

Rumors of Death

It would be logical to feel the same equanimity about the time after our death as we have about the time before our birth. And hence it would be logical to feel no more concern about our certain demise than we have about the certainty that we were born.

If we Unitarian Universalists were truly “God’s Frozen People,” as we are rumored to be, this attitude would be a snap.

But cerebral as many of us are, for better or worse we are not really dead from the neck down. A few of us may have meditated ourselves into a state of permanent equanimity, but most of us are scared of creepy movies (admit it), rubberneck at accidents (yes I mean you), and eat a lot at lunch after a funeral because we are glad we can still eat.

Even those of us in denial (and who isn’t?) receive rumors of death. The tombstones of people we loved are strong hints. As are the things we used to know and have forgotten, those little deaths. We see children dressed as skeletons on Halloween, like calacas come to life, laughing, eating chocolate, reminding us that even the youngest are part of the long parade into the ground.

One world at a time, Thoreau said when they asked him about life after death. But then there are the stories of people who died and came back, who were forced to live briefly in two worlds. Death refugees, they tell us the lay of the land, that other (maybe) land. Listen to these words from Tem Horwitz, a Chicago real estate developer who was revived after dying of anaphylactic shock:

I woke my wife and told her succinctly, we have to go. In the car I fought for breath, for my life. I knew that I was in the process of dying. There was no fear; the experience was too compelling. During this time, which was less than ten minutes, all my attachments to this world dwindled to nothing. The part of me that has always stood aside as an observer was left alone to observe the process of death. Dying removed me from the clutches of time.

On my return to the land of the living, there was a tremendous sense of freedom. There was no vestige of self-importance left. I had had no identity in death. My clock had been reset. Time restarted when I was pulled back into this world in the emergency room. I caught a glimpse of eternity, and I was content to dwell in its embrace. I still feel touches of that embrace now, a year and a half later. This may not be the ideal personality type for a real estate developer, or -- it may be.

Having come through the Cuisine of death, for a time the world felt uniform, blended, undifferentiated. I felt I was looking through things as much as looking at things. The material world no longer appeared to be solid. Over a period of months I began to see more or less as I had before I died. However it is still possible to look at the scene in front of me now and allow it to deconstruct.

Horwitz reports seeing the world like a pointillist painting, only with bigger holes. The holes gradually filled in, somewhat, but they are still there.

I remember as a kid, back in the day when television was new, how shocked I was to learn that shows were filmed in studios that resembled houses but were not houses. It was almost as big a shock as learning about mortality. And here's the thing: A television studio made to look like a house is a reasonable metaphor for the mental model each of us constructs about reality. It looks like a house. For the purpose required, it functions like a house. Yet a television studio is not a house, any more than our mental construct of the universe is the universe.

So Horwitz after his near death experience saw right through his own model. He deconstructed the universe at the same time he was being deconstructed. The world was empty. Any time except now had no meaning. He had no ego, and he was free.

Coming back to life, Horwitz still remembers what it was like to be without attachment. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, he had ignored the warning to pay no attention to the little man behind the curtain.

Living a human life is a little bit like playing scrabble. Some of the game exists before the game really begins. Rules and conventions, game pieces, game board: These are like biosphere and genome, the us that precedes the us. Then the gestalt continues with the gradual formation of the fetus. Nobody can say when life begins: There is no bright line. But next comes the part that everybody agrees is human life, that begins with birth and ends with death. And then the after-death: The Facebook page that sticks around, the people who know you well and almost dial your number before they remember you are gone. The tree you planted. The article you wrote in a journal that will not disappear because of the Internet. The end date on your tombstone is just a

reminder to renew your subscription to life. When the game ends, somebody still has to add up the score, put away the equipment, and grumble about losing.

We endlessly parse our relationships with friends, lovers, children. We talk about our relationships with our own bodies, with food, with careers. But in my experience, we don't talk a lot about our relationships with death, and so the way that relationship evolves over a lifetime remains a bit underground.

Consider for a moment how you felt about death when you first found out about it as a child, and how differently you felt as an "immortal" adolescent, then differently yet again as a young adult. If you became a parent, that changed your relationship with mortality once more, because suddenly your survival had such consequences for someone else. And if you have passed the crest of the hill as I have, with more days behind than ahead, death takes on a new character. It is there to remind you to enjoy yourself and the world fully, to gather rosebuds while ye may. A bit like a calaca.

When I was a kid in San Diego, the calacas of Dia de los Muertos, those laughing dancing skeletons, seemed pretty scary. Then I forgot about calacas for fifty years. Now I finally appreciate the amused dance in the face of death.

Those little statues are saying: Enjoy it, every minute of it. Don't worry about what you look like – at least you have skin. In fact, don't worry about anything. Whatever you have been waiting and wanting to do, do it now. Don't wait. Don't make excuses. This is the moment.

Honor the people we have lost, honor the days and years of our own lives that we have spent some other way than we might have wished, by living this day. The rumors are

true. There is a death. We will become unattached, completely, even if we never meditated. For better and for worse, nothing will matter.

Leave love scattered around like magic pennies. Take great joy into the void.

So say the dancing skeletons of Dio de los Muertos.

Do it.

Blessed be, and amen.