



Courtesy of Margaret H. McAllen Memorial Archives, Museum of South Texas History

A Dia de los Muertos altar.

HONORING THE DEAD

ON ALL HALLOWS' EVE

By SUE SKINNER
For The Daily Astorian

Originally, I was going to write about the devastating fires in the West (one of which I had the bizarre happenstance to have witnessed), the rapid desertification of California and the presence of humpback whales in the Columbia River (very likely because they are starving and looking for food, as humans continue industrial harvest of krill). Then, I remembered we're coming up on Samhain (Celtic for last harvest), All Hallows' Eve, All Saint's or All Soul's Day (Catholic) and Dia de Los Muertos (Spanish for Day of the Dead), and decided this might be a more hopeful, and certainly seasonal, topic.



Sue Skinner

Samhain has become my favorite holiday, because a celebration centered on honoring the memories of those humans and other creatures who have passed on to the other side is often richly satisfying and reassuring, grounding in a most essential way.

At the end of the harvests and the beginning of winter, when the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest, families and friends gather together to commemorate and celebrate their loved ones with an altar, and perhaps an ancestor dinner, featuring the favorite foods of the ones who have passed on. Plates may be set for the departed. Minds and hearts are stimulated and stories are told.

Grief is not discouraged, bonds between participants often strengthen and a new narrative begins.

As the days get shorter, and the leaves brown and whirl off the trees, kids go trick-or-treating on that special night, in the tradition of European children of long ago who dressed in costumes (guises) and went around to their

Writer's Notebook



Graphic courtesy of Iris Sullivan

A Samhain Wheel of the Year. notforsale

Most modern children and adults do not speak of death voluntarily.

neighbors, begging for the souls of their beloved dead.

In more recent times, Halloween had mostly been rebranded as a contest of overconsumption of sweets, and a mad party with outrageous (and outrageously expensive) costumes.

Most modern children — and adults — do not speak of death voluntarily, or realize there exists a holiday in honor of it. Very few of us are taught about the origins of the rituals surrounding the last day of October through the second day of November.

Samhain, or Dia de Los Muertos, may be easiest to plan around an altar, a place in your living space where you and your friends and family can place mementos, photos and objects of significance to you in remembering your beloved dead, whether recently passed or gone for hundreds of years. These sacred spots can be humble or over-the-top fabulous, depending on personal preference and belief systems and imagination.

In Mexico and other places in Latin America, the altars for Dia de los Muertos are famously elaborate, with colorful marigolds and calendulas, pomegranates and striped gourds coordinated with the statues and images of several saints, especially the Virgin of Guadalupe, and lots of representations of skulls, many drop-dead beautiful, including little marzipan candy ones.

These works of art remind us of the relationship between the bounty of the last harvest of the fall, and the seasons of the year and the seasons of our lives.

Now, with the survival of a viable Earth in peril and our culture running off the rails with mass killings and deep inequality, maybe it is time to reintroduce ourselves and our children to the fierce, powerful idea that life is sacred. We depend on the Earth and her harvests for survival and it is essential to learn about and honor our ancestors and those of the other creatures we share the planet with.

Because when we remember our ancestors, we remember our obligation to the future.

Amor Para Siempre to all those who have gone before us.

Sue Skinner has lived in Clatsop County 37 years, for most of which she has practiced as a nurse practitioner/nurse midwife, and is co-owner of an independent family practice clinic. Her interests, aside from her work, include reading, writing and spending time with pets and friends.



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