

They Are with Us Still (Samhain)  
Sunday, October 29, 2023  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

On the pagan wheel of the year Samhain is a cross quarters holiday approximately halfway between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. It is the pagan new year.

In the book Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions Steven W. Posch writes, "The Cross-Quarters, the holidays in between solstices and equinoxes, all have traditional door rituals associated with them. At Samhain, of course, the trick-or-treaters come to the door and we give them something to eat. At Beltane, the unnamed presences return to the door and leave May baskets full of flowers. So there's a balance struck: at Samhain a gifting out; at Beltane, return gifting in the other direction.

Posch continues, "I have another favorite door ritual for Samhain, an old Irish/Scottish tradition that kids love. Just at sunset on Halloween, we rush to the back door, throw it open, and send out the Old Year. We slam the door closed and lock it, 'to lock in the luck.' Then we rush to the front door, throw it open and welcome the New Year (usually scaring a few trick-or-treaters in the process). We grab horns and noisemakers and run through the whole house making a cacophonous racket to scare away the nasties."

Until I read that I had forgotten that among the Halloween paraphernalia of my childhood were metal noise makers. One was shaped like a maraca and was shaken. Another had a top that pivoted around the bottom as it was turned making a whirring noise.

At Samhain the veil between the land of the living and the land of the dead is said to be thin. Lanterns are set out to guide the beloved dead home.

Again, in the book Circle Round: Raising Children in Goddess Traditions Starhawk writes, "In my house, we celebrate Samhain with an Ancestor Feast.

"On the day of the feast, each of us prepares some special food that our ancestors liked. My ancestors are Ukrainian Jews, so I often make a beet soup called borscht. Other people in the house have ancestors from England, Poland, West Africa, Germany, Holland, France and many other places, so we have quite a variety of things to eat for dinner.

"Before we eat, we take a little bit of food from each dish and put it on a plate. We put the plate on the altar, in front of the pictures of our beloved dead, and light the candles. We speak to them.

*"Ancestors, Beloved dead, You who gave us our lives, This food is for you. We give back to you. We remember you, And so you live on. Join us now. Feast with us. Visit us in our dreams. We love you. Blessed be."*

"After dinner, we sit back in comfortable chairs near the altar, and each person tells a story about ancestors. The story might be about someone in their family – or a traditional myth or folktale of their people. We pass around photos of our beloved dead and talk about them or play tapes of their voices."

Usually at Samhain as I prepare the sermon, I think most of the beloved dead, our family members and friends now gone. This year I might have thought that this would be particularly so as tomorrow will be the one-year anniversary of my mother's death. But that is not where my mind is most focused this year. Instead, my mind is with the nasties that we seek to banish from our houses with a cacophony of noise.

My mother is dead a year and of natural causes in her eighties after I had her in my life into my sixties. But the deaths that are haunting me this year are the ones from Israel and Gaza that have ceaselessly been reported to me through my radio. Fortunately for me, I don't watch television, because the radio reports were graphic enough for me without showing me pictures.

On October 11 Fatma Tanis reported for NPR, "... what happened last weekend was unprecedented in its scale and coordination.

"Militants attacked Israeli communication towers with improvised explosives, they breached the Gaza-Israel border fence within minutes and assumed control of several Israeli communities. They paraglided over the border and gunned down civilians at a music festival.

" Hamas killed at least 1,200 people in the attack and took dozens hostage, including women, children and the elderly — all while Israel's military was late to respond. It was the deadliest attack Israel has seen in decades.

"In retaliation, Israel has laid siege to Gaza with hundreds of airstrikes that have killed at least 1,000 Palestinians and displaced more than 200,000 people. It has cut off electricity, food and fuel supplies," [Why Hamas and Israel reached this moment now — and what comes next | Iowa Public Radio.](#)

That is more than nasties. Those are atrocities.

Judith Lewis Herman, an American psychiatrist, researcher, and teacher, says, "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable.

"Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told." These more than nasties will not be banished.

It is these "ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told" who are haunting me now. And am I brave enough to hear the bloody, gory, horrible stories of their deaths? Part of me wants to bring out the noisemakers and drown out those stories. But folk wisdom tells us that we will not be rid of these ghosts until we tell their stories. And these ghosts have a long history of stories of trauma. These stories did not begin this month.

