



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Masks

Presented by the VOYAGers
(Very Old Young Adult Group)
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Homily I – Tina Rosales

Today's service is about masks. But since November is nearly upon us, I've been asked to speak about Dia De Los Muertos.

Dia De Los Muertos, its history, its connection to the Catholic religion, and how it's celebrated in Mexico... all great queries and I'm sure a Google search would supply the answers, since if you're asking me you're asking the wrong person.

My name is Tina Rosales and I'm a 4th generation Los Angeles county native, born and raised in Pasadena, 3 quarters Mexican, ¼ Irish, bi-sexual mother of two boys and a step daughter.

I celebrate the Day of the Dead by dipping into my kids candy bags and snatching the good stuff while they are sleeping. I celebrate the lives of those that have passed by remembering them in my daily life. Here are just a few stories that I keep in my heart:

My Grandmother Francisca: She died of a cancer that ravaged her body, but it's not her suffering that I remember, but her spine crushing hugs. She made chili so hot that my father literally cried and she did it with a smirk that reminded him who was boss.

My Great-Grandmother Carolina: A 4 foot tall single mother of two boys. As teenagers, her boys were already 6 foot and full of trouble. She'd wait for them to sneak home in the middle of the night, wait till they fell into a deep sleep and then awaken them with a few bashes of a pillow case filled with bars of soap. My grandfather tells this story with a glimmer in his eye. He likes to remind me that times were different then and single mothers had little options. And with a wink he tells me that her methods may come in handy one day.

My Great Grandmother Rosa: She spoke little English and I spoke little Spanish. Nevertheless, we would sit together and watch episode after episode of "I Love Lucy". We'd laugh and point and laugh some more. At family gatherings we'd exchange a sly smile. We bonded over that crazy red head, language barrier or not.

My Cousin Adam: He was 15. He was trying to get into the back of his friend's truck but the driver would hit the gas a little every time he tried. Stop, go, stop, go. Hilarious right? Adam decided to try to jump in. He bounced off, hit the back of his head on the concrete and was gone.

My Uncle Ignacio: Darn near 60 and played baseball every chance he got. He played the game barefoot; and boy how they teased him. Baseball was his escape from his hectic life that brought him back to the earth. For him I try to remember the things that keep me grounded.

Neil Cortez & Joe Bima both gone at ages far too young and both gone under circumstances that if only they would have left a few minutes earlier, or made a left instead of a right, they would still be with us today.

Michel Fitzgerald, born with a cocktail of birth defects. Was only given two years, but fought for 12. He couldn't speak but had a laugh that would make your heart feel like Christmas morning.

For him and all the others, I remember to light a candle, wiggle my toes in the grass, remind my kids that their friends are idiots and to be the one who takes a minute to think, and to be extra silly just to make someone giggle.

What do you do to keep the spirit of those that have gone alive?

What gifts do you leave to those who must continue without you?

Here are a few words from Steve Jobs, who passed earlier this month:

"Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes ... the ones who see things differently -- they're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. ... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things. ... They push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the people, who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do."

Homily II – Stevie St. John

Halloween gives kids the chance to don any mask they want--to be whomever they'd like for a day. If only it were followed by 364 days when all kids can be who they *are*.

Last year, a young boy was criticized at his school--notably, by his classmates' *parents*--for dressing up as Daphne from Scooby Doo. His mother fiercely defended him on her blog, and that simple act landed her in the media spotlight.

This year, the Times shared the story of Luc. He wanted to be a princess, and his parents weren't sure that was a good idea.

And then there's C.J., whose mother writes a blog I follow. C.J.'s top costume choices include Minnie Mouse and Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. His mother struggled with whether to encourage more "masculine" attire.

Homophobic parents afraid the yellow brick road is a slippery slope? Not at all.

Luc actually has two moms, a lesbian couple. They have no problem with Luc wanting to be a princess. They have a problem with how *others* might treat him and react to their family.

And C.J.? His mom's blog is called Raising My Rainbow, with the subtitle "Adventures in raising a slightly effeminate, possibly gay, totally fabulous son." She's a friend to many a friend of Dorothy's, and she's not afraid of her son rocking some ruby red slippers. Again, her hesitation is all about how *other* people might treat C.J. and his brother.

No wonder they're scared. Bullying directed at children who don't conform to prescribed sex roles is epidemic. Time after time, we hear the stories of children who faced relentless bullying that led to tragic consequences.

But it's not gender non-conforming costumes that need to change--and it certainly isn't the gender non-conforming children. The masks we feel we must wear to hide who we are, even as we should be exploring who that is? Let's change the world that's giving us those masks.

My 7-year-old nephew, Angel, is a rough and tumble boy who loves baseball and cars. He'll be trick-or-treating dressed as a video game character. He has plenty of stereotypically masculine traits--but he's also sensitive and affectionate. He likes pink. He wants to do gymnastics.

