

There'll Be One Child Born: Reflections on the Day of the Dead
November 4, 2007, by Sheila Rae

Our language, and I am sure other languages, are ripe with images, metaphors, similes and idioms of and about death. We are variously interested in, fascinated by, and frightened by it . And we are variously curious, certain, uncertain, accepting, and in denial about our own or another's death.

At the beginning of the school year I have an open-ended statement page, a sort of getting-to-know-me exercise I do with my students. One of the statements is "I am most afraid of..." Most 7th graders come up with spiders, snakes, monsters, aliens, the dark, scary movies, even clowns---things like that. Then I get the occasional heavy answers like: I am afraid of my dad. I am afraid I will end up in jail like my brother, I am afraid no one will like me. I am afraid I will die, and then the really scary one, most usually from a boy----I am afraid of nothing. When I share mine,

- I say I am afraid someone I love will die.

---Not you, Miss?

- No

---Then who?

-Someone I love.

---But who?

-Why You, of course.

Then I **have** them----they are listening. But they are too young for me to teach them John Donne---"ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

This past week at school, we had a lesson about the origins of Halloween---a Celtic tradition---a folk tale of Lord Samhain, out looking for the souls of the dead—ghosts, if you will, to take back to the underworld. The time of Oct. 31st and Nov. 1st, we learned, was the time when it was believed that the veil between the living and the dead was at its thinnest. That they were among us----and, depending on which culture one looks at, they were to be feared, honored, or even celebrated. The Mexican Day of the Dead, Dia de los Muertos culture of death is so much healthier than that of most traditional American WASP attitudes and ways of dealing with it and all its myths, questions, and assumptions; The often mournful

remembrances or antiseptic distancing ourselves by handing it all over to the funeral director.

Mexican culture has a more joyful celebration of. All Soul's Day lives on today, particularly in Mexico, where All Hallows' Eve, All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day are collectively observed as "Los Dias de los Muertos" (The Days of the Dead). First and foremost, Dia de los Muertos is a time when families fondly remember the deceased. But it is also a time marked by music, dancing, fireworks, and spectacular parades of skeletons and ghouls. In one notable tradition, revelers lead a mock funeral procession with a live person inside a coffin. Little cakes are left out in shapes of bones, skulls, and skeletons. Like the cookies we leave for Santa, the goodies are then eaten by living actual people, an echo of the Eucharist ---though not for the son of God but for the son of your great-uncle, or the sister of your mother, or the lost child of long ago.

Dying and death are more than biological events; they have social and spiritual dimensions. Questions about the meaning of life and the meaning of death and what happens when we die are central concerns to people in every culture and have been since time immemorial. An essential concern for living well and dying well is present in all human cultures.

Within Native American societies, death tends to be seen as a natural event. The emphasis is on "living one day at a time, with purpose, grateful for life's blessings, in the knowledge that it could all end abruptly. This way of relating to death is typified in the Lakota battle cry: "It is a good day to die!" This phrase encapsulates the notion that death may come at any time; it is wise to be prepared. This outlook on life is evident in the emphasis the Cree people place on making sure to say farewells before going away on a lengthy or difficult journey; unforeseen death may intervene. It calls to mind the many voice mails played after 9/11 left by souls to whom death was certain and eminent: "I love you." "I'm sorry." "Never forget me." And "I will see you on the other side."

When I die, and when I'm dead and gone, there'll be one child born and a world to carry on. Is that our legacy or is there life or any kind of consciousness beyond our physical death? In my life I have

changed my mind so many times — that God sacrificed his son so that I might have eternal life.

I read from the gospel according Luke in the New Testament:

[44] It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, [45] for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. [46] Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Later I came to believe that consciousness was finite, ending when the brain waves were gone, that funerals were barbaric and a stupid waste of money, then that sometimes when I felt the presence of my grandmother, I believed the dead **could** come and communicate with the living if only in whispers and fleetingly. At times reincarnation seemed appealing—to have multiple lives, growing wiser with each return—old souls. Existentialism, humanism, atheism, agnosticism, deism, Wicca have all swirled in my head along with literature and art and music and movies influencing my spiritual journey toward acceptance of my own death.

It is difficult to categorize the types of death. Is abortion murder? Is the death penalty murder? Is suicide murder—after all a person is killing a person? Or is suicide some kind of accident? Is euthanasia **murder** or suicide? When someone sacrifices his or her life to save others, is that suicide?

