

JOAN'S OBITUARY – UUCM OCT. 31, 2010

We are called here, today, to become more aware of death. What it is. And what it isn't.

Today I know what death is in a deeper/broader way than I knew it a few weeks ago. You see... I died on Oct. 1.

One morning last week, I had just gotten up to speed on the exercise bike at the gym, when an acquaintance, who knew I was raised in Colorado, walked into the weight room, rushed over and threw her arms around me. This unsettled my exercise momentum. In fact, it unsettled my sense of being alive in a material body at all.

She pointed to the front page of the Marin IJ, where my name appeared in white ink on the black background of the obituaries. Joan Nelson. From Colorado. Age 69. The photo, inside, was of a young girl, who could very well have been I. (And I can pass for 69.) As I got back up to speed on the bike and went on with my life, I thought, what an ordinary name I have. I've always wondered if I (to say nothing of other people) would see myself differently had I taken back my birth name. There aren't many Joan Antonia Astaritas dying in Marin.

My life went on as usual, for a couple of days, until my next door neighbor (with whom I have a distant "Hi. Nice day!" kind of relationship) girded her loins and walked over to me working in the garden in front of my house. She said the neighbors had seen the obituary and started talking to one another about my death. They started clucking: "I didn't know she was sick." "It seems so sudden." "I saw her carrying in groceries just the other day." And, "Wonder if her kids will list the house for sale in this down market." And worst of all: "Wonder if we're invited to the funeral. Does that crazy church of hers even have funerals?"

I did not know the Joan Nelson who died. And I extend my sincere condolences to her loved ones.

And I thank her, in a really deep way, because her death has, indirectly, given me a deeper, wider appreciation of my own being-ness, in a body, with a working mind and heart...whether I'm carrying groceries or telling my true-life story up here on Halloween, I am newly, and keenly, aware of the clarity of reality that comes from reading my own obituary and hearing my neighbors' comments about it.

As I walked into my house, the door looked as it had when I saw it the first time, with the real estate agent. I saw my beloved keepsakes as if I were seeing them for the last time. As I looked at the dining room table, my mind's ear heard the symphony of conversations that have played out there.

Imagining myself dead, my mind was freed of attachment to even my most treasured possessions. I tasted the joy of letting go. Letting go of my psychological attachment to my mother's cut glass deviled egg plate. The photos of my three dead husbands.

Given that you probably won't read your obituary in the news, I hope you will respond to the call of today's service to deepen your sense of your place in the cycles of our shared collective life and death.