His 4-year-old sister, Madison, is quiet and reserved. She's amassed a wardrobe's worth of flowing dresses and sparkling bangles for dress-up play. And this Halloween she'll be dressed as a Disney princess. But

she's also strong. Fiercely independent. Not afraid to say what she's thinking.

They are both so wonderfully complex and unique. I don't want the world to put a mask on them. I don't want Angel to turn up his nose at gymnastics or to play only with his superhero toys.

I don't want Madison's love for princessery to overcome her scrappy tomboy streak. And I don't want her toybox to be filled only with toys branded "for girls" by virtue of paint jobs reflecting a narrow rainbow spanning only from pastel pink to Pepto Bismol.

When Chaz Bono danced into America's living rooms in his Phantom of the Opera costume, he was literally wearing a mask. But the metaphorical mask he'd worn for many years, all through his childhood, was gone and the person inside was finally free to be himself.

As my niece and nephew grow up, I want them to find a world that's changed for the better-- a world where they can shine, whatever hue that takes.

Homily III – Meghann Robern

Take my love, take my land
Take me where I cannot stand
I don't care, I'm still free
You can't take the sky from me

Take me out to the black
Tell them I ain't comin' back
Burn the land and boil the sea
You can't take the sky from me

"The Ballad of Serenity," Joss Whedon

Samhain is the Wiccan New Year, one of Sabbats that doesn't fall on a solstice or equinox. In the Wheel of the Year, it is the time when the Blessed Lady mourns for her dead Lord at the same time she prepares for the rebirth of his incarnation on the Winter Solstice. This juxtaposition of grief and hope is, to me, one of the most poignant fundamentals of the human condition.

A few weeks ago, we flew back to Nashville for my grandmother's ninetieth birthday. One of my cousins had put together a photo album for the celebration, and I took advantage of the opportunity to share this timeline of pictures with Josh. And while we were there to celebrate an amazing woman who is still alive, this time on the couch turned into a memoriam of my grandfather, who passed away when I was thirteen.

The tears came upon me suddenly, and quietly, and as I lead my husband through the album they flowed freely. The very real life he lived with my grandmother has grown into the stuff of legend over the years: a lunch-break elopement after months of completely platonic letter-writing, a telegram during the Korean War stating he had been killed in action instead of merely missing, in peacetime a mysterious top secret assignment to Langley, after retirement running an organic farm well before it was trendy... a storybook love that flourished until the day he died.

I had only been a teenager for a few weeks when it happened, a neurotic bundle of hormones, self-assessment, and unfortunately for me at the time, geekitude. Not nearly as cool then as it is now. When he died I was sad, of course, desperately sad, but more so because everyone else around me had a story to tell about him, and I didn't. Don't get me wrong, I loved to hear them, over and over again, and I still tell them

to this day... but none of them are mine. Did that mean I loved him any less? At the time I remember thinking, "Am I worthy to mourn him the way everyone else is?"

I had a difficult time in school, and it wasn't just because of the "mean girls." My childhood carried words like bossy, obnoxious, and loud around on its record, and I have to admit they were true more than not. I have worked very hard, over many years, to remove or redirect these aspects of my personality, to be more worthy of my various communities, and in most cases, this is a good thing.

There were some people in my life, however -- toxic, manipulative people -- who tried to take away my exuberance. I lived, for nearly a decade, surrounded by words like silly, ridiculous, stupid, waste of time. My ability to find joy in little things, or efforts to follow my bliss, were either repeatedly mocked or deliberately silenced. And I let it happen, until four years ago when I simply could not take it anymore.

I have spent a lot of time since then trying to figure out exactly how I broke free. I had a support system in place, yes, but it had also been there before I escaped. And I think, sitting on the couch with my amazing partner looking at pictures of my Dada, that I finally have my story.

He was not broken by his months of torture as a POW. He loved his wife, and understood that even a storybook romance requires effort to maintain. His sense of honor and commitment to service were so profound that he was selected for service to the President of the United States as a pilot for Marine One. I know all of these things are true, and yet the things about him that have survived the years most clearly for me are his smile, as broad as the horizon, and his laughter, which came freely and loudly and proudly.

I believe it was this memory of his presence, and knowing his story through others, that saved my life four years ago. If finding joy and laughter in as much of the world as possible was good enough for this man, who had every right to be angry and hard... then surely it is good enough for me as well. And so I rescued myself from spiritual oblivion.

This Samhain, as the veil between the world gets thin, like the Blessed Lady I, too, find myself at the juxtaposition of grief and joy. I see pictures of Dada and cry that Prudence will never know his laughter, that he and Josh's dad will never discuss the beauty of God manifest in nature, or that he will never hear me preach. But I am also overwhelmed with joy at my life -- that I refused to settle for anything less than the standards he set in love and life, and that I will no longer wear the masks others try to set upon me. I remember the dead by making them part of me, and using their wisdom to help me follow a path of living justice -- not just for others, but for myself as well.

Take my love, take my land
Take me where I cannot stand
I don't care, I'm still free
You can't take the sky from me