

Sermon: Dia de los Muertos 2008 Bill Graves

First, I have a true ministerial-adventure story for you. One Winter morning almost two years ago, I arrived at Anacortes' Island Hospital to take my turn as chaplain on duty for the day. As usual, when I arrived I checked with the head nurse on the floor. I remember well taking a deep breath that morning because I was asked to look in on two patients who had just been told what I think must be the most sobering of all possible news: "You are being transferred to hospice care." Think about it a moment. Can you really imagine being told that; how would you react? What I found was a study in contrast.

First, I found John in his mid-sixties to be in a state of shock, staring wide-eyed into space, his wife weeping beside him. For a long while he didn't acknowledge my presence. Then he literally spat out at me words to the effect that it wasn't fair, he'd been a good person and he didn't deserve this. And as for me the chaplain, my assumed God could be damned and if I really wanted to do something for him (John that is) I could find him a pistol. And then, down the hall was Joan and I could have just as well have been walking from a cave into sunshine. She greeted me with a radiant smile. And, yes, she knew of the diagnosis and she was totally ready and sure she would be all right, and she wondered how I was doing that morning.

And now, let me take you from antiseptic Island Hospital to the sunny, sweaty, spicy climes of Mexico where preparations are well underway for the three day festival over All Hallows' Eve, (or Halloween), All Saints' and All Souls' Day. Collectively they are Dia de los Muertos where as the poet Octavio Paz says, people don't hide death, they get familiar with it and celebrate it. Think about that for a moment...getting familiar with and celebrating death. A Mexican, Paz says "chases after it, mocks it, courts it, hugs it, sleeps with it. It is his favorite play thing and most lasting love." They also dress death up (like this figure) and call it La Catrina, la Flaca, la Huesuda, la Pelona--Fancy Lady, Skinny, Bony, Baldy.

My first taste of it actually came in the city of Taria in Bolivia on visiting Toyon there. And then, several years ago I was blessed by an invitation from my daughter, Laura, to meet her in Oaxaca, Mexico on my 60th birthday which coincided with El *Dia de los Muertos*. Basically the entire population of Oaxaca takes three full days off from normal commerce to enter into communion with their dearly departed, communion with each other, joyously, and to confront their own mortality.

It caused me to wonder why we in the United States have nothing comparable. Does it have something to do with the event being too unproductive? It's a three day party after all. Too much community intimacy perhaps? Too introspective for most of us? Maybe too much primitive superstition? Most centrally, perhaps, what about our tendency to flee from anything that bumps up against the subject of our own mortality? But if we hide death, if we avoid thinking about it at all cost, isn't that a pretty good indication of how much we fear it?

In Oaxaca right now most families are starting to construct in their homes elaborately decorated alters on which are placed sacred images (typically of Christ and the Virgin of Guadalupe, sometimes Frida Kahlo) and they place pictures of deceased family members. Also placed on the alter are items the deceased is known to have loved, such as a cigar or a bottle of Coca Cola.

During the first two nights of Dia de Los Muertos over 100,000 people (more than 1/3 of the population of Oaxaca) are at the cemeteries which are highly decorated with millions of flowers and thousands of candles. It's undoubtedly much more popular than football, either the American or Mexican variety. In the cemeteries, persons can be observed laughing, chatting with their neighbors, in silent prayer. Choruses are singing traditional versions of Mass. Children are offered candy replicas of human skulls (called calveras) with the names of dear departed ones inscribed on them. They eat the calveras to make them more comfortable with the reality of death, or so I was told.

On the last night of the festival people dress in elaborate, ghoulish costumes and parade from house to house in their own neighborhoods. Laura and I were privileged to be invited to participate at a neighborhood on the outskirts of Oaxaca. At each house the exact same, curious ritual was reenacted. In the middle of the courtyard one of the occupants is lying comatose. As soon as the crowd is assembled, a man dressed in drag with a blond wig and huge breasts rushes up and commences a mourning wail. Next, a second man dressed as a doctor comes up, listens to the heart and shakes his head. Then a third man dressed in an outlandish priestly garb and a tall miter comes up, sprinkles some holy water, and chants a prayer, then also shakes his head. Finally, a clown with a stove-pipe hat dances in with glee and shakes an alarm clock over the persons face whereupon the person rises with a big smile, the crowd cheers, the band strikes up, all dance for a few minutes, and the *Mezcal* flows. Then, the ritual is repeated at the next house, over and over until dawn. We saw it reenacted maybe 15 times before we cashed it in about 3 in the morning.

