

*Sunday November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Olinda  
“All Saints, All Souls: How We Name Ourselves”.*

*Rev. Fran Dearman, Interim Minister serving the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda*

*All Saints Day, November 1<sup>st</sup>;*

*All Souls Day November 2<sup>nd</sup>;*

*Olinda founding day is November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1880—Olinda marks the 137<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberal religious congregational life in Essex County.*

## INTRODUCTION: LAYERING

Winter is coming. We find ourselves midway between autumn equinox and winter solstice.

If you were in Alaska, there would be a headline in the Anchorage Daily News that the sun had set in Barrow, up on the North Slope, and would not rise there again until early February. In Anchorage, you would go to school, or to work, in darkness. This far south, not so much. And we step back into Standard Time. Still, nights are longer, days are shorter. Winds are cooler. Leaves are falling.

The Interfaith Calendar tells me that First Nations call November “Blanket Month”: an extra blanket on the bunk, a blanket of leaves on the woodlot path, perhaps sometime soon a blanket of snow over top of the leaves, creating a snug secret world for the small creatures who make their homes just under the earth.

The calendar has its layers, also. October 31<sup>st</sup> is Hallowe’en—All Hallows Eve. November 1<sup>st</sup> is marked by many as All Saints Day, and the next day as All Souls Day. Some know this grouping of days as All Hallows Tide. For Wiccans, Celts and neo-Pagans, this was and is the time when the veil between the living and the dead is felt to be at its thinnest.

At this time of year we are especially mindful of the dead.

## PART ONE: THE HUMAN CONDITION

There was a church in Anchorage Alaska called All Saints Episcopal—Anglican we’d call that here in Canada. Many churches in the Catholic and Episcopal traditions are named All Saints. I do not know of even one Unitarian or Universalist Church named All Saints. But there are many Unitarian and Universalist Churches called All Souls. So I thought I’d look into that.

There is an All Souls Church Unitarian in Washington DC. It was founded in 1821 as First Unitarian Church, then the congregation moved into a second building in 1877, about ten years after the Civil War, and in this new building and new beginning they named themselves All

Souls Church Unitarian. They were an intentionally mixed race congregation. The great orator Frederick Douglass went to church there. John Quincy Adams, president of the United States and liberating lawyer of the Amistad trial, went to church there.

[Author's note, 07Nov'17: The Rev. Shana Lynngood, co-minister at my home congregation, First Victoria, on Vancouver Island, served as associate minister at All Souls Church Unitarian in DC before coming to Canada. Shana told me about a quotation from William Ellery Channing, a quotation that All Souls DC printed on every order of service to remind them of their core reason for being All Souls Church. Shana keeps it on her wall, even today. Here is the entire quotation, from a sermon circa 1830 at Federal Street Church—the words of William Ellery Channing:

“I am a living member of the great family of all souls and I cannot improve or suffer myself without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere....I belong to this family. I am bound to it by vital bonds. I am always exerting an influence upon it. I can hardly perform an act that is confined in its consequences to myself. Others are affected by what I am, and say, and do...So that a single act of mine may spread and spread in widening circles through a nation or humanity.” –Wm. Ellery Channing.”

To paraphrase: I am a living member of the great family of all souls—and my life, for good or ill, impacts all around me through an ever-enlarging sphere. It's a call to prophetic voice, prophetic witness.]

There is an All Souls UU church in Tulsa Oklahoma—the largest UU church in the world, 1,800 souls all told, and intentionally and mindfully bi-racial. There was a UU World article about them, how they welcomed folks from an evangelical church, folks who had arrived at a universalist outlook, and gave these folks a home when their home congregation had turned them away.

There is an All Souls Church UU in Kansas City Missouri, founded as a Unitarian Church in 1868, almost one hundred years ago. There is a Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, where the prolific UU author Forrest Church used to be the minister, founded in 1819.

There is an All Souls UU Church in Braintree Massachusetts with an interesting history. The people were first gathered around 1833, and named themselves the Unitarian Religious Society

in Braintree. Then they were the Braintree Free Church. Then they disbanded because so many of their people had died in the Civil War. The people who had made it through the war didn't seem to care much whether they were a broad liberal Unitarian church or a Universalist church. They seemed happy with a both/and option.

By 1900 the Unitarians and Universalists in Braintree had got themselves organized together into a church they called All Souls; their current building dates to 1905 and has a plaque that puts them on a National Register of Historic Places. The list goes on and on, for UU churches named All Souls, in the United States.

Not so much, in Canada. We have churches that used to be called Church of Our Saviour, Church of the Redeemer, or Church of the Messiah, long ago.

