

All Souls Day
October 29, 2017
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Halloween. All Souls Day. Samhain. Dia de los Muertos.

This upcoming week bring us these holidays that celebrate fall, the end of the warmth, and the beginning of the dark days. And across many traditions and cultures, scary sights, costumes, and haunted houses will appear.

All of these days, in their own way, honor our ultimate fate, and one of the few things that unites us all as humans: The reality that each of us, and all those we love, and all those inhabiting this earth, will someday die.

These holidays are kind of a natural response to the spring holiday of Easter, the holiday of birth, or re-birth as the case may be. The brightness of spring. The new life that it brings.

And not unlike the re-birth of spring, we experience at this time of year, a slowing. Something approaching an end. A coldness in the air. The falling of leaves. The hibernation of animals. And it reminds of our own mortality.

And in our American culture, particularly for those of us who come from European descent, Halloween is likely the one of these holidays we are most familiar with.

Which is interesting if you, like me, didn't make the direct connection between Halloween and death as a child.

You see, while I was aware of the Halloween themes, the ghosts, the witches, the zombies, and other scary things, I always found myself drawn to more, let's say, "alive" costumes. Ones that weren't so scary. Ones that let me pretend to be someone else, if only for a day.

My favorite, of course, was being able to dress up Lt. Commander Data from Star Trek the Next Generation. For those who aren't familiar with Star Trek: The Next Generation - well first of all, I know as a minister I'm not supposed to be judgemental, but I'm totally judging you right now, let's fix that ASAP - anyhow, for those of you who aren't familiar with the show, the character I dressed as, Lt. Commander Data, is an android, a robot, one who strives to learn about humanity, but cannot express emotions.

I loved going to each door greeting people as the emotionless Data, seeing the joy on the faces of the adults who recognized me, and confusion on some others. You see the actor who played Data had a kind of white paint all over his body, so it really did look like I was some sort of ghost or ghoul.

And it didn't occur to me until I was thinking about this last week, that this, my favorite costume from my childhood, was in some way escaping the very thought of my mortality.

Instead of dressing up as something scary, something that reminded me of death, like a ghost, I dressed up as an android. Literally a being that would never die of natural causes. An escape from our own mortality. Kind of ironic.

I don't think that's a coincidence that our Halloween costumes have moved away from death and scary things to popular culture and happy things. We adults don't like to be reminded of death, of our death, of the death of those we love. We are a culture afraid of death.

And I find it particularly interesting that this change has happened as Halloween has become less of a religious holiday and more of a secular one.

Now, I'm not trying to knock the fun of dressing up as your favorite character for Halloween superheroes and princesses were here for our parade and they were fantastic.

But I wonder if we've lost something in our secular North American culture when we forget to take this time to truly contemplate death, to honor the dead, and to consider our connection to our ancestors in this deep and meaningful way. Perhaps something is lost when we don't take this time, apart from our daily lives, every year.

But as we will see in this service. We can do both. Both the joyousness of Halloween and the honoring of our beloved dead. This duality of joy and sorrow co-existing is part of what makes us human.

Because as the Unitarian Universalist minister, the late Forrest Church said "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die."

And so since we must die, let us step into that reality boldly and bravely and compassionately. Let us allow ourselves to be guided, in whatever way that means for us, by those who have come before us, in this church, in our families of origin and our families of choice, and have already left this world.

And it is in that spirit that today we honor All Souls Day. In some Christian traditions this is a remembrance of all Christian souls who have died; in others still it's a commemoration of those souls who are in Purgatory, for those who will make it to heaven after some purification first. And perhaps for us Unitarian Universalists, as the spiritual descendants of our Universalist ancestors in this church, it is truly a day for ALL souls, as they believed that all would ultimately be united with God's love in heaven. Perhaps for us, as Unitarian Universalists today, it is a way to recognize that our first principle states that we intend to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

And so let us join in a ritual for all souls.