

Dia de los Muertos
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, October 29, 2017
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

Today we honor the Mexican celebration of Dia de los Muertos, Fiesta de Muertos, called Mikailhuitl in the Nahuatl language of Mexico. This is a time when families celebrate the ongoing connections of life as they invite the spirits of their loved ones to return once a year from Mictlan, the land of the dead, for a visit, drawn home by the pungent scent of marigolds.

The marigold, cempazuchil, is called the flower of the dead. It is said that the unique scent of the marigold can draw souls back across the boundary between this life and the next, connecting in love across the threshold between this life and the unknown that lies beyond. Many Mexican families put out marigolds and lovingly spread a welcoming feast for the returning spirits, with all their favorite things to eat and drink, holding a glorious party in their honor.

These rituals honor Mictecacihuatl, the goddess who watches over the bones of the beloved dead. These dead rest peacefully in Mictlan, waiting for the day each year when they may return home to visit their families still living on the earth.

The fragile nature of life is expressed in these ancient words of respected elder Nezahualcoyotl,

Not forever on earth; is it true we live on the earth?

Not forever on the earth, only a little while here, only a little while here.

Even though it is made of jade, it can be broken

Even though it is made of gold, it can be worn out.

Even though it is made of the beautiful quetzal feathers, they tear.

Not forever, on the earth, only a little a while here, only a little while here.

At this time of year the world around we find celebrations of this mystical time, including the Christian holidays of All Hallow’s Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day. We look back in this time to those who have gone before, those who created the world in which we now live. Now also is the time of the Celtic festival of Samhain. In ancient Ireland, Samhain was the central feast day of the Celtic calendar, “a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet.”

The rituals and holidays of this season celebrate this thinning of the veils between the worlds – a time when the doorways are more open, the thresholds are more easily crossed, creating a liminal space, a threshold space between different realities, different possibilities. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold" – the psychological, neurological, or metaphysical state of being in the crossing space between two different existential planes.

Catherine Decker’s poem, *In Liminal Space*, captures the essence of this opening between worlds in evocative imagery:

In the liminal space
there is a roar in the ears,
and the consciousness races
too loud, too fast –
maybe to drown out the unconscious.

It is as if one sees it all
but knows it is fleeting--
too fast to grasp; it will be gone too soon,
And what one has seized from it
will fade and dim
and haunt the soul.

One comes back too infrequently.
The moments are more precious
each time as their
transience is known:

Lost in the very act
of freezing the moment,
The moment of being alive.

Meeting the self that has been here before
--The moment of choice
when the heartbeat is felt
in the arms and toes and gut --

The selves that chose
without knowing they chose:
They are me again
united in the moment
between the gates.

I glimpse the truth
– the one we forget to live
but must remember to be alive --
One huge heartbeat, shaking, alive.

In the liminal state, the threshold between the planes of being, we encounter ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Liminality is a transitional space, the moment between the gates, where our normal limits are relaxed, and we can open ourselves to new perspectives, new ways of being, new possibilities.

And so now, honoring the ancient Mexican tradition that celebrates this mystical time of connecting across the planes of being through the generations, through the cycles of life, always connected in love and memory, let us gather to place our objects of memory on the tables, to place our butterflies on the tree, and share our memories with one another.

Sources:

Decker, Catherine (poems and other writings) retrieved from <http://hal.ucr.edu/~cathy/poems/liminal.html>

Henes, Donna. (1996) *Celestially Auspicious Occasions: Seasons, Cycles and Celebrations*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Group.

Montley, Patricia, (2005) *In Nature's Honor: Myths and Rituals Celebrating the Earth*. Boston: Skinner House Books

“Liminal” on Wikipedia, retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminal#cite_note-0

Fitzgerald, Mitch Cempasúchil, *The Marigold and Day of the Dead* retrieved from <http://davesgarden.com/guides/articles/view/245/>

Hernandez, Aracely, *Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)* retrieved from <http://www3.niu.edu/newsplace/nndia.html>

King, Judy, *Day of the Dead*, retrieved from <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1427-los-dias-de-los-muertos-the-days-of-the-dead>

Mictecacihuatl retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mictecacihuatl> and <http://atheism.about.com/od/aztecgodsgoddesses/p/Mictecacihuatl.htm>