Nowadays Canadian UUs seem to name themselves by the town or city they find themselves in, and the energy for debate goes into whether they're a church or a fellowship or a congregation, and whether they want to claim First Church status in their city, and whether they want two U's with that....

The folks in Kitchener-Waterloo did something interesting—they renamed themselves Grand River Unitarian Congregation. They named themselves for their watershed—for the earth where they stand and the water that flows through it.

But no UU churches named for All Saints. I wondered why. Seems it all goes back to the Reformation.

Actually, it goes back to time immemorial, when human beings first became self-conscious, self-aware, and realized that they had been born, they would live, they would love, and then—then they would die. And all the people they had known, the people who had guided their steps as children, the people they had lived with and loved and cherished—they would all die, too.

That is the human condition.

Depending on our time and place, our languages of faith give us words to help us wrap our heads around this. Every religion I know of has some ritual or language that tries to give us words and actions to help us think about this stark reality, and a time for remembering those who have gone before us.

And nowhere do land earth and sky more starkly remind us of our own mortality than in the darkening days of November in Northern latitudes. There is also that matter of layering—layering the rituals of one faith over the customs of the faith that preceded it, customs that endure in memory and in function, even when the connection to long ago is long forgotten.

As mentioned earlier, the Christian observances at All Hallows—Hallowe'en, echo the Germanic and Celtic customs we know as Samhain—a time to honour the dead.

The early Christian churches gave their spiritual descendents such language as the church local and the church universal. The communion of saints linked the living and the dead—all souls—in a mystical union beyond time and space. The church militant, on earth, looked to the church triumphant, in heaven, in the light of the presence of the holy, *lux aeterna*, mindful of the church penitent—those who still worked out their redemption in purgatory.

Accordingly, All Saints were the holy martyrs in heaven who had borne witness to the faith and spent eternity in the presence of their god. Martyr—that's a Greek word meaning witness. Speaking truth to power, in love. All Saints Day is a day of giving thanks for the lives who have gone before us, especially those who have borne witness to the holy. In the West, the day for this honouring was and is November 1<sup>st</sup>.

In French, this day is named La Toussaint—the day for honouring all saints. In France La Toussaint is a public holiday. People traditionally visit the graves of friends and relatives to lay wreaths of heather and chrysanthemums. The following day, All Souls in English, is Le Jour des Morts, the day of the dead.

The Reformation movements of the fifteenth century brought radical change to this outlook. All Saints Day had traditionally honoured those who had achieved heaven and lived in God's presence eternally—*lux perpetua*; All Souls Day honoured those who were still working on it, in Purgatory.

But the Reformation Protestants were not so keen on Saints, or Purgatory.

In essence, Protestants put their trust in redemption through belief in Christ—purgatory was no longer part of the picture for Protestants. Some Radical Protestants might go so far as to see Jesus as one who offered a model for living a good life, but to see salvation in terms of an individual's relationship with God—with the holy. Salvation—health is the essential meaning of that word. Redemption—to buy back.

What do we mean by redemption? Our Father—give us this day our daily bread—forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive our debtors. In the original Hebrew and in the Gospels, as I understand it, Jesus is talking about the literal forgiveness of debt. The Roman Empire demanded taxes, the taxes drove the people into debt, and often the only way out was to sell oneself and one's children into slavery. My own belief is that what Jesus was preaching was a year of Jubilee, a year for the forgiveness of debt and the return of land to its original owners.

I have a sense that for nineteenth century Unitarians and Universalists in North America, saints and all souls carried some sense of code, a subtext of liberality and acceptance, just as nowadays UUs mean something open and accepting when we speak of a Welcoming Congregation or a Rainbow people. When a nineteenth century congregation chose to name themselves as All Souls they were committing themselves to radical inclusion, connection, and commitment to prophetic witness.

My understanding is that when a New England Unitarian spoke of the Saints they had in mind the Calvinist Congregationalist founders and their aspiration to a close personal relationship with the holy, much as our Baptist and Evangelical neighbours today might speak of a conversion experience. In other words, their ancestors, and the witness of their ancestors to a life aligned with bearing witness to the holy.

But I digress....

## PART TWO: MOVING ON

All Saints. All Souls. What might that mean to UUs, especially nowadays? The worth and dignity of all persons? The web of life that connects all beings?

I find this hinge of the year, midway between equinox and solstice, very meaningful. First and foremost, it's scary dark out, the leaves are falling, and the air smells of death.

In the old days that would have been quite literal, for at this time of year a farming economy would have to be making some hard decisions about how many animals they could bring through the winter, and how many they would now have to slaughter.

