

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

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We are in the week leading up to October 31st – Halloween - a special holiday in our culture. And, in the towns and villages of Mexico and the American Southwest, November 1st and 2nd are important cultural and spiritual holidays for people descended from the ancient Zapotecs. Dia de los Angelitos, the Day of the Little Angels, and Dia de Los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, mark the time of the year when the spirits of the ancestors and those who have passed on are invited to return to earth.

Families in this tradition decorate the graves of their dear ones and keep vigil all night to facilitate the ancestors' return for a night of feasting and celebration. The spirits of the dead are welcomed at altars covered with colorful decorations and flowers, along with their favorite food and drink, so that the living and the departed can once again be together in a happy moment on Earth.

These special days of remembrance represent a public acknowledgement of the past, of those who came before, and they provide a community-supported environment for recalling one's departed loved ones and celebrating their lives. They are an acknowledgement of the place that death has in life, a part of the inevitable cycle we all must follow. In the words of a traditional Mexican poem, "We do not live in our house here on Earth. We are here but a short time, taken as a loan."

I've pondered the propriety of offering a service incorporating the Dia de Los Muertos tradition – how a blue-eyed Anglo woman can present the myths, symbols, and history of a practice indigenous to the people of Mexico. After all, it's not my ancestral tradition. What right do I have to represent this culture or practice its ritual? How can I begin to adequately represent a rite that isn't a part of my history?

Despite my questions, I believe that each of us can feel a deep connection to this holiday. We share a need with the traditional celebrants of this ritual. There's a mystery and spiritual connection in this celebration that can have meaning for us, as well.

We all want to honor the cycle of life and remember our dead with respect, with honor, and with joy. A loss in life, whether it is the death of loved one, the loss of a job, or the diagnosis of disease, starts a grief process. Elizabeth Kubler Ross is noted for her research and writing on the process of death and dying. According to her grief research, this process includes phases of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance. Rituals facilitate our working through this process.

When my mother died suddenly several years ago, my initial grief felt like a huge box of rocks I carried with me where ever I went. Each rock represented a memory of my mother or an opportunity to be with her that I would no longer have. Grief, in the early days following her passing, was my constant companion, keeping me up at nights, replaying my memories and recollections.

As I sifted through these grief stones, the sharp edges cut my heart. In time, my turning of the stones softened grief's edge and the rocks in my box became more smooth. About a year after my mother's death, I started to see gemstones among the rocks.

I started seeing the opportunities for me presented by her passing. I was my parents' only child, and my mother's death left me an "adult orphan." With no siblings to

share the responsibility for “making the family look good,” I had often in my life felt a great pressure to behave in certain “family approved” ways, to not disappoint.

One revelation was that there was no one I could really disappoint anymore. Oh, there are people who might be unhappy with me at times, but there is no longer anyone in my life, except me, whose approval I feel I have to work so diligently for. Rise or fall, my decisions are now solely my own.

Paradoxically, there’s also no one left to bail me out, so now I have to make it on my own. This realization helped me feel a huge surge of freedom. I am no one’s child any more, and actually at an age which in others I thought represented maturity, wisdom and knowledge. So, perhaps I should act like that, too!

When I got to this point in my grieving process, I was ready to remember my mother wholly – the pain, the pleasure, the laughter, the tears – and to really celebrate her life.

What I appreciate about Dia de Los Muertos, and why this celebration is a part of my personal spiritual life, is that it’s a public acknowledgement of our griefs and a normalization of death as a part of life. It’s a reminder that life is short, and should be lived to its fullest. It’s an acknowledgement of grief, in the midst of aliveness and celebration and the fullness of life.

The very community-oriented setting of Dia de Los Muertos, allows celebrants to publicly speak of the dead, acknowledge their presence, and include them in the flow of life. I find this perspective a refreshing alternative to my own cultural tradition, which I feel fears death and seeks to distance itself from it. I want to rejoice in the full spectrum of human experience, from the birth of a child to the final passage into death. Participating in Dia de Los Muertos has expanded my spiritual understanding and practice.

In my cultural experience, in the time just after a death, there is great community understanding for the tears and emotions of the bereaved. Yet, in Anglo culture, there comes a point when it seems the acceptable time for visible mourning comes to a distinct end. After a period of time, as little as a few days, one is expected to return to work, fully present and productive. At some point, friends and colleagues suggest that it’s time to move on, get over it, and get back to life as usual.

