



### **Children's Story**

"A Gift for Abuelita – Celebrating the Day of the Dead" Nancy Luenn.

### **Sermon**

I wonder if Abuelita understood the legacy she was leaving as she taught her granddaughter to braid and to make tortillas and to weed the garden? I wonder if Abuelita knew that her time was coming and she wanted to be sure that the cord of love between her and Rosita was as strong as it could be so that Rosita would be able to hold onto that love even when Abuelita was gone. I suspect that when her illness set in, she knew that her death would be the first significant loss that Rosita would experience and I wonder if she worried about her granddaughter and how she would handle the loss?

Abuelita had likely participated in the Day of the Dead for as long as she could remember. She probably stood beside her mother and made food and gifts for the ofrenda and helped to light the candles and the incense. She probably welcomed relatives into her family's home as they brought their gifts and she probably helped her family wash the graves of loved ones and then picnicked in the cemetery and listened to the stories of those her family had loved, many of whom she may not have ever met. In this way, she learned not only who her ancestors were, but also who she was.

I wonder how old she was when she experienced her first significant loss? I bet that those rituals became filled with a new meaning for her and that the same acts of preparing gifts and food and washing the tombstones and picnicking in the cemetery felt very different because these very familiar rituals could now touch the grief in her heart.

I wonder when she learned that the grief never goes away? It will change, transform, hurt less, and sometimes even be forgotten, but then those moments come and you remember, "Oh yes, I have this loss that I am carrying, and it continues to change me." I imagine that as the years went on, every Day of the Dead was layered with new losses for Abuelita, and as she prepared her gifts and made the food and lit the candles and washed the tombstones and ate beside them and listened to and told her own stories, she could peel back the layers, as one grief touched upon another and yet another. That was why she was so grateful for rituals like the Day of the Dead. She could count on there being some time for her to recognize the losses, rather than hold them inside, in loneliness, without anyone else knowing. It helped to know she was not alone. Everyone carried grief like she did.

I remember one day visiting my grandmother in the nursing home and she said to me, "Krista, I'm losing my body, bit by bit, and at least once a month, I lose someone I know. I'm losing track of my losses, and soon I'm going to lose my own life." Then she laughed and said, "But I've figured out that if I talk too much about my losses I become a downer, and then nobody will visit an old woman like me! So I don't try to think about it too much."

My grandmother lived in a nursing home established by the church she belonged to. This meant that everyone in the nursing home was someone she knew. Because they all came from the same church, the nursing home made arrangements for all the worship services, including the funerals, to be broadcast live through the cable system so the residents could stay connected to their community. Sometimes I would visit her and there would be a funeral of one of her friends on TV, and she could see their families file into

the pews, and watch the casket be wheeled to the front, and listen to the sermon. During the singing she would ask me to open her hymnal and hold it for her and she would sing along in her faltering alto.

We sat together with the unspoken truth that someday in the not too distant future her funeral would be the one broadcast, and her friends would sit in their rooms and watch us as we filed into the pews and honored her life and grieved her death. Truth be told, I think she really liked it! She liked knowing that all her friends would be able to watch her funeral. It made her feel known. She had a place.

She also liked being able to take notes about what she wanted and didn't want for her funeral. It was no small coincidence that we often received instructions for her funeral shortly after she'd watched one of her friend's funerals on TV. The nice thing about it was that there would be no surprises. Just as Rosita's family knew exactly what to do when the Day of the Dead rolled around, we all knew exactly what would be asked of us when she died. Her approaching death was already part of our life and it was normal.

One of the things she did in her final years was to be sure to tell us her stories. There were things she wanted us to know. She told us stories about her childhood and her years as a young unmarried woman. She told us stories about each of her children when they were young. She told us stories of her parents and brothers and sisters. They weren't always easy stories to tell, but that was part of why they were so important. She was teaching us, just as Abuelita taught Rosita to braid and make tortillas and weed the garden, just as Rosita's family was teaching her when they told the stories as they picnicked in the cemetery.

So I ask you, each of you, no matter how old or young you are, what stories do you need to tell and to whom? None of us knows when we are going to die. It could be a generation from now; it could be tomorrow. So, what do you need them to know, because it is highly likely that someday every one of us will have our name lifted up during a worship service like this one by someone who is grieving, who wishes for your spirit to be called into this place. Songs will be sung and prayers will be prayed and stories will be told so that those who miss us and grieve us can feel a little closer to us and remember our love. We will be the breath of the ancestors, we will be in the rustling trees and the woods and the grass and the rocks. We will be in the voice of the wailing child and the breast of the mother who nurtures it. So what stories do you need to tell?

And what stories do you need to hear? I needed to hear my grandmother's stories, not just to know her, but also to know myself and to know my place in this world. What stories do you need to hear? I hope you will find a way to ask for them so that when you are the one grieving, that you will remember how to listen for the one you have lost and to find them in the beating of your own heart. When we allow ourselves to come close to our grief, to embrace it, then we can be open to the embrace of love that is life itself.

On the Day of the Dead, when the gifts have been placed on the altar and the graves have been cleaned and the food has been eaten, in many places the streets begin to fill. You will find men and women and children wearing elaborate costumes and there is music and singing and dancing. Around the world people are dancing with death and embracing life.

Here at Emerson we have our own unique form of this march. Every year, we invite all our children to come in their Halloween costumes and every one of them is given a UNICEF collection box. If there is anything that calls us to embrace life it is our children! So get out your change purses and get ready ... and may the spirit be with you.