

At the Altar of our Ancestors

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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A Shrine in a Casual Corner © Rod E.S.Q.

Today, some of us have collaborated in a joint altar – a shrine – to commemorate those who have gone before us – our dearly departed, people who we can now come to see as ancestors. The particular altar we’ve set up in our sanctuary has *some* elements that are common in the *ofrendas* or altars that are set up around this time of year during the

Mexican Day of the Dead (and in some other places as well). This can include items like food and candy, colourful ornaments and banners, and skull motifs.

Although this particular setup might not be common among many of your cultures of origin, I – having a background in this practice – have extended an invitation to you to participate in it, recognizing that there are also ways to do similar practices that are more in tune with your own backgrounds.

After all, setting up photos or mementos of those who we miss, is not something that’s exclusive to one culture, I suspect most of you do *something* of this kind already.

The Mexican style, of course, has some distinctive traits. In the season of the Days of the Dead, the custom also tends to include intentional gathering, often with music, and partaking in some of the food and treats.

But, while visiting Mexico this summer, I was reminded that these altars are actually not exclusive to this season. Sure, the days around the feasts of All Saints and All Souls *do* prompt people to *ensure* the altars

are set up, updated, maintained, and intentionally admired, often with a group of family or friends, but many households actually keep these up – or some version of them – *year-long*.

This past August, while visiting Mexico, I noticed that many family members had a table, or maybe some furniture in a corner of the house, where these photos and items were perpetually set. As I looked at these, certain conversations came up – we'd pick up the photos and reminisce, and maybe we'd share the stories with other guests who were not familiar with the names or the anecdotes. Even though it was the summer, the practice of honouring our ancestors endured.

I noticed that, in reliving these stories – or in learning some new stories – I came to a deeper understanding of how these people who came before me have shaped who I am. Some of these ancestors did so while I was already around, but some were gone long before I was born. And still I saw that their lives influenced mine. And just as our ancestors have done, so do *we* become ancestors to people we might know now, as well as to those who we might never know.

During my summer visit, one of my aunts had been safeguarding my deceased grandfather's family bible – I've put it in the altar this morning. She figured that I might be the grandchild in the family who might most appreciate being the keeper of this particular personal effect from my grandfather. And having this around the house offers me another point of connection with him.

This week, a different thing happened, as I got something in the mail from a – living – friend of mine. It was these Day of the Dead-themed socks, with a traditional sugar skull design. Knowing that I like socks with... cute designs, and that this Mexican holiday holds particular significance to me, he saw them, bought them, and mailed them to me.

Once again, I got to thinking that, as we are around, here with each other, each of us is also on track to becoming a cherished ancestor.

Sometimes, this kind of connection may be expressed through gifts, and over the next couple months, many of us might engage in that kind of activity during the holidays.

But the greater part is reminding each other of the presence that our dear ones represent in our lives. Physical gifts do that some of the time, and spending time with each other is another way to give of ourselves, be it through remote connections, or in-person, as it has now become more practicable. Some of you have now been taking part in our church dinner series – hosting and attending – building new memories into the ancestry that we want to be for each other.

My friends, I know that many of you have some version of an altar at home – shelves, mantels, or dresser tops, with photos and other articles, which have memories of people you've shared your life with – casual corners that have, over time, been transformed into a shrine.

On these shrines, my friends, you may find items that represent both people who are still alive, as well as many that have transitioned to a presence that is now centred around our memories. Some of you might choose to gather these latter ones together in one space – though, whichever place is conducive to honouring their memory will be appropriate enough.

And if there are photos of people who are still around, some of them might be visiting or connecting every once in a while, ready to reminisce, to name those ancestors alongside you, to make ongoing memories. Sometimes, my friends, new memories are made, as we *coauthor* a new ancestry for those who come after us.

So may it be,
In keeping memory,
And in building memories,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening #322 Thanks Be for These**

~)| Words: Richard Seward Gilbert, 1936- , and

~)| Joyce Timmerman Gilbert, 1936 , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Hungarian Melody, 16th cent.,

~)| arr. by Robert L. Sanders, 1906-

TRANSYLVANIA

Hymn #411 Part in Peace

~)| Words: Sarah Flower Adams

Music: From *The Southern Harmony*, 1825, harmony by Alastair Cassels-Brown, b. 1927, © 1982 The Church Pension Fund

CHARLESTON

Closing Hymn #128 For All That Is Our Life

~)| Words: Bruce Findlow, 1922-

Music: Patrick L. Rickey, 1964- , © 1992 UUA

SHERMAN ISLAND