



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Days for the Dead”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

The life of the dead is placed in the heart of the living. Cicero

Let children walk with nature. Let them see the beautiful communions of death and life.

And they will learn that death is as beautiful as life. John Muir

‘There is no death, daughter. People die only when we forget them,’ my mother explained shortly before she left me. ‘If you can remember me, I will be with you always.’ Isabel Allende, ‘Eva Luna’

Photographs are precious memories...the visual evidence of place and time and relationships... ritual talismans for the treasure chest of the heart. Robert Fulghum, ‘From Beginning to End’

Sermon

Dressing up in costume as a ghost, or skeleton, or witch, is one of the ways we laugh and make less scary the things that might actually frighten us. What are some of you dressing up as for Halloween? (*congregation responds*) Sounds like you all will have some fun this Halloween.

As I was preparing for this service I came across a book written in 1896 titled, *In Search of Gravestones Old and Curious*. The author, William Vincent, calls himself a ‘Gravestone Rambler’ because he explores the history recorded in cemeteries. More than one hundred years ago he worried about the decaying or eroding stones and the loss of information recorded on them which reveal people’s beliefs or attitudes about death and dying.

Vincent’s book includes sketches of stones with their winged skeletons, coffins, snuffed candles with wispy smoke, even the grim reaper’s scythes which cut into life, and hourglasses empty of time. Sounds like a Halloween haunted house, but these 1700s carved pictures indicate how real and close death was. It was not romanticized.

In my own gravestone rambling on the internet, I discovered a few treasured epitaphs.

Gay, thoughtless Reader, view this sod,

Where youth and beauty mouldering lie.

It warns thee with the voice of God,

Prepare / for thou shalt surely die. (*from Mary Miner’s grave*)

And this,

Unactive in the damp and gloomy Grave
Beneath this stone, to worms a-prey, we sleep
Unconscious of the world, & all her woes. *(from Nathaniel & Elisabeth Day's graves)*

Another less grim epitaph extolled the virtues of a tender husband, kind Father, a blessing to the community, et cetera. It closes with these lines:

But alas neither wealth nor merit can bribe or evade
The grim tyrant Death
nor repel the fatal shaft,
Hamilton is no more. *(from Jonathan Hamilton's grave)*

[All epitaphs taken from <http://www.gravematter.com/>]

I like to ramble in actual cemeteries, too, listening to the voices from the grave as I journey back in time. When I went on my Concord, Massachusetts, pilgrimage two summers ago, I went to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and to Author's Ridge, the section of the cemetery where Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau are buried. None of these people had anything more than their names on their stones, but epigraphs of a different kind lay near. Pens and small toys were placed around Alcott's grave, tokens of appreciation and offerings to her spirit. By Thoreau's grave lay natural objects like shells, stones, and twigs, symbolic of his writings about the natural world.

Walking among their graves made these people more real to me. The visible grave marker proved they once lived, they weren't made-up characters in a book. But of course, there are less tangible markers of a person's life—the love and memories we hold. And there are tangible objects we keep, too, objects handed down over the generations, like photos, jewelry and special treasures. I have a standing, dressed-pig cookie jar of my grandmother's. She always had cookies to fill the pig's belly.

Sometimes treasured keepsakes aren't enough. The traditions Morgan and Clela described of going to cemeteries, placing flowers on a grave, pausing to reflect on the person laying at rest, and even picnicking with relatives, these allow people time to commune with the person named on the stone. But the opportunity to do this in our times is rare as we cease using cemeteries and gravestones.

My mother was cremated four years ago. My family buried her ashes in the memorial ground at our UU congregation in Fairfax, Virginia. Recently, I took my father to visit the site but we couldn't remember which tree she had been buried beside. There's no gravestone to mark the spot. I didn't mind though, for it made me feel like she truly had become one with the woods and the earth, just as she wanted.

Afterwards, my father and I went inside the sanctuary. On one wall hangs a memorial board. Brass plaques bear a person's name who has been returned to the earth where we had just

been. As I searched for my mother's name I read names of people I had known. When I reached my mother's name I suddenly felt her presence. Simply seeing her name affirmed that she had lived.

Here on our Fellowship grounds, in the woods, several members have had ashes scattered or buried. If you know someone whose remains have been returned to these woods, please let me know. Some of these people may have their names added to our own memorial wall outside this sanctuary. Earlier this morning we dedicated the Memorial Wall and Terrace.

The wall will have plaques fixed to it naming a person along with their birth and death dates. The wall was built because of a generous donation by two families in this Fellowship and with the creative design and expert labor of two others. Two benches beside the wall invite you to sit, remember or reflect. If possible, we hope to replace the three wooden memorial benches that sit further among the trees and closer to where people's ashes have been returned to the earth.

Placing nameplates on the new Memorial Wall or on Boats replaces the gravestone and gives us a place to return to. Our memorial wall will become a new tradition for those who are interested. We will ask you to cover the cost to engrave and affix the nameplates.

Soon we will share in an older tradition of this Fellowship—sharing names and planting flower bulbs in memory of those we've loved and lost. Later, you can plant flower bulbs around your home or here to be perennial reminders of the love and beauty of the people you have lost.

In a few days the seasonal wheel will turn to Halloween, Samhain, All Saints, Dia de los Muertos, and All Souls days. If not then, perhaps soon, you will ramble in a cemetery, explore family photos, or pull a cookie from an heirloom jar. May the spirits of our loved ones be close by us this winter, spring, summer and fall. May they continue to live on in our memories and in our hearts.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How have you been touched by the memorializing of someone else's life?
2. What message would you like written on your headstone, if you had one?
3. Does knowing you will die affect the way you live? Would immortality change your living?
4. What do you believe happens after death?

