



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Saving All Souls”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

*The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns
to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7*

*I simply believe that some part of the human Self or Soul
is not subject to the laws of space and time. Carl Jung*

Life is just a chance to grow a soul. The Reverend A. Powell Davies (UU)

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard. Anne Sexton

Sermon

Today our Roman Catholic friends may be observing “All Souls Day”, a time to remember the souls, or persons, who have died. The Mexican “Day of the Dead” practice when people visit cemeteries and share a symbolic meal with ancestors combines Catholic and indigenous American traditions on this day.

Many Protestant churches observe All Souls traditions, too, even as we Unitarian Universalists do. Some of you have already placed photos or mementos of loved ones who have died on a celebration table up front. Later in our service you will have an opportunity to name and remember the persons or souls you admired or loved but are no longer living.

The occurrence of All Souls’ Day, brought about by the inevitable turning of the seasonal wheel, provides us with an intentional opportunity to remember those we might forget because they are physically absent from our daily lives. Annual holidays and holy days like this one remind us that time is passing and we need to stop and take notice. We need these markers throughout the year to remind us not to waste time. And for this particular holy day, even as we remember the dead, we can remember that we still live.

The phrase ‘all souls’ has a dual meaning for Unitarian Universalism. Some of you may be familiar with Unitarian Universalist congregations named All Souls. All Souls congregations exist in New York City, Washington, DC, Tulsa, OK, and elsewhere. The naming of these congregations was influenced by The Unitarian Reverend William Ellery Channing. In the early

1800s, Channing said, “I am a living member of the great family of all souls.” In a sermon he expanded on this idea. He said:

The individual is a living part of this living whole, – vitally connected with it, – acting upon it and reacted upon by it, – receiving good, and communicating good in return, in proportion to his growth and power. ... The general good is bound up in the individual good.... I am bound to [this family] by vital bonds. I am always exerting an influence upon it....Others are affected by what I am, and say, and do. And these others have also their spheres of influence...I am a living member of the great family of all souls; ... My happiness is manifestly bound up with and flows from the happiness of those around; and thus the divine kindness to others is essentially kindness to myself.

This is no theory; it is the fact confirmed by all experience. Every day we receive perpetual blessings from the progress of our [human] race. We are enlightened, refined, [and] elevated through the studies, discoveries, and arts of countless persons whom we have never seen and of whom we have never even heard....¹

In this excerpt Channing not only proclaims his connection to all humanity, he suggests what we now call our Seventh Principle, that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. These ‘All Souls’ churches adopted this name to reflect their agreement with Channing’s words.

With Channing’s thoughts in mind, we can understand All Souls’ Day as a day to celebrate our Seventh Principle. In this community we know we are connected to one another each week when we share our Joys and Sorrows, or when we come together to celebrate a baby’s birth, or to say goodbye in a memorial service. Our loves and losses are shared loves and losses. We are part of the grand circle of life and remembering the souls of those who have lived and died puts that reality before us.

The second meaning of All Souls comes from our Universalist ancestors who held that all souls would be forgiven their sins and granted eternal life with God in Heaven. This ‘universal salvation’ explains the second half of our UU name. Although the concept of universal salvation was rejected as heretical by an early church council held in the year 544, it was also rejected during America’s infancy when Puritan and Calvinist theology claimed that God knew even before you were born whether you were doomed to everlasting Hell or elected to everlasting life in Heaven.

Our Universalist ancestors objected to that idea, claiming that God was too good and loving to damn anyone forever, no matter how terrible a life a person had led. They couldn’t believe that a loving God would give life to someone only to damn that person forever. They

1. *The Works of William E. Channing, Part IV*, sermon titled “The Father’s Love for Persons,” pages 955-957.

http://books.google.com/books?id=FZk7AAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA956&lpg=PA956&dq=living+member+of+the+great+family+of+all+souls&source=bl&ots=8LnOGkkVSk&sig=b1dGcX95_dmWK1J5D9DFhcPkkH0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=86pTVKjwHYOXNq6-g6AI&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=living%20member%20of%20the%20great%20family%20of%20all%20souls&f=false

also resisted the idea that you couldn't do anything to save yourself and that no matter how good a life you led, it wouldn't guarantee you were among the select few. It made no sense to early Universalists and makes little sense to most UUs today.

With Universalism in mind, we can understand All Souls' Day as a time to remember that God's love and goodness will ultimately save us. But to expand that theology a bit. When I say 'God's love and goodness will save us' I don't personally mean a supernatural God the Father will gather us all in Heaven one day. For me, I speak of God more as that divine spark of love and goodness inside each of us, that calls us to care about one another and draws us together in community to seek a better world and create the beloved community. Our Universalist name in the 21st century refers more to universal love in this life than salvation in some possible afterlife.

The concept of God can't be defined easily, and the ideas of soul and spirit prove almost as challenging. By soul or spirit I mean an invisible, indescribable essence that defines who we are, that sums up all our experiences and understandings, that unites our body, mind, and heart in some intangible whole for which concrete words don't fully explain. Spirit and Soul offer us poetic and religious words to describe who we are in ways scientific language only scratches the surface. Spirit and soul are the breath in our breathing, they are the inspiration in our respiration. They are that essence deep within us that our physical bodies envelop.

Personality and character, beliefs and behavior, attitudes and aspirations, these combine in unique ways for each of us, forming what we might recognize as our spirit or soul. Who we are as unique beings is much more than our physical bodies. Whatever may or may not live on when we die, it is our soul or spirit, that is how we are remembered by those who loved us or were influenced by us.

If our spirits or souls are guided by love and our actions reflect that, then we are undoubtedly not only going to Heaven, but we're making heaven on earth. Our souls need to be saved on earth, and if they are, then we need not be concerned for what comes after we die.

Although you may not have articulated it quite this way, I believe you come to a religious community to save your soul, to grow a soul, to feed your spirit, to become the person you hope to be, to not waste your life meaninglessly, to learn how to lead a better life, to meet others who will help you accomplish all that, and for you to help others lead good, loving lives. That is our very mission: to care for one another while we learn and grow, transforming ourselves and our world with love.

However you understand All Souls' Day let it serve to remind us that our goodness and shared love saves lives. We are connected to all souls, to all people, no matter what their means, whom they love, how they vote, or what their beliefs. Love alone will save us from the worst of what humanity is capable of.

Live well. Love well. Feed your soul now, so that when death comes, you die without regrets. Live as if Heaven is on Earth. Live as if your days are numbered, for they are numbered.

Breathe in the Spirit of Life. Breathe in the Spirit of Peace. Breathe out Love. Breathe out the names of your ancestors. Breathe, and fill your spirit with the love of this community.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When, and in what way, did you become aware of death? How did you feel about it then?
2. How does the knowledge that you will die one day affect or direct your life now?
3. How may death or the idea of an everlasting soul shape your spirituality or beliefs?