

*“For a resident of New York, Paris or London death is a word that is never uttered because it burns the lips. A Mexican, on the other hand, frequents it, defies it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it, it’s one of his favorite toys and his most permanent love.”*

**Octavio Paz**

## **Day of the Dead**



In many cultures death is a taboo subject not often discussed. It is sometimes feared, sometimes dreaded but rarely is it embraced as it is in Latin American cultures during the celebration known as El Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, which occurs the first two days of November.

The Catholic Church issued an edict in the 8<sup>th</sup> century that decreed November 1<sup>st</sup>, All Saint’s Day. A couple of hundred years later they named November 2<sup>nd</sup>, All Soul’s Day. This is an example of the attempt to catholicize and Christianize the beliefs and festivals of ancient pagan religions, in this case the Celtic and Druid celebration of Samhain. These societies believed the veil thinned and ancestors returned to visit the earth. They threw lively parties and burnt offerings and did rituals to honor their Gods as well as their ancestors.

Too much fun and dancing around naked for the church to condone so they threw saints and souls into the mix.

When Cortez arrived in Mexico in 1519 the Aztecs, Toltecs, Incans and Mayans were thriving. The Spaniards discovered that the indigenous people of Mexico and Central America celebrated their year-end at the close of the harvest and performed sacrificial rites to their Gods and the departed, much like the ancient peoples of the British Isles. The Aztecs paid homage to the Lady of the Dead, Mictecacihuatl using burnt offerings and dancing in costumes of animal skins in a way very similar to Samhain rites. Aztecs put on lively parades dressed in colorful costumes and danced with many ancestral objects including human skulls which the Catholic Spaniards found a sacrilege and saw it as mocking death. They tried to convince the native people to accept All Saint’s Day and All Soul’s Day as time to honor the dead in a more reverential and mournful way, through prayer and reflection. Though Catholicism as a whole was rapidly spreading rapidly throughout this region by both voluntary and forceful means, the Aztecs and other native people were not willing to give up these rituals that they had been practicing for more than 4000 years, long before they were even known as Aztecs.

Despite Roman Catholicism’s best efforts, The Day of the Dead is still widely celebrated throughout Latin American cultures today. At this time of year the dead are still believed to pierce the thinned veil and return to the earth plane to visit loved ones. Families often spend the day going to cemeteries to tend to their loved one’s graves. They clean them and adorn them with colorful flowers and decorations and leave offerings. They try to maintain a happy attitude at any time they are near someone’s grave as they believe that the tears of the living make the deceased one’s path to the afterlife slippery and difficult to traverse.



Celebrants also create elaborate altars, rich in symbolism, to honor the dead. At the center of the altar are often pictures of deceased family members to be honored and remembered. Skulls are still an important symbol of this holiday but for the most part sugar skulls are used to represent the transience of this life and the belief of the soul living on in the afterlife. They are often elaborately decorated as a nod to the vitality of life. Tamales, alcoholic beverages, or a loved one's favorite food are offered to entice the spirits over for a visit. Sweetbreads in

the shape of bones are placed on the altar dusted with sugar which is meant to represent the soil. An array of Monarch Butterflies made of paper or silk can often be seen at the crown of an altar. The Monarchs migrate back to Mexico around this time of year and are believed to be the souls of loved ones returning for a visit. Lanterns and paper cuts made of tissue represent the wind and the fragility of this mortal life. Dog figurines are placed on altars to be used as guides for the returning spirits and candles are lit to show them the way with the scent of flowers to sweeten the journey.

Embracing death is foreign to many cultures but death is the one guarantee that life offers us. To accept this and celebrate it can be very empowering. In the words of Hurley from *Lost*, "I want to look death in the face and say, 'what up, man?'" Down the road death waits for us all but what a beautiful, scenic and interesting road it is. Stop and see the world's largest ball of twine or check out a roadside carnival that you come across. I don't know if I'll meet death at a stop light for a drag race or if it will set up cones and close a lane so I'm forced to exit at some point but until then, I'm going to enjoy the wind in my hair and the sun on my face. It's often easier to consider our own death vs. the death of someone we love but that is the ultimate reminder to not leave things left unsaid and to slow down for a second just to soak in the presence of someone we love in our lives and never ever take the simple pleasure of enjoying a meal together or sharing a laugh, for granted. The same astral cues that told our forefathers that it was time to celebrate those who have crossed over are still overhead today, the perfect symbol for this immutable truth that has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. Deny it or celebrate it, it still doesn't change it. Might as well use it as an excuse to revel! It's also a good state of mind to get into before the holidays when sometimes it's easy to forget how lucky we are and how important it is to slow down and look around once in a while. The Darker Half of the Year has begun. It's a time for resting from the activity of the harvest of our lives, enjoying what those efforts have brought, and relishing some stillness as even nature reminds us that the birth and death cycle is inevitable but the emergence of springtime is sure to follow. Until then-Remember. Honor. Celebrate. – All of the things that mean the most to you.

Until next time,

Lisa Burkhart