

31st October – Halloween

Led by Rev Kate Whyman and Poppy Buttons

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Funeral March’, Chopin (maybe fade in)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKoiWSN_9hs

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to our service this morning. Greetings to everyone here in the church and all who are joining us online today. You are welcome.

As you’ve probably noticed this evening is Halloween. It’s also the start of the ancient Celtic festival of Samain, which continues until tomorrow evening. And if you come from a Christian background then you likely know that tomorrow, 1st November, is All Saints’ Day and the following day is All Souls’ Day. Meanwhile, in Mexico they will be celebrating the more joyful festival of the ‘Day of the Dead’.

And so this morning, in our Unitarian way, we will also mark this time, both as a chance for mourning and an opportunity for celebration, and we’ll consider what this time of year might mean for us. Much of the content of this service has been chosen by Poppy – thank you! She will be leading this service with me and later she’ll also share why this time of year is particularly important for her.

But let us begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. *If you’re at home I invite you to light a candle with me now.* Chalice lighting comes from Rev. Florence Caplow of Urbana, Illinois.

As we kindle this flame, we honour and remember,
Those who have passed into the mystery.
Their brightness lives on in our vision;
their courage lives on in our commitments;
and their love continues to bless the world through us.

Let’s sing.

HYMN 298 (G) Living and dying (piano only – one verse intro)

Sing of living, sing of dying,
let them both be joined in one,
parts of an eternal process
like the ever-circling sun.
From the freshness of each infant
giving hope in what is new,
to the wisdom of the aged
deepened by a longer view.

Open to a deeper loving,
open to the gift of care,
searching for a higher justice,
helping others in despair.
Through the tender bonds of living
in a more inclusive way
we are opened more to suffering
from the losses of each day.

When a special life has ended,
if our lives were interlaced,
we are carried into darkness
by that presence unreplaced.
Standing at the edge of meaning
struggling to be free from pain
wondering if our hearts will ever
dare to fill with love again.

Even when our grief o'erwhelms us
and our aching hearts seem lost,
life is dancing all around us,
even while it counts the cost.
Slowly in our inner darkness,
love may light the saddened will,
giving us a way to see that
life has meaning for us still.

Words by Thomas Jarl Mikelson

PRAYER

Spirit of Love

As we gather in the midst of life, we recognize also that our time here is limited.

May this truly be a blessing. May we recognize that it is the gift of death that gives shape to our lives, energy to our endeavours, and meaning to our existence. May our finite time on earth encourage us to use each moment well, to be awake while we have the chance to be, to live fully and to love fearlessly all of our days.

As we remember those who have gone before us, and look ahead to those who will follow, let us embrace the mystery of life and death and surrender to the dance.

Amen.

Later there will be time to light candles and name those we have lost. But now let's pause to bring into our hearts and minds those beloved souls who are alive today and who are suffering in any way, in sickness or grief, anxiety or fear, oppression or poverty, whether they are known to us, or unknown.

Blessed be them all. Amen

STORY Like a Leaf ...By Thich Nhat Hanh (Poppy)

One autumn day I was in the park, absorbed in the contemplations of a very small, beautiful leaf, shaped like a heart and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling.

The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I am not limited by this form. I am also the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue nourish the tree. So, I don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I will see you again very soon.'"

That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from the leaf.

POEM Autumn by Rainer Maria Rilke

The leaves fall, fall as from far,
Like distant gardens withered in the heavens;
They fall with slow and lingering descent.
And in the nights the heavy Earth, too, falls
From out the stars into the Solitude.
Thus, all doth fall. This hand of mine must fall
And lo! the other one: —it is the law.
But there is One who holds this falling
Infinitely softly in His hands.

CANDLE LIGHTING FOR THOSE WE HAVE LOST

INTERLUDE The Parting Glass

<https://youtu.be/2279XWvN1FE>

ADDRESS – shared by Rev Kate and Poppy

The ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (Sow-in) marked the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter in the northern hemisphere. It is not clear whether Samhain was also associated with remembering the dead, though there are some suggestions that burial grounds were opened at this time. But in modern times this festival has begun to be celebrated by neopagans and wiccans who see it as a time when the veil between the dead and the living is at its thinnest, and communication with the spirits of deceased loved ones easier. Some of our current Halloween celebrations may have their roots in the old Celtic traditions of building bonfires for protection and to ward off evil spirits, and dressing up to trick or hide from them, as well as ancient practices of leaving sweet offerings to appease the gods.

However, the name Halloween comes from the Christian tradition of 'All Hallows Eve', which was the vigil held the evening before the holy day of All Saints'. The practice of honouring saints and martyrs of the Christian faith may have begun as early as the 2nd century, originally in the spring and only later moved to coincide with the Celtic Samhain. But because there simply weren't enough days in the calendar to give each saint their own feast day, a joint tribute gradually evolved into a common day for all the saints in heaven. All

Saints Day (and therefore also Halloween) is generally more important in the Catholic faith, and less so for Protestants.

All Souls Day is a feast of remembrance for our deceased loved ones. For Catholics it is also a time to pray for souls in purgatory so they can enter heaven. And those Protestants who honour the festival in Europe often adorn graves and bring food for the dead.

Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) is a Latin American festival celebrated mostly in Mexico. It has its roots in indigenous Aztec rituals, but when the Spanish colonized in the 16th century, all indigenous festivals were moved to coincide with Catholic ones. The day of the day is a national holiday, though it actually lasts 2 days, and is celebrated on both 1st and 2nd November. November 1 is traditionally set aside to remember the souls of children while November 2 is dedicated to honouring the memories of adults. Tradition holds that one these days the souls can come back to partake in the family's celebrations. Long before sunrise people go the cemeteries to clean graves and tidy around them. Candles are placed and marigolds are used to decorate as their scent is believed strong enough to entice souls back. People cook the deceased's favourite foods and listen to music whilst sharing memories. Children enjoy hearse-shaped chocolates, candy skulls and coffins made of sugar.

'What Halloween means to me', Poppy Buttons

I don't know when my love for Halloween started but it has certainly been my favourite holiday for as long as I can remember. As a child I enjoyed reading fictional stories about witches and ghosts and I recall dressing-up as these things to attend school discos or to go trick-or-treating with friends.

As a teenager my enjoyment of the magical and spooky developed to include a love of the strange and macabre through the writings of Stephen King, the gothic films of Tim Burton and a deep fascination of the supernatural after reading Sir Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers which some of you may be familiar with. Clarke's book included reports on experiences of reincarnation, extra-sensory perception and stigmata amongst other things.

As an adult these things still hold fascination for me and I now keep other traditions of the season such as pumpkin carving and practicing the art of divination. However, one thing that has developed and changed over time is my understanding and appreciation of what I see as the main lesson or message of this holiday.

I recognise the end of October and early November as being a time where life is celebrated through various rituals that recognise and honour death as a natural part of life. Halloween highlights to me a fundamental truth that death is the baseline of life. Death exists alongside and works in cooperation with life, one cannot exist without the other.

This is what I see as Halloween's central message and I endeavour to keep it in mind all year round. By reflecting on the mortality and fragility of life I feel more connected to my inner spirit and find that by doing so my respect and empathy for others deepens. If I am in a quandary about what to prioritise or am unsure how to handle a difficult or challenging situation then I find focusing on my mortality provides perspective like nothing else. It brings into focus what truths matter most to me in the given situation.

In addition to honouring death, it's also traditionally a time of reflection and remembrance. I find being out in nature at this time of the year an intuitive time to do this. As the trees shed their leaves to create a beautiful carpet of oranges, reds and browns I experience a peaceful stillness and feel a deep connection with the mystery of spirit like at no other time of year.

I subscribe to the belief that the veil between this world and the next is thinner at this time and I spend time thinking of those who have touched my life but are no longer of this world, both ancestors and friends. Of course, facing death is not easy and depending on your own unique circumstances it may be hard for you to think in terms of specifics and that is fine. Honouring those who join our life to the past and to the future to me doesn't mean naming individuals as I see us all interconnected through spirit or energy regardless.

Other practices I find natural to undertake at this time of year include a sort of stock-clearance and realignment. I have a good dust and clean of our home before decorating it for the holiday and cleanse the energy within it by using a sage stick to welcome in positive energy. I take time to revisit my hopes and dreams that I have written in a book. I consider whether they have changed or how I am taking steps to bring them to fruition if not.

I really cannot understate how much my love of the spooky and Halloween's message has impacted all areas of my life. In the last few years alone, it influenced my subject of study as I completed a Masters degree in Death, Religion and Culture and it was the date chosen for our marriage and hand-fasting ceremony. I believe today and the two days of festivals following it are the perfect time to reflect on your own life and honour those that connect to yours. Halloween to me is a truly magical holiday whereby people of all ages and backgrounds can celebrate and honour life and death in both playful and serious ways.

2nd HYMN: 193 (P) We laugh, we cry

We laugh, we cry, we live, we die,
we dance, we sing our song.
We need to feel there's something here
to which we can belong.
We need to feel the freedom just
to have some time alone.
But most of all we need close friends
we can call our very own.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a need to be together.
We have our hearts to give,
we have our thoughts to receive,
and we believe that sharing is an answer.*

A child is born amongst us and
we feel a special glow.
We see time's endless journey as
we watch the baby grow.
We thrill to hear imagination
freely running wild.
We dedicate our minds and hearts
to the spirit of the child.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a time to be together.
And with the grace of age,
we share the wonder of youth,
and we believe that growing is an answer.*

Our lives are full of wonder and
our time is very brief.
The death of one amongst us fills
us all with pain and grief.
But as we live, so shall we die,
and when our lives are done
the memories we shared with friends,
they will linger on and on.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a place to be together.
We have the right to grow,
we have the gift to believe,
that peace within our living is an answer.*

We seek elusive answers to
the questions of this life.
We seek to put an end to all
the waste of human strife.
We search for truth, equality,
and blessed peace of mind.
And then we come together here
to make sense of what we find.

*And we believe in life,
and in the strength of love,
and we have found a joy to be together.
And in our search for peace,
maybe we'll finally see:
even to question truly is an answer.
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CLOSING WORDS traditional Samhain Blessing

May the ancestors deliver blessings on you and yours

May the new year bear great fruits for you.

May your granted wishes be as many as the seeds in a pomegranate.

May the slide into darkness bring you light.

May the memories of what has been keep you strong for what is to be.

May this Samhain cleanse your heart, your soul, and your mind!

CLOSING MUSIC 'This is Halloween' by Danny Elfman, Vitamin String Quartet

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flwTMVOoLsQ>