But my personal experience of the loss from death is that it can’t just be “tucked away” somewhere. While the initial pain ebbs, and it becomes easier to live each day as time goes on, I still think of those I’ve lost, no matter if they died recently or 30 years ago. I yearn for a way to remember them, publicly and joyfully, for the gifts they brought to my life, for the pleasure of their company while they were here, and for the pain of no longer having them physically present.

I first heard about the Day of the Dead about 25 years ago, when I worked in an education program for migrant farmworkers in Oregon, most of whom were from Mexico. I was invited to a celebratory meal by colleagues of mine, with friends of theirs from the same area of Mexico. I didn’t understand the holiday’s nuances at that time, but I did understand the deep reverence my colleagues had for their ancestors and for Dia de Los Muertos. I also sensed in their celebration an acceptance and acknowledgement of the cycle of life that appealed to me. I set about learning more.

Now, Dia de los Muertos has gained more prominence. People all over North America know about the day. These modern interpretations retain some of the old ways, but have expanded the symbolic and commercial opportunities of the holiday, as well.

Which brings me back to a concern for cultural appropriation – or misappropriation, to be more specific.

As we in the association of Unitarian Universalists consider revisions to our Seven Principles and Six Sources, a hot topic of discussion is the issue of how we respectfully and honorably expand our spiritual practice by incorporating elements from the disparate traditions from which we draw inspiration.

Over the centuries, UUs have widened our embrace of paths to spiritual truth and meaning beyond our roots in the Judeo-Christian heritage. We are proud of being open to a variety of religious traditions and cultures. Our worship reflects this by including music and readings from and acknowledgement of many traditions.

However, in drawing from this vast array of the world's cultures and religious traditions, we must be aware of what we are doing, of how we are using the words and symbols of other people's sacred traditions and cultural heritage.

We have a desire to be more diverse and inclusive in our religious community, to expand our worship and community practice to create a welcoming and embracing environment for people of many kinds and backgrounds, philosophies and cultures. However, as a predominantly white and well-educated denomination, we have a particular need to be aware of cultural appropriation, of avoiding the "colonization" of the very traditions and world's religions from which we draw inspiration.

We are all the product of cultures and communities meeting and mingling over the millennia. I don't believe that there is actually any truly "pure" religious tradition, devoid of influences, ideas, or practices drawn from other sources. All religions have heavily borrowed from others, blending and adapting as time goes by. This historical pattern doesn't let us off the hook for taking responsibility for our own encounters with other traditions in our own spiritual and devotional practice.

We must be aware of the power of the White majority to "pick and choose" from the cultural, religious, and other traditions of others; of the possibility for cultural racism and other forms of bigotry to run roughshod over the very people, traditions, rituals, and symbols we say we want to honor and respect. We must be aware of our responsibility, In the words of the late Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, "for developing greater sensitivity for honoring the heritage, traditions, and work of racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups."

An anonymous author is quoted as giving us this advice: "Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we find ourselves treading on another's dream. More serious still, we may forget that God was there before we arrived."

Rev. Danielle DiBona, who works with our denomination on issues of cultural appropriation, reminds us that, "if you're getting ready to do something in your congregation and you wonder if it might be cultural misappropriation, then step back and think about it further." She asks us to research and engage the tradition we are interested in exploring and incorporating, asking ourselves why it is that we want to use these particular symbols, rituals, or texts.

She also makes a distinction between education and misappropriation. Descended from the Wampanoag Native American Nation, Rev. DiBona says, "there's a difference between teaching children about a culture by making dream catchers or masks and using

parts of a culture's religious practices in our own worship services." There's a difference between recklessly borrowing and engaging in appropriate cultural sharing. We start with learning about the tradition, and then respectfully engaging with it and the culture from which it sprang. If we bring rituals, symbols, and practices into our own worship life, we do it in context and we acknowledge the source of our inspiration.

We all have our own ways of privately coping with our grief. Today, we've created a community altar to honor those who passed from life, in the tradition of Dia de Los Muertos. A community festival like Dia de Los Muertos sanctions our expressions of grief and gratitude, making death and the celebration of life truly integrated into the fabric of our lives. Respectfully and purposefully incorporating this tradition gives us a community-oriented approach for acknowledging those who were among us, but are no longer. I hope my mother and all of our ancestors would approve of being remembered in this way.

May it be so.