

Come to the Gathering of Our Kin
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When her mother died, my colleague Barbara Hamilton-Holway was led by her grieving process to write a beautiful brief memoir about this central relationship in her life, and about her experience of loss and healing. In the book's Preface Barbara wrote about a conversation she had on the plane on the way home from the funeral with a doctor who told her that in his experience, "At the end of life, people wonder, 'Who will remember me?'" Barbara goes on to say, "Surely my mother wondered about who and how she would be remembered. Facing her death, I wonder, 'Now who will remember me as a baby, as a girl, as a young woman?'"

Who will remember me?

In memorial services and in this annual All Souls service, I will often speak about how those who have died are carried forward into the world after their death by our memories, by our love for them, and by the ways our lives have been shaped and changed by knowing them. Unitarian Universalism does not have any set doctrine about life after death. Yet whatever we *don't* know, we *do* know that we live on in one another. Our beloveds and our ancestors *need us*. Yet Barbara's simple question about her mother—who will remember me as a baby, as a girl, as a young woman?—reminds me that our relationship with our beloveds beyond the grave is not only about *their* need; it's about ours as well.

This time last year Disney studios released a new Pixar movie called "Coco," set in Mexico and built around the festivities and customs of *Dia de los Muertos*, the Mexican Day of the Dead. I watched it again Friday, on All Souls Day, as I probably will every year from now on. If you haven't seen it, I can't recommend it highly enough. Culturally rich, funny yet dramatically moving, and as usual with Pixar remarkably nuanced to appeal to audiences of all ages, it's a pleasure to watch, and a thoughtful experience as well.

"Coco" tells the story of a young boy named Miguel who struggles with his family legacy. He wants to be a musician, but music is not allowed in his family's life because of a musician ancestor who has been banished from the family memory—as his picture has been banished from the *Dia de Muertos* altar. On the Day of the Dead Miguel finds himself accidentally, mysteriously travelling to the Mexican Land of the Dead, where he finds his deceased family, and has a chance to repair the old injury and reconcile the family not just across generations, but even across the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead.

It's a wonderful story which I don't want to spoil for you. For me there are ideas in the way the relationships among the dead and the living are imagined and portrayed in the film that are worth lifting up. As the film begins, Miguel is telling the story of his family's long-ago catastrophe,

and it becomes clear that the tale is unfolding by way of pictures and objects on the *ofrenda*, the family altar that's set up for *Dia de los Muertos*. Like our table here, the *ofrenda* holds the story of life overflowing the boundaries of one person's birth and death. Miguel's story is the story of his parents, his grandmother, his great grandmother Mama Coco and her parents, and all the family members connected with them. The story continues, not just because it's told by the family, but because the family knows that they, the living, are part of the ancestors' ongoing story as well.

We Americans love to start our stories over from scratch. The fresh start is a foundational part of European American mythology, part of our national identity. It's a path many of us have chosen as we pull up stakes, relocate, and reinvent ourselves, many times for some of us. And yet we have been learning, especially as Americans of other cultural heritages have been reminding us, that like the traits of biological heredity, our narrative inheritance—the inheritance that isn't limited to our biological relations--doesn't simply vanish with every new generation, or each new beginning. Those new starts are chapters in a longer story, the story of our whole life and of all the life stories we're connected with. We are who we are, in part, because of who they were and are—and they live on as we live.

Early in Miguel's adventure, there's a moment when he runs through the cemetery where families from the village have gathered at their ancestral grave sites. They've brought food, flowers, and mementos, and they're cleaning the graves, and picnicking in the spiritual company of their other-worldly relatives. In the magic moment when he crosses over the boundary, Miguel looks at the cemetery again and suddenly sees both the living and the dead families, all the kin gathered together. The imagined presence has become real—except that really nothing has changed; he's just become able to see differently.

I think of that when we call the names of our own ancestors, our families and beloveds here on the altar and living in our own memories. For me, their presence becomes real as we invite and welcome them—not as a physical reality for us to touch or chat with, but *real* nonetheless as we call our own attention to the fact that they are always with us. This is the gathering of our kin.

In the film's Land of the Dead, the unremembered dead lead a marginalized existence. If their picture isn't on someone's *ofrenda* they can't cross over for *Dia de los Muertos*; if no one living remembers them at all they fade away entirely, lost to both worlds forever. I was struck by the fact that in the film these paupers of the afterlife have formed families for themselves, celebrating together and caring for each other, calling each other Uncle or Tia or Cousin. Those chosen kinships make things easier and more pleasant for the unremembered, keeping them from being alone and desolate. Yet they're not enough to sustain them. They need the power of a living memory, a relative or loved one, to keep them going, to keep them real.

I've heard a saying that a person isn't really dead until the last ripple of their living fades away—the last crop gathered from the fields they plowed, the last drink taken from the last cup they made, the last story of their life forgotten. Yet it seems to me that those ripples affect the living

as well. We can be enriched by the lives that have gone before us; their stories can give our own lives greater depth and vividness. I think of my own love for cooking and hospitality. It gives me joy, and at the same time there's a dimension added when I remember that my own father and grandfather ran the kitchen in the workman's hotel my grandparents owned, and that they, too, loved to cook and to feed hungry guests. It's not just part of who *I am*, it's part of who *we are*.

Not all our relations with all these relations of ours in the Land of the Dead are benign or nurturing. Some might be very difficult for us—a loved one lost in circumstances that leave us with a sense of guilt; a partner incapable of genuine love; a relative or family friend who did harm; a parent whose name we don't know. They may not be visible here on the table, but for better and for worse they're still present in this gathering of our kin.

In "Coco," the boy Miguel can only resolve his conflict with his living family if he's able to heal relationships broken four generations before him, righting wrongs among people who died before he was born. Our own situation with our difficult dead might be a little easier than Miguel's—because ours no longer have the ability to control how they're going to affect us. Whatever needs to happen between us and them—forgiveness, judgment, letting go, reconciliation—is entirely in our hands. Still, like Miguel, we have to learn how to address these old injuries if we want to keep the hurts of the dead from disfiguring our own living.

Our difficult dead depend on us for their continuing presence in the world, just as our beloveds do. And we depend on them, difficult and beloved alike, to know more of the truth of our own stories. We remember them; we continue living with them, sometimes painfully and sometimes gratefully. As we remember them, we remember ourselves, remember the parts of our own lives they have been present for, and the parts of our lives they still affect. In this gathering of our kin, we recognize and celebrate the truth that the story of our life is not confined to the days between our birth and our death. It began long before we were born and continues long after we die. Right here on this table is beautiful testimony to that truth.

We bless these gathered kin of ours, and give thanks for all they have given us.

May the stories of their life be a blessing; may the ongoing reality of their presence be a gift.

.Benediction

We are each other's immortality.

Each of us is a web, an intertwined glittering skein stretching forward and backward in time, connecting everyone we have known, everyone they have known, and all those who will come after us. We carry each other back from the threshold of life and death. Some part of those we loved who have died is gone forever, but some part is ours to have and to hold and to make real in the world.