Even nowadays, as the days draw in and the trees show their bones, this death of the year brings to mind our own deaths. Things happen in November. November 10<sup>th</sup> 1975, the SS Edmund Fitzgerald founders in Lake Superior with the loss of all hands. The gales of November.... Not so far from here.... November 11<sup>th</sup>, Armistice Day, Remembrance Day, sums up the losses of the Great War, and all the wars that followed. That follow.... Almost a day of national mourning....

November 1<sup>st</sup>, All Saints Day, was the date of the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. A massive point nine earthquake all but levelled the great city of Lisbon in Portugal. More than ten thousand people died immediately, and another forty thousand or more not long after. Great waves shook the waters of the North and South Atlantic as far away as Brazil, as far as Finland, as far as the Hudson Bay. Fire and flood raged through the city of Lisbon. This tremendous disaster galvanized the arguments around Theodicy—the justice of God.

If God is all powerful, all knowing, all just, all wise, all good, then what was that about?—that an entire city and its tens of thousands of people could be devastated in a matter of minutes? How could such a cataclysm occur in a world where God was active in the world? How could this be? Something had to be wrong, radically wrong, with those assumptions!

The Great Earthquake of Lisbon, All Saints Day 1755, gave Enlightenment philosophers an awful lot to think about.

Second, remember that the word martyr actually means in the original Greek—those who have borne witness. There is as much need now as ever for folks to bear witness to what is true and just and decent. Every age has need of those who will not turn their heads and look away and pass by on the other side, of those who will act on their best intentions, mindful of those who suffer, of those who will not let themselves be lost in despair, of those who will bear witness.

Let us be mindful of those who bear witness, and of all who go into harm's way, this time of year, and all through all the years.

Let us be mindful of our own ancestors—your saints, also. Do you feel close to your ancestors? Do you feel they have gifted you with strength and wisdom and resilience? Burdens, perhaps? And also stories and memories that are well-springs of hope and courage, and a legacy of love?

In essence, this sermon has been an unpacking of Hymn #103 in our grey hymnal: “For All the Saints” (words by William Walsham How, 1823-1897) is the traditional hymn sung at this time of year in English-speaking countries. In my experience, it's often used as a Processional Hymn at the close of a UU Ordination service. In essence, the newly ordained or installed minister is invited to consider how they will take their place among those whose particular duty it is to bear witness, to speak truth to power in love, to utter forth prophetic voice; they join an august company.

These are the words to Hymn #103 “For All the Saints”, as found in our hymnal. Let us take a moment to look at the words, and consider, mindfully. Do they remind you of someone you hold in your heart, someone whose words and example are precious to you, and inspiring?

Hymn #103 “For All the Saints”,

For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
thy name most holy be forever blessed.

Thou was their rock, their shelter and their might;  
their strength and solace in the well-fought fight;  
thou, in the darkness deep their one true light.

*[nb: verse 3 is across the page]*

O blest communion of the saints divine!  
we live in struggle, they in glory shine,  
yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.

And when the strife is fierce, the conflict long,  
steals on the ear the distant triumph song,  
and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we live between memory and hope. May we remember, may we remember well, and with understanding and compassion, may we bear witness in our turn.

May we dream and may we hope.

Winter is coming. Layer up, folks.

Wrap yourselves in some good memory of those who have gone before us, of those who bear witness to the possibilities of a better world, and the gifts and joys of this world, here and now, as well as its sorrows and inevitable loss. Remember joy, also. Always remember joy.

May it be so.

## Chronology, and Bibliography

31<sup>st</sup> October~All Hallows Eve aka Hallowe'en

01 November~All Saints Day~Samhain

02 November~All Souls Day

All Hallows Tide

01 November 1755 Great Lisbon Earthquake; spur to Enlightenment Theodicy arguments.

10 November 1880 Founding date of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1975, SS Edmund Fitzgerald founders in Lake Superior with the loss of all hands

11 November 1918 Armistice Day~Remembrance Day

Collins Dictionary

UUA Hymnal, "Singing the Living Tradition".

Personal communication, the Rev. Shana Lynngood, re William Ellery Channing quotation. An expansion on the quotation will be found on line, in a sermon by the Rev. Carl Gregg. See <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2017/02/great-end-religious-instruction-legacy-william-ellery-channing/#zTx3RUrbLiqvBBk.99>

First Unitarian Church of Victoria, November Newsletter, columns of DRE Faye Mogenson and the Rev. Shana Lynngood for their reflections on the role of ancestors in our lives.

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