

Sugar Skulls – Kerri Meyer
Unity Church Worship Service
Sunday, October 30, 2011

If Unity happened be in Guanajuato instead of St. Paul, today would have unfolded a little different already. I would still be tired but from having danced in the streets last night until the wee hours, instead of from having the flu. I would have got up early, baked some bread in the shape of bones to leave at the graveside of my grandmother when I went keep vigil tonight. Before leaving the house, I would have freshened the flowers on my household offrenda, I would have straightened up the photos of my grandfathers and put an extra bottle of cervesa from last night next to the photo of my uncle who worked hard all his life and enjoyed cold beer now and again. On the way to church, I would have passed by revelers in skull masks returning home in the morning light. Maybe I'd pick up a paper at the corner shop in which I'd find printed several poems – most amateur, some skillfully wrought -- mocking the prominent leaders of my town and my nation. When I got to church, I would have greeted many of you who are close personal friends, and greeted your children as well, with a skull, made out of sugar, with the letters of your name spelled out in frosting across its forehead. "Eat your death!" I'd say. "Hope it's sweet!"

In Mexico and other Latin countries, Day of the Dead is a rich holiday that blends Roman Catholic influences with more ancient traditions of the native peoples who were colonized by Spain. The colonists, upon first witnessing the colorfully macabre celebration of one's ancestors, condemned it as utterly irreverent. Then, of course, they absorbed it into the church by layering All Saints Day over it. Early ethnologists characterized the holiday as a cultural obsession with death and an irreverent act of bravado in the face of all-too-familiar human mortality. Looking with a careful eye, though, one finds in the Day of the Dead a mix of sacred and profane, applied in exactly the right places. The dead are honored, their graves tended, their spirits fed. The living are reminded not to get too wrapped up in themselves, because underneath the trappings and the painting an inch thick, we are all merely a package of bones. The living are called to make the most of the present moment, life is sweet and so, so short. To those of us for whom Dia de los Muertos is someone else's celebration, it a reminder that sometimes things that look irreverent from the outside actually spring from our holiest human impulses.

I think it's safe to say, though, that Day of the Dead is a partly irreverent holiday. The word "reverence" comes from Latin roots "to stand in fear of". Day of the Dead is irreverent in that there is no fear in it, only gratitude and a sense of

one's own precious and fragile aliveness. What can we learn from this kind of irreverence? Can we learn to hold the sacred a little more lightly?

William S. Burroughs, who maybe never vacationed in Mexico, calls irreverence an American virtue. That's possible, but its virtuousness is not a given. In my experience, irreverence can come in three flavors, ignorant, bitter and, I say, reverent. Examples of the ignorant kind include might include the yoga mat in the Gaiam catalog which features a large-format imprint of the Buddha's face, which in Buddhist cultures must always be displayed higher than our eyes and never come in contact with the human foot, the basest part of the body. Sacrilege is yours for \$29.95. Or it might look like kid from Boston who, cursing and yelling at his friends, skateboarded through the holocaust memorial, the kid whom Rob grabbed by his hoodie and served with a quick and really intimidating homily on reverence. There's ignorant irreverence and it's ugly. And then there's blasphemous irreverence, which is uglier still. Its irreverence coupled with meanness, still shaped like skulls and bones, but bitter in the mouth. I could rant about blasphemy – and I believe it, even as a religious liberal – for a while, but I won't, because I don't think the word is interchangeable with irreverence.

I believe in reverent irreverence. What is that? If only you could sit in our staff meetings or hang out in between Luke's and my cubicles, you'd have a thousand examples. I don't want to alarm anyone if they don't know this already, but we are an irreverent lot. Oh, the things that come out of our mouths. But I don't worry about us, because underneath the flip puns and shallow jokes you'll find a deep love and respect for the Holy. The weight of ministry presses on a person so heavily that the only thing we can do in response is to hold it lightly. Reverent irreverence is maybe a bit like jazz. My understanding is that the best jazz musicians aren't the ones who skip right over form, but who learn the rules so they can break them beautifully. To be reverently irreverent, the reverence has to come first. It's like how we all know that it's not okay to make jokes about cancer. Unless your life has been devastated by cancer. If you're the one who's lost her eyebrows or have had to post to Facebook that hooray, your beloved has finished round three of radiation, then you have the right and the power and our blessing to say whatever you need to say about the disease, including outright, irreverent comedy. To claim your own reverent irreverence, you have to pass through the valley of awe and fear, through the holy light and sacred shadows on your knees, in order to earn the right to stand up, look back and laugh.

We need irreverence to survive this life. Without it, despair comes knocking. Religious liberals have needed more than our share of irreverence, so that we could become who we are. Unitarian Universalists operate out of a certain lack of reverence. It's part of our religious heritage. We might even consider taking as a creed Twain's words: Irreverence is the champion of liberty and its only sure defense. We are a faith of prophets, by which we mean we speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power requires a certain LACK of awe and fear of worldly power. What if Servetus and Channing and Emerson had revered the church and its doctrine such that they hadn't asked the questions that shaped our faith? I cherish our heritage of irreverence and want to cultivate and sustain it in our own lives. But I want this irreverence to be well placed, and bound to an awareness of what is truly sacred.

