

“All Souls”
November 29th, 2020
Rev. Laurel Gray

It is our custom here at this, our UU congregation in Westborough, to celebrate All Souls on the first Sunday in November. Typically we find a bare tree that's nearing its own end and put it up on the altar. While so many of us are starting to put up Christmas trees, strung with lights, glittering with ornaments and memories; this tree on our altar doesn't get strung with lights, at least not in the literal sense.

Instead, we pass out paper leaves - Jim Kirk did a beautiful job of making the leaves last year - we pass out paper leaves, and there is time during the service to write down the names of our loved ones who have left this world, those who have died and who remain forever woven into our living and our loving. And together we cover this barren tree with our memories of love and loss. Or perhaps it's pain and relief, for we know that families are not always found in bloodlines. And sometimes the death of a parent or relative gives us respite from abuse and violence. Connection and ancestry is itself a complicated thing.

And this year we're celebrating All Souls on the last Sunday in November, in the space between Thanksgiving and the winter holidays. There is so much this year that is different. So much loss. So much grief. And though we normally only gather up the names of those who have died on All Souls Sunday, today we are also holding the strange grief of spending the holidays in varying degrees of isolation - altering our plans, forgoing family visits, staying home instead of seeing old friends. Or perhaps, too, there is the relief of being released from the expectation to gather with people who have harmed us.

We hold, too, the complexity of Thanksgiving itself - a holiday commemorating a historical event that is far from joyful or simple. So many Native people refer to it as a day of mourning, because of the reality that colonization has a long and brutal history. Overlay this with our current crisis - a pandemic that has killed 265 thousand people in this country alone in a matter of months.

Overlay all these things together and this is not an easy Sunday. This is not a simple moment. *And* there is space in this place for all the complexity. For the grief and the longing, the love of gathering together over a meal, and the wish that things had been otherwise.

I name all these truths to give them a place at our table. To gather us together in community.

For as Unitarian Universalists, our covenant calls us to care for each other, to seek a salve when our own spirits grow weary, to tell the truth in the name of justice, to tend to the hurts and the healing of this world. We affirm that the journey is complicated, that we can be worthy and still find it hard being loved, that we can live full lives and still feel like our grief has blocked out the sun.

We don't have a tree for this All Souls Sunday. There is no high altar, no rows of pews in this sanctuary. And so instead of writing down names of those who have died on leaves, we're going to do things differently.

For this All Souls service, I invite you to reflect on who you're missing, whose physical absence you're feeling most acutely. Maybe they're alive but at a distance, or maybe they're gone from this world. And since we're all in our homes, I invite you to take these next few minutes to go and gather up some objects that remind you of the people you're missing. Or if you'd rather, stay in your seat and conjure those memories.

Maybe you have a favorite photo or family ring - maybe it's your dad's favorite shirt or something your sister gave you. Maybe it was the way your grandmother smelled of lilies, or your nephew's love of toy trucks. Maybe it's the first adult who taught you what it meant to be loved. I invite you to draw them close in object and in memory.

Kala is going to play some music and we'll take about five minutes to gather objects physically or in our minds. At the end of the service, we'll have time to share during our small group coffee hour.