

How We Remember – A Homily for the Day of the Dead

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I didn't know about the hurricane when I planned this service.

I didn't know about it when I chose to read Ray Bradbury's story about wind.

Of the many metaphors about remembering those who have died, wind is one that comes up a lot. Hearing loved ones in the breeze or feeling their presence in the wind. Not the strong winds of a hurricane or the malevolent winds of Bradbury's creation, but rather the gentle breezes that caress our faces and ripple through our hair. It might be called the ancestor's breath or their presence in a thousand winds. But with the incoming storm, I am poignantly reminded of the strength of some of these memories.

Today is our congregation's annual service honoring the Day of the Dead, inspired by the Mexican holiday honoring departed friends and family members with many traditions and gatherings. It is a holiday that is commemorated in many cultures and religious traditions around the world, including the Wiccan holiday of Samhain and the Christian All Saint's Day. But more than just a holiday, this is one of the ways that we remember. There are times built into our calendars and our cycles of the year where we remember those who have died. Day of the Dead and Samhain remember ancestors. The American Memorial Day remembers those who died while in the service. And there are the anniversaries of deaths, commemorated by practices of those who were close to the one who died, like the Jewish tradition of lighting a special candle on each anniversary of a death.

These reminders and remembrances are built into many calendars and cycles of the year and give definite times to go about remembering. Another way that many of us remember is talking with one another and sharing about those that we love. This is both soon after our loved one's death and later in the months and years afterwards. I remember the first death that I witnessed as a hospital chaplain. It was the middle of the night, and no members of his family were present when he died, but his son came about half an hour later, and he wanted to talk. In between expressing his sorrow and shock, he told me many things about his Dad's life and stories about his Dad. For 45 minutes he shared his memories about his father. This was how he needed to start remembering, by sharing with someone else his specific memories.

Remembering may be attached to all manner of emotions, to sorrow and pain over the loss but also could be to anger, remorse, regret, or numbness. You might also feel relief or joy as well. Or all of these at once. Any loss may have a mixture of emotions. Today we simply remember, holding the space for any and all of these feelings. We remember because it's important to

have a time to do just that, remember those we love and affirm that the ways that they are still with us.

There might also be tangible reminders. Perhaps objects or places that we have intentionally attached our memories to, for instance trees and bushes planted in our memorial garden in honor of someone. But more so, it's objects that are links to that person's place in one's life, objects that carry memories with them by the nature of their connection to that person. This is often the way that memory works, getting triggered by a thing or an event or the lack of something. And for the service today, you were invited to bring some of these objects or photographs to share in our ritual. There are many ways that we remember, and today we take the time to weave some of these memories together.