

Lisa was a quirky young girl. She was a close friend of mine when I was growing up in California. When she was a small child she used to like to walk through cemeteries with her older sister. And they would stop at different tombstones and read the person's name and dates of birth and death. But that was not enough for my friend. She would ask her sister how they had died and her sister would make up all sorts of dramatic stories of accidents and rare and horrible illnesses. Oh Lovey - she would say for that was her nickname – “That poor girl died in the influenza outbreak of 1918 she woke up fine but was gone by sundown.”

I grew up in California and all the cemeteries I knew were wonderful beautiful rolling hill garden cemeteries. So as strange as it sounds that someone might like to walk through a cemetery they were beautiful parks, well kept up and quiet.

So when I went to Boston for the first time and saw some of the old cemeteries associated with some of our older congregations I was a little surprised. They are small and crammed full of headstones. It is difficult to walk between the headstones without walking on someone's grave. What I only found out recently is that our some of our Unitarian forbears are the people we can thank for the transition to the garden cemetery.

One of my research sources for this sermon is a podcast called “The Pamphlet” from their episode a Unitarian Death. Listen to it if you get a chance.

“Back in 19th century Boston, where it said that most people, they crossed the street so they didn't have to walk past a cemetery, because they were just these loathsome places for them to go... “

How did we go from graveyards full of scary images to cemeteries places where one might walk with one's sister?

The roots in this transformation of Unitarian thought in around 1825.”

“Of course, the original Puritan burial grounds, they were meant to be places that were upsetting, and disquieting, so of course the most common headstone was the very narrow, Boston granite, that was often inscribed with a skull. The grounds themselves were deliberately unkempt. The whole point of the Puritan burial yard was to make you contemplate future judgment. Of course, inside the Puritan theology, that meant contemplating that not only was your fate completely uncertain, it was awfully unlikely to be a happy one.”

You can see this theology reflected in the way the cemeteries were designed but also in the actual headstones.

Here is a picture of the Kings chapel graveyard – you can see how the headstones are all crowded together and this is after it has been tidied up for the 21st century and for tourists

And here is another Boston graveyard - the grave markers are practically falling all over each other.

Not really welcoming places are they?

And here is a close up of a headstone notice the skull. Early puritan headstones if decorated at all tended to have skulls on them. It certainly added to the sense of scariness. And served to remind one of the threat of hell.

But “Boston in 1825, was kind of exploding, in terms of population. There were just so many people, and with that came a problem that there were no places to put bodies when people had died. There was no space within Boston city limits for that. They were trying to figure out a way to deal with these bodies, the same time as there was a real change in the way that people thought about death, and thought about the body.”

Transcendentalism was beginning to take hold and it was having its impact on how people thought about the relationship between life and death. And remember that transcendentalism had such an emphasis on finding the divine in nature.

Mount Auburn cemetery was actually thought of by Jacob Bigelow. He came up with the idea for Mount Auburn Cemetery as early as 1825, though a site was not acquired until five years later.^[3] Bigelow was concerned about the unhealthiness of burials under churches as well as the possibility of running out of space.

“Bigelow proposed that on a plot called Mt Auburn, which is outside of Boston, near Watertown, that they would build a rural cemetery. It was to be a cemetery in which that Puritan vision of the decay and the mortality would be challenged, and a new chapter reflecting this emergent Unitarian liberal beliefs that death was not the end but a natural part would be represented. He said that the rural cemetery was going to be a place for the living as well as the dead, where family values and the endurance of the family would be celebrated. He wanted to create a place where family members would go and visit their deceased loved ones in a space that felt comforting, in which trees, and flowers, and birds, and animals would be present and provide consolation to the soul.”

And I think he succeeded look at these photos of Mt Auburn

The dell is a water feature a beautiful pond in the center of the grounds

Here is a picture of a tree lined walking path

Even when you see headstones of graves they are set against breathtaking landscaping of trees and bushes

“It is a place where one would want to go where you could commune with nature. A place that didn’t create fear, and did not celebrate death but instead by the very way it was designed communicated the connections between death and life. Mt Auburn was created as this innovative way of trying to unite life and death, and to provide comfort to those who were mourning. “

Mount Auburn cemetery was revolutionary in its time. The establishment of this cemetery solved a problem for Boston – where to bury people when they were running out of space. It also helped to bring into American though a different way of looking at death. The transcendentalists, and Unitarians moved to a place of understanding that death is one part of the arc of life. It is a sad part for sure but it is not something to be scared of and it shouldn't be used to control people through fear. If death is a natural part of life then we should be able to be around it and even celebrate it a bit.