— On September 11, 2001. Todd Beamer, Oracle software executive and passenger on United flight 93, used his cell phone to call Lisa Jefferson, a GTC telephone switchboard operator (he didn't want to worry his pregnant wife). They talked for 13 minutes, during which they discussed the hijacking and recited together the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm — 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

The last words Lisa heard on the line were, "Are you guys ready? Let's roll. They're coming."

A couple of years ago someone who had once been very close to me killed herself, and I, like others was left with shock, despair, anger, questions of 'what if...', and self recriminations of "If only I had.... Maybe my friend Terry is right when she says suicide is the ultimate act of selfishness, but if we are honest, who has not considered it at times in our lives if only as an intellectual or philosophical question? Fredrick Neitche wrote, "Suicide is man's way of telling God, 'You can't fire me - I quit.' " Is it better to die instantly in an accident with no time to say goodbye or as they say, put your affairs in order, or rather to linger in pain bringing drawn-out emotional despair and huge financial expenses to loved ones?

Sudden infant death defies categorizing as it is apparently neither accident nor illness, nor a natural cause,

Death of the Child brings an
 Unspeakable
 unfathomable
 unbearable
 infinite cavern,
 filled with
 pain--
 (a matrix of grief
 A labyrinth of loss)
 --S. Rae

After the Death of a Child, by Sheila Rae

Blessed are they that mourn,
 for they shall be comforted.
 But by what means?
 He was, after all, a man
 who could not cry.
 No less sad he was.
 No less broken in two
 from the loss of the child.
 So small
 So still in his bed he was,
 looking asleep at first
 but dead weight
 and pale when Daddy
 put his lips to the little one's

and blew, in hope
that what he knew
to be true was not--
what could not, by God,
be what his baby was---
and **that** was gone.

She could scream
And her tears did stream.
She found some comfort in
those who loved her
and the other child still alive
in her lap.

But not he.
He could not cry
or cry out
or even curse God.

Numb
And unvoiced,
helpless to help her or
himself,
or life itself

After all,
men fix.
They mend,
and bear the load.

He went back to the house
and took down the crib
packing it away.
Took down the curtains
with the scattered blue bears,
burning them with the trash out back.
Painted the room
changing the hue on its silent walls.

Laid down the rug
 Rolling it out to be new
 So she wouldn't see the room as it was.

It's what men do
 Their grief put into
 action, some way,
 however pitiful,
 to flame against the pain

Draw your children near,
 for they are merely here for **now**.

Blessed are they who mourn
 For they shall be comforted.

The defining theology of Universalism is universal salvation;
 Universalists believe that the God of love would not create a person
 knowing that that person would be destined for eternal damnation.
 Thus, they concluded that any existing person must be destined for
 salvation.

For reasons I can not explain.
 There's some part of me that wants to see
 Graceland

“All alone, I came into this world. All alone, I shall surely die.”
 Goes the Beth Chapman song. Is there the absolute certainty that
 death is a complete and definitive and irrevocable annihilation of
 personal consciousness?

Or, on the other hand, is there absolute certainty that our personal
 consciousness continues beyond death in whatever condition and
 that **could** include the strange additional notion of eternal reward or
 punishment?

Although, intellectually, we all know that one day we shall die, many
 of us are reluctant to think of our death, in that this knowledge of our
 mortality does not touch our hearts. Sometimes we live our lives as if

we were going to be in this world forever. As a result, the things of this world - such as material possessions, reputation, popularity, and the pleasures of the senses - become of paramount importance, so we devote almost all our time and energy to obtaining them and engage in many negative actions for their sake. We are so preoccupied with the **concerns** of this life that there is little room in our mind for genuine spiritual practice. When the time of death actually arrives we discover that by having ignored death all our life we are completely unprepared.

What is death? Death is the cessation of the connection between our mind and our body. Most people believe that death takes place when the heart stops beating; but in the belief system of Buddhism this does not mean that the person has died, because his subtle mind may still remain in his body. Death occurs when the subtle consciousness finally leaves the body to go to the next life. Our body is like a guesthouse and our mind like the guest; when we die our mind has to leave this body and enter the body of our next rebirth, like a guest leaving one guesthouse and traveling to another.

Buddhism further asserts that the mind is neither physical, nor a by-product of purely physical processes, but is a formless continuum that is a separate entity from the body. When the body disintegrates at death the mind does not cease. Although our superficial conscious mind ceases, it does so by dissolving into a deeper level of consciousness, the very subtle mind; and the continuum of the very subtle mind has no beginning and no end. It is this mind which, when thoroughly purified, transforms into the omniscient mind of the Buddha.

