

Celebrating life through Day of the Dead

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...nic holiday
...e Muertos, a
...o honor loved
...gone but not
...ten

Norma Martinez
Clackamas Print

...than 500 years ago,
...Spanish conquistadors
...to what is now Mexico,
...fought natives prac-
...ritual that seemed to
...ath.
...a ritual the indigenous
...ad been practicing for
...3,000 years in which
...ored those gone but not
...a. *Dia de Muertos* is a
...n the ancient and mod-

ern embrace in Latin culture. It is called All Souls' Day in English, but it is translated literally as "Day of the Dead." It is celebrated on Nov. 2 and, despite the name, there is nothing morbid or sad about it. It is a happy day of celebration and remembrance of the departed.

El Dia de Muertos has evolved in Mexico and other Central American countries to include visits to graveyards, where families spruce up sites of deceased loved ones. Revelers construct *ofrendas*, the offerings made to deceased loved ones.

The spirits may not partake of the altar's many offerings, but there are plenty of those not among the life-disenfranchised more than happy to devour the candy skulls, sugar skeletons and sweet *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead).

In order to celebrate this day, Mexicans build magical altars that symbolize the loving dialogue between death and life.

The authenticity of this dialogue is represented through the *ofrenda*: food, *cempazuchitl* (yellow marigolds), water, *papel picado* (colored-paper designs), *velas* (candles), *copal* (incense), and *petates* (a decorative rug woven with dried leaves). Other items such as *calaveritas de azucar* (sugar skulls), *ojaldras* (bread), *tequila* (liquors), cigarettes, photographs, money, toys, *Los santitos* (saints) and other gifts, which individuals have cherished during their lifetime, find their place in the *ofrenda*.

Mexicans react to death with mourning along with happiness and joy. They look at death with the same fear as any other culture, but there is a difference.

They reflect their fear by mocking and living alongside death. Living alongside death means that Mexicans have to learn to accept it within their lives.

Death is apparent in everyday life. It is in art and even in children's toys. It is not respected as it is in other cultures. Children play *al funeral* with toys that are made to represent coffins and undertakers.

Death is laughed at in its face. Many euphemisms are used for death: *la calaca* (the skeleton), *la pelona* (baldy), *la flaca* (skinny), and *la huesada* (bony). There are refrains, sayings and poems that are popular with the day of the dead. These sayings are *burlas* and lose

meaning when translated. For example "La muerte es flaca y no puede conmigo" means "Death is skinny/weak and she can't carry me."

Calaveras (skulls) are decorated with bright colors with the name of the departed inscribed on the head. Children carrying *cempazuchitl* enjoy the processions to the cemetery. At the cemetery, music is played and dances are made to honor the spirits.

This is a huge celebration that every year helps us remember our people, our traditions and our lives. It doesn't matter where it is, Latin people are going to be there to share their traditions with the world.



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...ic students at Portland Community College celebrated and shared the
...on of *Dia de Muertos* with their kids and teachers last Monday.

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