I was told that the clown was "Father Time". And that was an important clue to what was going on which it took me a while to get, I being a little dense sometimes to theological metaphors. So, the doctor can't help, nor can the priest, for it is the person's "time". And what a curious reaction: Death is a resurrection, everybody celebrates!

I'm only a gringo and I'm sure there were other symbolic meanings going on here that escape me but it helps me to know that in Mesoamerica, death was not to be feared, but rather was seen as an awakening. And, I understand that Dia de los Muertos incorporates many pre-Hispanic customs that always kept the frightening, Catholic vision of death that included hell from entirely taking hold.

Now, I'm going to give you a few minutes of relief from hearing my voice, and if the technological Gods are with us, Francie is going to show you some visual images of what I've been trying to verbalize in Oaxaca.

We modern UU's are apt to see Dia de los Muertos as quaint or primitive. Yet if we dismiss it as pure superstition, we can easily miss the profound spiritual and psychological insight that makes this tradition so powerful.

One aspect of Dia de los Muertos is to bring Death out of the closet and make it impossible to hide from. There is a spirit of confronting our fears of the unknown which is death with the sword of humor. So we thumb our noses just a little bit at Death as if to say "I'm not afraid of you, Death. I know you're coming but I've already confronted you and I have this funny little "faith", you see.

When you are a chaplain in a hospital you see a lot of death: People like John who was terrified and angry, and like Joan who was most concerned about how I was doing. Traditions like Dia de los Muertos cause one to reflect about death and life.

What do you have faith in or trust that will see you through, will not allow fears of death to ruin your one precious life? Perhaps it helps a little to see that nobody can buy or bribe Mr. Death with prayer or sacrifices or good behavior, and I'm sorry John, because if that's the way the world worked chaos rather than natural law would rein in the world, at least that's what I think the Hebrew Scriptural Book of Job teaches.

Perhaps it also helps a little to reflect that without Mr. Death, the world would be a frozen, static, intolerable place—no rebirth or budding of new life in Spring, no evolution. It seems to me that behind Dia de los Muertos and behind Joan's faith is a faith, yes faith, that life and death and existence as we know it is as it should be, as it must be, and on the whole it is good!

Another aspect of Dia de los Muertos that captivates me is the grand continuity between generations it honors. A Oaxacan girl spending the night at her grandmother's grave has a connection across time with her forebears that our children seem to lack. An old man is comforted by the knowledge that his family for generations will recall and honor him with love and joy at his memory every year.

[In an article in the UU World some years back, Peter Morales points out that] we dwellers in a technological world are hugely connected to each other by the World Wide Web, cellular phones, etc., but we seem to have cut ourselves off from the web of time. Traditional cultures, with their ghosts and reincarnations, seem to understand intuitively something we've repressed: The dead live on. I'm talking about the very real stuff of memory, history, and molecular biology. Look in the mirror. The DNA of your ancestors is alive in you. The choices made by your parents and grandparents shaped you. The interconnections stretch across time. And, Dia de los Muertos reminds us of these things, and this is its power. "A simple ceremony of remembrance puts us in touch with our place in time and our mortality, and it reminds us that to live is to create a legacy that endures for generations."

I want to offer you these images from a poem by a Spanish poet, Julie Sopena entitled "Message in Colors":

Lit candles. Faces. Memories,
and an entrance that's a rainbow: protection for the place
of rest and meditation.
Necklaces. Cemapasuchitl, 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...
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....
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.

Here is a wonderful expression of solace in the face of death. "Only love can save us"; love that connects us. In the end it is our relationships that give us solace. So, the dead help remind us of what is most meaningful and joyous in the world. In this way Dia de los Muertos celebrates life.

Dia de los Muertos is a mixture of traditions. Let us blend it into our own without patronizing any of them. Let us receive the wisdom and power of these traditions as a gift—and as with any gift, treat it with respect.

(1953 words)