I believe in reverent irreverence. We can familiarize ourselves with its possibilities by practicing on ourselves. What would happen if we laughed at ourselves a little more often? Took ourselves a little less seriously. It might go some distance toward undoing Unitarians' reputation as people who believe they are too good to be damned by God. When you don't come off as being impressed with yourself, it's a lot easier to make friends. Have you ever experienced that sweet gratitude when someone defuses a tense or awkward moment – maybe

one about race or about money – with a little irreverent humor? Just last week, in Boston, I had this experience at Plimoth plantation where we chaperones, with the help of the ticketing staff and the introductory film, drill into our youth's heads that the Native people who work at the museum deserve respect and should be able get through a workday free from ignorant irreverence. Sadly, it's a necessary admonition, because the norm is that visitors come loaded with stereotypes and insults to spare. Some of the native staff seem steeled against visitors' irreverence, prepared, almost waiting for us to blaspheme their story, their very being. Our Unity youth get so nervous sometimes, so afraid that their ignorance will come out as irreverence, that they leave the Wampanoag homesite after a few minutes and head for the English plantation right away. This year, there was a man on staff, I wish I knew his name, a native American descendent of the eastern First Nations, who handled this nervous tension beautifully. Sensing our kids' earnest anxiety, he started telling jokes. First, he told jokes about himself and his porcupine headdress. He told gentle jokes about his people. When he learned we were from Minnesota, he told jokes about the Vikings. It disarmed us all, completely, and we talked about the life of the Wampanoag people for nearly an hour, free from fear. Reverently irreverent, we met one another.

We can laugh at ourselves and bless one other with this irreverence. And what would happen if we laughed more at our faith, laughed a little more at the work we need to do to fix up our sad sweet mess of a world? Maybe we would feel better if we all gave each other a really big skull with the word “humanity” written across its forehead and all share in its sticky sugariness. Can we even take what we do a little less seriously? If we weren’t so darned earnest about being do-gooders, we might actually get new and different good things done. Let me try to explain by talking briefly about something serious: immigration reform. It’s kind of ironic that Dia de los Muertos is really taking off here in the U.S. I can’t think of Day of the Dead, without seeing in it another example of American consumerism claiming a culture and rejecting its people. We’ll buy your precious sugar skulls but we don’t want you picking our sugar beets so you can feed your precious children. That lack of reverence is the bitter flavored variety. I am proud of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to immigration reform. It’s our reverence for each person’s inherent worth and dignity that has fueled that commitment. And we are certainly reverent about it. Righteous, even. Is there space in our struggle for something other than reverent righteousness? Space for that carnival-esque spirit of turning order on its head. I ask, because I’ve seen some of our very informative and earnest Standing on the Side of Love videos out

there on YouTube, some of which even have in excess 440 hits. They are heartfelt and grounded in truth and a little too boring to watch, apparently. It makes me wonder if there is a there a different doorway into this conversation? One that's easier to get through, open to more people? I ask because I've also seen clips of Stephen Colbert, the czar of irreverence, Colbert who participated in the United Farm Workers "take our jobs" campaign. Colbert took up an invitation to U.S. citizens do the jobs that immigrant workers do and then showed up, in character, to testify in a congressional hearing on agriculture and labor. Oh, the man says things we would none of us say. He mixes earnestness with a huge dose of irreverent humor, saying things no Unitarian would dare say. He pleads with congress to reform our labor laws if only so he, Colbert, never has to pick another bean in his life, because as it turns out, most soil is at ground level and bending all day is brutal. Why lift Colbert's irreverent testimony up? Mostly because his YouTube video has 1,460,000 views and his message is the same as ours. I hope that when we show up in Phoenix, we show up armed with a reverent irreverence that holds the lives of our neighbors as worthy of awe and the systems in which they are caught up as less than worthy of our fear. I hope Phoenix looks a lot more like life throwing a street party than a vigil at the tomb of American. In the realm of justice work, reverent irreverence would look like

exuberantly creative solutions, joyfully subversive action, raucously honest dialogue and a whole lot more laughter.

The big question remains to be asked: what about irreverence toward God? I'd argue that the Unitarian and Universalist saints whom we revere most rarely indulged in actual irreverence toward God. Maybe I wouldn't recognize it, because as Twain says irreverence is how YOU act toward MY God. There isn't a word, he writes, for how I act toward your God. Maybe irreverence toward God wouldn't have occurred to our ancestors, what with our roots deep Judeo-Christian tradition. Just not worth the risk if you're grounded in the image of a stern God, one who judges and smites, one who demands our reverence, or else. In the gospels, Jesus weeps and rages but never laughs. Other faith traditions are grounded in laughter. The Egyptian creation myth says the universe was laughed into existence. That really changes things! The Apaches say that God created people who could walk and talk, but wasn't satisfied with them until they were given laughter. Now, said the creator, you have earned the privilege of life. I didn't know until now, but other folks entire religion is sourced in laughter.

I crave this holy laughter. I need to be able to poke some fun and roll my eyes in disgust at God. The God I know can handle my doubt-filled mockery.

because even in my own mouth it still tastes sweet. I love God and think that the only thing worthwhile is to be God's friend. Anthropologists know something about friendship: it has space for irreverence inside its bonds. Teasing is a measurable characteristic in human relationship. In the most distant relationships, mockery is taboo. In many cultures, relations between leaders, between distant kin, are characterized by formulaic teasing. Social scientists know that a bond of kinship or friendship is of the most intimate variety when teasing is a regular and unregulated, a loving and necessary part of the relationship. That's the kind of friendship I want with God: the, I-thou bond, the kind where we love one another too dearly to let one another take ourselves seriously. How else can I live in God's world so holy and so broken and at times, so utterly absurd? Frost says it so much better than I have in his short, short poem: "Forgive, oh Lord, my little jokes on thee and I'll forgive thy great big joke on me."

May we have the courage to offer one another the skulls and bare bones of truth, but let them be made of sweet sugar. Let our irreverence be reverent.

May we have more laughter, more life, abundantly. Blessed Day of the Dead.

Amen.