No. The Jews have a history of trauma rooted in pogroms and the Holocaust. The Palestinians have a history of trauma rooted in the Nakba, their permanent displacement, and generations of living as refugees. Nakba means disaster, catastrophe or cataclysm. Holocaust comes from the word for the Jewish sacrificial offering that was burned completely on the altar, thus complete destruction.

The dead of today's war cannot be put to rest without confronting the current trauma and the traumas of the past. The long conflict between Israel and those who say they are fighting for the Palestinian cause will not be resolved until both sides are truly able to hear all of the others' story.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Nelson Mandela authorized, and Bishop Desmond Tutu chaired after apartheid ended in South Africa was about all sides publicly telling their stories. Victims from various parties and perpetrators from various parties all came before the commission. People disagree about how effective the commission was, but the effort was made. People told their stories and some, at least, from all sides listened, [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(South Africa\) - Wikipedia](#).

As Herman said, “Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told.”

I was fascinated to see a book for sale on Amazon that I have not yet bought or read, but it looked like an attempt to tell the stories. Its title is [Love Israel, Support Palestine](#). It is by Nir Avishai Cohen. The blurb for the book reads in part, “Nir is a different kind of Israeli, one who cannot be ignored. In his book, he confronts the reader with his Israeli identities: his Jewish heritage as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors, his military identity as an officer who takes up arms and defends his country, and his humane identity as a citizen fighting for human rights and the rights of his Palestinian neighbors,” [Love Israel support Palestine: An Israeli story: Cohen, Nir Avishai: 9798387050152: Amazon.com: Books](#). It sounds like he is telling his story and is open to hearing the Palestinian story.

But right now, no one is listening to stories. Both sides are out fighting monsters. Those monsters will not be seen as human until their stories are heard. Is there any hope of that? I might think not, but on one of the pages of the website for the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry is a piece by Václav Havel, Czech author, statesman, and poet, last President of Czechoslovakia and first President of the Czech Republic that speaks to this. The piece is titled, “Hope.”

Hope by Vaclav Havel. “Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t. Hope is not a prognostication—it’s an orientation of the spirit. You can’t delegate that to anyone else. Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism. It’s not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now. In the face of this absurdity, life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope,” [Hope-by-Vaclav-Havel-and-A-Prayer-for-the-Dispossed.pdf \(uutrm.org\)](#).

It is Samhain, and the dead are haunting me. They will not be banished. But as war rages, I cling to hope, a hope that someday stories will not just be told but will also be heard, and the monsters will become seen as fellow humans, and the first steps will be taken toward peace.

On Wednesday night I thought this sermon was written and except for the closing prayer it ended here. I would have Thursday to make final edits, prepare my notes and practice it before recording it Friday morning. But then I woke up Thursday morning to the news of another mass shooting, this time in Lewiston, Maine. It is one of more than 500 mass shooting in our own country so far this year. We know the stories. Someone was fired. Someone’s partner broke up with them. Someone feels bullied. Someone has become convinced that the Jews, the Blacks, the Muslims, the Hispanics, the immigrants are responsible for their and the world’s troubles. The ghosts of those killed here should be haunting us

and haunting our legislators, but we seem to have been all too successful in drowning them out with other noises. Perhaps we should put markers for all those killed this year or in the last five years or in the last twenty years on the capitol lawns of all our states and of the nation. But I would not put “rest in peace” on those markers. Something is required of us before we can say those words. We need to do some things. We need to expand our mental health services. We need to reform our gun laws. We need to address hate speech and keep it from escalating into incitement to violence. Our legislators may need to actually do most of this, but we citizens need to demand it. We have a responsibility to the dead. They are with us. They demand it of us.

Let us pray using words from UU minister, Amy Petrie Shaw.

For all who die in war

We lift up our hearts

For all who live in suffering in the aftermath of violence

We lift up our hearts

For all who give their lives in smoke and flame

We lift up our hearts

For all who go on in honor of the dead

We lift up our hearts

For all who have served

We lift up our hearts

For our country and our world

We lift up our hearts

For a planet that will find peace

We lift up our hearts

For the young and the innocent

We lift up our hearts

For the weary and war torn

We lift up our hearts

For those who would pray

We lift up our hearts

For those too angry to cry

We lift up our hearts

For all of us, for the many names of God

We lift up our hearts

We lift up our hearts

Shanti, shalom, peace, sa laam.

Amen.