

## **Sermon (Laurel): All Souls**

All over the world, in a whole myriad of ways, people gather in this season to remember the dead. Lots of cultures have ways of making altars to those who have gone from this world, giving offerings of food and drink, or making space for the trickery of spirits like All Hallow's Eve, which has become Halloween.

Death is something that we so often fear, and yet it is part of the reality of being mortal creatures who love other mortal creatures.

The mystery of death is one of those things that often drives people to church, or to ask theological questions. We wonder about what happens after life, about things like heaven and eternity and reincarnation. Or maybe we're convicted about the absence of such things and feel more alone in our grief when we hear pseudo religious platitudes about being in a better place. Either way, these complicated questions rarely stand alone, they're bound up in the poignancy of grief and the loss of someone important.

We, as Unitarian Universalists, are unusual among religious groups because we don't have creeds or doctrines. We as a tradition are more interested in the experience of meaning-making than in having clear answers. But in moments of great loss, that can be really hard. I don't have an answer for you about the afterlife and I have no expectation that we all agree. As your minister, I'm more concerned with how you return to life after death has gutted your world. My role isn't to come up with answers to the unknown - can you imagine if a UU minister tried? - my role is to be your companion, however you talk about the mysteries of eternity.

I want to make space today for wondering, for a little bit of curiosity and tenderness and whimsy. Often the way that we talk about the afterlife - meaning whatever happens after death - often it's seen as either a pretty Christianized idea of Heaven, or as nothing. The starkness leaves little room for wondering.

I had a conversation with some of my UU minister friends several weeks ago that turned into a funny kind of thought experiment about different ways of interacting with our ancestors and the afterlife, and I'd like to share it with you. This is a text

thread between me, Rev. Micah Ma, played by Catherine, and Rev. Elizabeth Mount, played by Kala. For context, Micah is Chinese American and has been sharing about their practice of making offerings to their ancestors.

Elizabeth: Micah, did you let your ancestors know you're cat sitting? Cause they're for sure gonna notice no incense

Micah: I mean honestly nobody's been burning incense to them for like a hundred years probably, so I think they're okay.

IMO they should be delighted that they're getting anything right now

THERE ARE STARVING ANCESTORS IN SICHUAN etc etc

I did give them food offerings for the Hungry Ghost Festival but they were the most pathetic offerings because 1. It was a fast day for me so everything had to be plant based and 2. I had not adequately prepared

So their offerings were like some vegan supermarket sushi, a peach, and a plum candy

Elizabeth: lol, I'd be happy with that meal and I'm not even a ghost

Laurel: What is the hungry ghost festival? It sounds delightful?

Micah: Oh it's not delightful? I think? It's probably a terrifying holiday. Idk. But basically it's a day where everyone tries to "feed" the ancestors who aren't being revered properly

Like the ghosts who have been forgotten I guess

So you make offerings outside for any ghosts who happen to be passing by, burn paper money, etc.

Otherwise they will be HUNGRY and they may HAUNT YOU!!! I think.

Laurel: So it's delightful only for the ghosts

Micah: I mean I guess when I think about it, it's kind of a sweet holiday in that it's a time when you're taking care of everyone, not just your own family, and you're kind of taking pity on these forgotten ghosts

But also

GHOSTS  
HUNGRY GHOSTS  
WANDERING THE STREETS

Elizabeth: So basically the premise of Coco, but Chinese

Micah: Oh my god I decided to look up the holiday on Wikipedia and it is so much more hardcore than I realized

Elizabeth: Tell us more!

Micah: (from Wikipedia) Significance: The opening of the gates of Hell and Heaven, permitting all ghosts to receive food and drink.

Elizabeth: Oh hey! It's totally Coco!

Micah: And yeah it's because the veil between worlds is thinner on this night, so  
THE GATES OF HEAVEN AND HELL ARE OPEN AND THE STREETS ARE  
FILLED WITH GHOSTS

Elizabeth: Ahhh (screen face emoji)

Laurel: Yeah that's kind of a lot. What day is this? I feel like there should be announcements about these things

Micah: It's the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar. So it was on August 30th this year

Laurel: Presumably this is all ghosts and not exclusively the Chinese ghosts?

Micah: I mean. Okay

Laurel: ARE THE WHITE GHOSTS TRYING TO CUT THE GHOST LINE  
Because white culture doesn't really do ancestor care with food

Elizabeth: This is fascinating...So then in theory, is this the day that Chinese people are mostly surrounded by a ton of foreign hungry ghosts? Like, presumably the Chinese ones are getting incense on other days from their descendents, right?

Laurel: Exactly!

Micah: Or maybe race doesn't matter when you're a ghost. But this is a good question. Like yeah are the white ghosts hungrier than the other ghosts because they never get fed

Laurel: Right so it's less ghosts' race and more descendents' race

Micah: Or do white ghosts not turn into hungry ghosts because they have no expectation that their descendants will be filial (thinking face emoji)

Elizabeth: But I do wonder if your hungry ghost mostly pops up where it expects its own descendants to be? So maybe the white people ghosts are mostly wandering Europe when they escape anyhow?

Laurel: The idea of spirits being tied to wily humans in a segregated world is fascinating.

But then if souls are reincarnated maybe they take turns linking to descendant lines that are bad caregivers because a different generation of their descendents are good caregivers?

...

This was a conversation with only questions and no clear answers. And it was delightful, infused with a kind of playful wondering and exploring different ways of interacting with ideas about the afterlife. We weren't concerned about if any belief was right or wrong, or adopting it as our own, we were getting to know a perspective.

Several years ago I had another colleague who shared a story from her time as a hospital chaplain. One of the people she was visiting had lost one of their dearest loves and was lamenting that she didn't believe in heaven. She was grief stricken

and didn't know how to proceed.

My colleague asked her to imagine what she wished for the dear one who had passed. What would be a suitable way to spend eternity. The woman thought for a while and then said she imagined her love in a one person space ship zipping around the galaxy exploring the stars with their cat. And that scene, that hope and blessing she was sending out into the unknown became a companion to her grief, a way to hold the pain and the loss together with a vision of joy and peace.

Because why not. There are mysteries about death that we cannot answer. Yes, we know that bodies decay and return to the earth, we know that we carry the impact and memory of our beloved with us in our own living, but questions about eternity don't have prove-able answers. We're all trying to make sense of the unknown, so why not imagine the best possible scenario? Why not send our blessings or our offerings of nourishment to the dead?

As with all things, I encourage that we treat ourselves with gentleness and clarity. You don't owe anyone your blessing or a lifetime of food offerings, especially not if they harmed you. You are not obligated to honor the memory of everyone who came before you simply because they were family. This ritual, after all, is for you, it's for connecting with memories of love. You get to choose who you remember in this moment.

During this service we write the name of loved ones on paper leaves and come hang them on branches. We're still going to do that, but I want you to also imagine something beautiful or joyful or peaceful for this beloved soul. Whatever you imagine heaven would be for them, not in the religious sense, but the experiential sense - a scene that they would find blissful, that wraps around your grief with warmth. Maybe it's a particular memory or maybe it was their favorite food.

Whatever your offering, I invite you to describe or draw it on the back of the leaf. This will be our act of blessing to those who have departed the living world and entered the realm of ancestry. Kala will play some music while we do this. If you're at home, I invite you to join us - find something to write on and then go place your blessing wherever feels right - maybe on a window sill or next to a

potted plant, amidst your grandmother's favorite earrings, wherever feels right.  
We'll take our time. Raise your hand if you need more leaves and come hang them  
on the tree whenever you're ready.