terms of receiving a sign or seeing the dead in some spiritual form, here’s what you said:

45.5% say no, you have not experienced such a thing
36.6% say yes
17.9% aren’t sure

The last two questions in the survey were “Do you want to tell us about it?” And, “Is there anything else you’d like to share about spirits or communicating with them?”

This was a survey of stories, and they are so interesting, beautiful, and mysterious.

A parent whose son died wrote that they often receive signs from him. They send him love, and feel his love coming back to them.

Another person, after witnessing their aunt who was near death have a seemingly robust conversation with an older relative who had already died, says, “I’ve always wondered that was about. Perhaps my [aunt’s great aunt] came to ease her over into the great beyond.”

After hearing the voice of a recently deceased friend speak into her ear, one person wrote, “There was no one near me, and this was something he totally would have said, and I believe that it was him. He was a strong believer in ghosts, and I have wondered if believing influences us after death, like, because he believed in ghosts, he was able to communicate before he moved on...”

A hospice worker shared that they “have received testimony from multiple patients over [their] 25 year career of a transitional person welcoming them into the afterworld as they prepare to die, many appearances up and to the left of the patient lying in bed... Also, multiple patients have confessed identifying some kind of vehicle that will transport them into the afterworld...cars, trucks, one patient didn’t die until she had money in her hand, some needed

their purse or wallet, one patient said that a car with deceased family members slowed down for her but wouldn't let her into the car and we spent a... visit examining this event and it helped her prepare for death and the day the car would stop for her. I also spent many bereavement sessions listening to events that grieving family members experienced centered on visitations from their deceased loved ones. A butterfly, a scent, a change in room temperature, moved physical objects such as slippers are some examples."

The hospice worker went on to share that some people were comfortable with those experiences, while some found them very surprising and confusing.

Others told stories in the survey about feeling a deceased loved one's presence, hearing a deceased loved one call their name, sensing a smell associated with them, or being visited by the loved one in a dream or meditative state. Sometimes a dream might feel like just that, a dream, while other times the sense of being visited feels so real, it seems undeniable. One person wrote about a dream visit from their deceased father, saying, "When we said 'I love you' and hugged in the dream, energy and light coursed through my body in reality. I woke up very scared and wondered what the heck just happened."

Others expressed uncertainty about their experiences of deceased loved ones, but acknowledge the comfort in it. "Even if it's not real, sometimes imagining I've seen a hello from someone I've lost provides me with comfort and meaning," one person wrote.

Another said, "After my mom passed, she appeared to me in a dream. My sister swears that it was my mom trying to tell me she is happy where she is. I think it was just my brain conjuring comforting memories, but I hope my sister is the one who is right."

And though there were many such stories, and one person even said they had received more communications from the other side than they care to admit, that isn't always the case. One person wrote, "I'm still waiting." And another spoke of feeling disappointed that although one parent visited them after death, the other did not. And obviously, many of us have not experienced any such thing and wouldn't expect to.

There's a reading I've included in memorial services from time to time, when it seems like a good fit for the person we are remembering. It was written by the journalist Aaron Freeman, from a physicist's perspective.

I think in its very scientific way, it speaks to our need to understand what happens and to stay connected, and it can bring together what seem like divergent interpretations of existence after death. I've asked Matt to share it with us this morning. Matt?

Matt reads "Eulogy from a Physicist" by the journalist Aaron Freeman

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics; that no energy gets created in the universe, and none is

destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every Btu of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got.

And at one point you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off like children, their ways forever changed by you. And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that are her eyes, that those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

And the physicist will remind the congregation of how much of all our energy is given off as heat. There may be a few fanning themselves with their programs as he says it. And he will tell them that the warmth that flowed through you in life is still here, still part of all that we are, even as we who mourn continue the heat of our own lives.

And you'll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time. You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they'll be comforted to know your energy's still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly. Amen.

Angela:

Nothing is created. Nothing is destroyed. All is one. We are just ordered, disordered, and reordered from the stuff of the cosmos.

Last weekend, we held yet another memorial service under the big cottonwood in the courtyard. We never used to do that before COVID, but I think it is one of the gifts of this time. The courtyard is as sacred a space as this sanctuary. Some of you might think it is even more so, with the big sky stretched out above, our feet right there on the ground, and that tree, which has witnessed the whole life of this church, spread out in between.

In that service, I read an expert from a poem by May Sarton:

What has been once so interwoven
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.

Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,

Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
Are wound and bound together and enflowing.

*What has been plaited cannot be unplaited—
Only the strands grow richer with each loss*

And memory makes kings and queens of us.

Plaited means braided, interwoven.

“Now the dead move through all of us still glowing... What has been plaited cannot be unplaited.”

If all is one, and the dead move through all of us still glowing, then it makes perfect sense to me that we can still connect with them on some level.

And since there is so much that remains beyond our understanding, I encourage you to trust in your intuition and in what resonates with you. We can and should draw on science and on the traditions of our ancestors in our search for meaning, yet our way of connecting with those who have died may be still different from someone else’s, just as your particular spiritual path is unique to you.

So light a candle, make some food, sing a song, go to a special place or spend time in nature... dream, meditate, or just be with your memories and your beloveds. For however else the universe works, it is certainly also true that, in the words of one of your fellow UUs:

“It is our love for [the dead] and memories of them that live on. The spirit of their impact on us remains with us as long as we allow it. I keep these people alive in my soul and I hope somebody will keep me alive in their soul. The power of love is as strong as we make it.”

ⁱ <https://www.thehoodwitch.com/blog/2015/10/16/halloween-samhain-the-thinning-veil>