The pagan holiday Samhain is said to be when the veil between this world and the next is at its thinnest and that the connection is most easily felt. Mt. Auburn cemetery was created to live out that close relationship. It was revolutionary at the time. And our liberal Unitarian faith made it possible.

[Altar making activity]

The Ancestors Are Watching

I have a paradoxical relationship to my Ancestors. My family of origin map, or genogram, is complicated. I suppose everyone's is in a way but mine in particular. You see I am adopted, but I was adopted with my twin brother so I grew up in a family with both a blood relation and non-blood relations. And I got all the kinds of questions that adopted kids get my least favorite was "Who is your real family". And I never knew as a young child when folks asked my ancestry - Irish or English or what should I answer

with my parent's lineage or should I answer with my birth parents lineage. To further complicate things I grew up in a house that was built on property that had been owned by my family since my great great grandfather started farming it in 1871. I was surrounded by artifacts of my ancestors who I knew as my real ancestors, but who many people would question. Did you know for example that you can only be a member of the DAR through your bloodline not through your adopted family? So there I was surrounded by a cloud of witness my ancestors but always with this nagging question were they really. So yes ancestors are a little complicated for me.

It did however often feel like there was this cloud of witness, cloud of ancestors surrounding me. There were stories of dangerous travel, and perseverance, or adventure and discovery, of family and stability. All of these stories became like guiding lights for me. Some were positive stories told so that I could learn to be like my ancestors and some were negative reminding of things I should avoid.

I was told about my great great grandfather Oliver who traveled from Montreal Canada by boat to Panama - he then walked across the Isthmus caught another boat and traveled to California to join in the gold rush. That story taught me that it is good to take a risk and that often there is a lot of hard work involved

My father would tell me stories about how the original farm had been bought by my great great grandfather and how he did not want his son also named Oliver to be a farmer he wanted more for him. And so my great

great grandfather worked hard and saved his money and sent his son to school. Again hard work and a commitment to family

My Great grandfather became a doctor. And to do that he had to ride his horse approximately 15 miles over the hill and mountain to catch the ferry that took him to San Francisco where he would study all week and then do a return trip on the weekend. It taught me that commitment to a project is important.

These are some of my ancestors and their stories - the stories that were passed on at least.

One of my supervisors when I was training to become a family therapist once explained his view of ancestors and their effect on us. He said that ancestors are like the stars that we guide our ship by. It is like this you have your parents and they travel with you raising you and protecting you and teaching you how to be. And then one day they are no longer by your side. They have moved from this world to the world of ancestors. But they are not gone. They do not simply disappear. They move from your side to a place in your heart and your mind. They are with you always looking over you and guiding you still. And the stories that you have about them stay with you and you pass them onto the next generation and they then become guides for that generation just as you and I will someday.

Samhain is that holiday that honors the ancestors just as we have honored our ancestors here

Starhawk says it this way:

"In Northern Europe, Samhain (the Celtic term for Halloween, pronounced sow-in as in 'sour') was the time when the cattle were moved from the summer pastures to winter shelter. It was the end of the growing season, the end of harvest, a time of thanksgiving, when the ancestors and the spirits of the beloved dead would return home to share in the feast. Death did not sever one's connections with the community. People would leave offerings of food and drink for their loved ones, and set out candles to light their way home. Those traditions gave us many of our present day customs. Now we set out jack-o-lanterns and give offerings of candy to children—who are, after all, the ancestors returning in new forms. Death and regeneration are always linked in Goddess theology. Birth, growth, death and renewal are a cycle that plays over and over again through natural systems and human lives. Embracing this cycle, we don't need to fear death, but instead can see it as a stage of life and a gateway to some new form of being.

So Samhain is a time to remember and honor those who have died, to celebrate their lives and appreciate their gifts, to tell stories about them to the next generation so their memory will not be lost. "

Samhain was not a holiday that I celebrated as a child. Sure we did the Halloween thing and trick or treated but in my Catholic family the stories were of ghost ghouls and how much candy did we get.

My first year working in a UU church as a DRE the schedule of the year

had been set before I got there so on the appointed Sunday I got up before the children in chapel and talked to them of Samhain, there were a few giggles and one of the adults nicely told me that it was actually pronounce sow-en. Those Celts the spell everything differently.

But I have gawn to deeply appreciate this holiday - this time to appreciate who has gone before me and to consider who will come after me and to recognize that as the Ancestors watch I am living out their hopes and dreams.

Death is never easy but the beauty of Samhain is that it helps us remember the deeper meaning of the holiday: that death is no barrier to love, and every ending brings a new beginning.

In a World without end I know this to be true.