

## **Walking With the Dead**

**By Lori Erickson**

**November 6, 2022**

Each November 1<sup>st</sup> for the past four years, I've led a Day of the Dead Walk at Harvest Preserve in Iowa City. As many of you know, Harvest Preserve is an outdoor spiritual sanctuary on the northeast side of town. Thanks to its circle of standing stones brought from Indonesia, it's Iowa City's own version of Stonehenge.

I had the idea for a local Day of the Dead Walk after writing my book *Near the Exit*, which is about places that have taught me about mortality. During the research for that book I became fascinated by this holiday, which has roots in both Christian and Indigenous traditions. On November 1<sup>st</sup> in Mexico, and in Mexican-American communities across the U.S., people set up altars with photos and mementoes of their loved ones as well as flowers and foods. At night they gather in cemeteries to picnic at the graves of those they love. It's said that the dead come back to join them, drawn by the festivities and the smell of the flowers.

I love the Day of the Dead traditions in part because they're such an unusual blend of sorrow and celebration, in contrast to the mostly gloomy approach to mortality in the rest of the world.

You've probably seen the colorful Day of the Dead images of skeletons arranged in fanciful postures, or maybe you've watched the Disney movie *Coco*. Day of the Dead humanizes death by bringing it into the regular cycle of the year, instead of just at funerals. Each year as

November comes around, people get the chance to honor their loved ones who have passed. Death comes to visit for a short time, and then leaves once again.

The church has its own version of Day of the Dead—All Saints Day, which we celebrate today. It's no accident that these two holidays are linked, because when Christianity came to Mexico, the Aztec holiday relating to death was shifted to the time of the year when the church honored its dead. Both holidays look to the past and celebrate the memory of those who are no more—though of course All Saints Day has the solemnity but not the parties.

On Tuesday afternoon this past week, about twenty of us met in the parking lot at Harvest Preserve, where we started a silent, meditative walk to the Stone Circle. We walked slowly, single file, so that each of us could be alone with our thoughts. It was a beautiful afternoon, sunny and warm, and the only sounds were bird songs, the distant hum of the interstate, and the rustle of fallen leaves as we walked beneath the trees. Each of us, in our own way, was walking with the dead.

At the end of the walk we stood in a circle and one by one people said aloud the names of the people they were carrying in their hearts. Dozens of names filled the air—those of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, children, aunts and uncles and cousins—so many that it felt like we had a cloud of witnesses hovering all around us, to use that lovely term from the letter to the Hebrews in the Bible.

And to conclude the walk I read a poem called 'Tis a Fearful Thing' by Jewish rabbi Chaim Stern. It goes like this:

Tis a fearful thing  
to love what death can touch.

A fearful thing  
to love, to hope, to dream, to be –

to be,  
And oh, to lose.

A thing for fools, this,

And a holy thing, a holy thing  
to love.

For your life has lived in me,  
your laugh once lifted me,  
your word was gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,  
a holy thing, to love  
what death has touched.'

I suspect all of us walk with the dead at times, especially those who have recently lost someone they love. It happens when a memory comes unbidden or when we see someone on the street who looks achingly familiar or when a familiar scent triggers a wave of recollection. There's a bittersweetness about these experiences that make us want to hold onto them, despite their sadness.

As we grow older, we have more people to remember, but paradoxically I think it can be easier to bear their loss. Maybe it's because the existential reality of our own mortality seeps into our consciousness. This is the way it has always been. We have twin appointments with life: when it begins and when it ends.

So what does the church celebration of All Saints Day mean in this context? I think one lesson is that we should remember the dead. There's an old tradition that we all have two deaths—one a physical death, and the other the last time someone says our name. So part of All Saints Day is to say those names. The Episcopal Church uses the wonderfully old-fashioned term Necrology to describe the list of people who have died in the parish during the past year. In churches across the world today, the Necrology is read.

Here at New Song I'm going to extend the time frame a bit to include all of those we have lost since 2019. So today we remember David Evans, Chuck Coulter, Anne Hulme, Avery Wills, and David Hacker. We remember not only their names, but also what they meant to us.

How the church celebrates this day has changed through the years. It used to be that All Saints Day was followed by All Souls Day, with the first day honoring those of exceptional holiness, while the second honors more ordinary mortals. Over the years these two celebrations have been blended into one, which I think is a good thing. Because who can separate the saints from the ordinary souls, other than God? The saints have their faults, after all, and ordinary people have their moments of saintliness, fleeting though they may be.

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner makes a similar point:

"On All Saints' Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and the whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved

them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own."

I love that last phrase, especially: we remember those who helped us come to some kind of seedy sainthood of our own. Because our sainthood is a little tattered, isn't it? Our halos are crooked and our robes bedraggled. But we are still aspiring saints, and most of us have been helped on our paths by people who don't fit the traditional definition of sainthood either. I think of my friend Jackie, who was my saint of healing, and my friend Mark, who was my saint of Being Lovably Peculiar. You likely have your own saints, too—people who despite their flaws and limitations, pushed and prodded and inspired you into being a better person.

And consider this: God willing, someday our names will be read aloud on All Saints Day, or recalled at family reunions or among friends gathering at a restaurant. We will live in their memories. That might seem morbid, but to me it's a reminder to use our time on this earth well.

And as we remember others, and as we hope that we will one day be remembered, we would do well to remember the need for forgiveness. The veil between the living and the dead is opaque, but it still allows grace and healing to pass through. The old hurts can be forgiven, whether they were committed against us or through our own actions. As we walk with the dead, through the mysterious, miraculous grace of God, healing can happen.

I know all of you have loved ones that you're carrying in your heart this day. Let us take a few moments of silence to remember them, and then if you like, you can say their names aloud.

...

“‘Tis a holy thing, to love what death has touched.” Amen.