In the critically acclaimed HBO series, *Six Feet Under*, Nate Fisher has reluctantly now assumed the role, left by his father's untimely death, of a funeral director at Fisher and Sons Mortuary. His late father periodically appears to Nate. "This is what you've been running away from your whole life, buddy boy. Scared the crap out of you when you were growing up, didn't it? And you thought you'd escape, well guess what, nobody escapes."

The opening reading, Tom Moran

Becoming

Nowhere is it the same place as yesterday.
None of us is the same person as yesterday.
We finally die from the exhaustion of becoming.
This downward cellular jubilation is shared
by the wind, bugs, birds, bears and rivers,
and perhaps the black holes in galactic space
where our souls will all be gathered in an invisible
thimble of antimatter. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.
Yes, trees wear out as the wattles under my chin
grow, the wrinkled hands.
We whirl with the earth, catching our breath
as someone else, our soft brains ill-trained
except to watch ourselves disappear into the distance.
Still, we love to make music of this puzzle.

I confess that I've always been fascinated by people's purported last words. These are a few I thought you might find interesting.

"Now comes the mystery." Henry Ward Beecher:

"It's very beautiful over there." Thomas Edison

"Why not? Why not? Why not? Why not? Yeah." Timothy Leary

"Don't turn down the light. I'm afraid to go home in the dark."

O. Henry

IN HER BOOK ***IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING***, ABOUT GILDA RADNER'S STRUGGLE WITH OVARIAN CANCER, WHICH LED TO HER DEATH AT 43 WROTE,

I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.

Laura Nyro's song brought forth the title of our sermon
And when I die, and when I am gone,
There'll be one child born and a world to carry on

Last year, AARP Magazine did a random survey of 1011 members over 50.

To varying degrees, of those surveyed

-- 73% said they believe in some form of life after death

- (53%) said they believe in the existence of spirits or ghosts
- 86% said they believe in heaven
- and 70% said they believe in hell

To the question "Is there life after death?" a man named Tom responded , "Nope. I've always felt that way. Life's short enough without having to worry about something you can't do anything about anyway. It's just reality, you know? I mean, I'm a Catholic."

Tom waited while the surveyor lifted his jaw from the table. A Catholic?

“Sure. They preach life after death, you know? I just say, hey, people preach a lot of stuff. You just gotta make up your own mind about things. I go to Mass. I live my life like there’s life after death, but I don’t believe there is. If it’s true, well, hey, it’s a plus. But if it ain’t, I didn’t lose nothing.”

“Atheists celebrate life, but we know death is a reality,” says Margaret Downey, president of Atheist Alliance International. “We believe the only afterlife that a person can hope to have is the legacy they leave behind—the memory of the people who have been touched by their lives.”ah ah, wooooosh ah ah, woooooosh

Hollywood has long been fascinated by the afterlife. My favorite ones include the following.

In the Albert Brooks film ,***Defending your Life***: Daniel , who, while he was changing a CD in his car, is hit and killed by a bus and ends up in Judgment City where he must face a panel who will decide if he is worthy of going to Heaven, or if he must return to earth to get it right. In Judgment City you can go to fabulous restaurants and eat as much as you want without gaining weight. (That would be Heaven enough for a food addict like me.) It would be OK with Daniel if he were judged unworthy for heaven yet, except while he is awaiting judgment, he falls in love with a woman there who has been found worthy of getting on the bus to the afterlife because she had died while saving some little children and even a cat from a burning building. The plot unfolds from there in a charming and poignant manner.

In ***Groundhog Day*** Bill Murray plays the cynical Phil , caught in some weird February 2nd time warp which at one point ***he*** comes to believe is Hell, kills himself over and over in manners each more hideously clever than the last, only to wake up quite alive the next morning to relive the exact same day until he figures out he can redeem himself by kind and selfless choices which he never would have made as his former self.---then one morning he wakes up and it is, at last, February 3rd.

I mention these as they share the theme that we make our own Heaven and Hell here on earth.

Or if like the man from the AARP survey replied---live as if there is a Heaven, just in case there is.

Perhaps the Universalists had it as right as in the Paul Simon song,

“I have reason to believe we all will be received in Graceland.

Second Reading:

When Death Comes, By Mary Oliver, read by Catherine Sharick

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Meditation: And now, relax and enter what is, for you, a place of
prayer or meditation. Today, let us speak the name of one who has
gone before who made a loving difference in your life. Then...

Let go.

Let the wind carry most of it.
Let the words fall
Let the thoughts scatter
Let the memories melt.
Settle, instead,
Into the larger darkness,
Where the smaller Darknesses
that our lives **were**
Lie softly down.
--srae