

What Is Remembered, Lives

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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I never had much experience of grandparents. By the time I was 2 I had just one living grandparent, Hi-hey, so named by my brother who used to want to talk to her on the phone, and used the phrase hi-hey to communicate it. In my memory she was always old and on the verge of collapse. I did not encounter her as a young woman, or as a decisive person making decisions for the good of her family. I only experienced her through the eyes of a 9 year old before she passed. I delighted in her presence, in her radiant kindness, but I only had so much to go on when I think about her. I don't have the full picture at all. My mother does. My aunt does. My uncle does, but I only have bits and pieces of the last years.

What is remembered, lives, but memory is a funny thing, and so is perception. We know from living through our childhoods that memories don't always align. Things that affected us deeply and moved us and perhaps even changed the trajectory of our lives go unnoticed by others. Things that someone said that were very meaningful are not even remembered by that same person. Perception and memory are deeply personal. It is not objective, but it is subjective in a way that is beautiful in a way. In modern literary theory there's this idea of the death of the author – that the author's intentions don't matter, because the death of the author is the birth of the reader – what counts is the readers experience of the text. In a similar way, what counts in people's memories of us might not be what we think about in our lives – it most certainly will not be our highlight reel. And vice versa. We only have one set of eyes and one brain through which we might see. We can't change that. So, when I say in celebration of the Dia de los Muertos, that what is remembered, lives, I am making a very particular point. What lives on after us in memory lives on in other people – other flawed observers, in misquotations, in frail human form, but that does not diminish the force of memory and life. Far from it, it means that our path to life eternal is dependent on other human beings.

When we die, we are not simply removed from this plane. If we have lived lives of virtue and hope and mercy and truth, then we have also probably affected other people. Those people then go on to affect others, and before you know it, you've had an impact on others that you've never met. It's like a ripple in a pool – they radiate out, bouncing off one another, making other ripples that go out. And that is because as human beings we were never made for isolated existences, but for community. That community is built on a web of interconnectedness and meaning making that is filled with difficulty, because, again, we are human. And because we are human we are always able to learn, to grow, to be impacted in surprising ways by those who are here, by those who are not, and by those who have been impacted by those who are no longer here. This to me is what scripture means by a great cloud of witnesses surrounding the church. We are not alone. We are being impacted not just by autonomous actors, but those people come from somewhere. They have grandmothers and fathers and uncles and cousins. They are the people they are today not just because of the living, but also because of the dead. The dead speak through us and our actions in the here and now.

Death is the thing that all of us will experience. We usually first experience it when we lose a loved one, but usually death makes an appearance throughout our lives, and of course, we are promised that we too will not get away from experiencing death. I included a reading from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in this reading because I think it reflects all of our conscious realizations about death and the fears that can engender for us. “Enkidu is dead. Must Gilgamesh be like that too?” Am I going to die too? Dying isn't just about the actual fact that we're dead, of course, but it's also about what sort of existence, if any, there is after we die. Of course, we don't know anything about our life after death for sure, and that in and of itself can be a source of anxiety. But the dead are not really gone from us. As the new star wars film's trailer so eloquently puts it: “no one's ever really gone.”

If anything *Dia de los muertos* challenges us to be more at home with the idea that the dead use us as their mouthpieces, that the ancestors have more of a role to play than we normally give them credit for. That we are only ourselves through our interactions with and our learning from others. It is a call to interdependence and to a spirituality that embraces the stories of those who have gone before. If we let it, that can be a powerful motivator for understanding our role in the here and now and just what roles we will have available to us after we die. Death is real and complex, and so is life after

death. That is not a new thought, but it does mean that our life, our death, our life beyond death will all be unmistakably human – inexorably linked to our frailties and our glories, our loves and our losses. Blessed Be.