

Embracing Tradition: Bringing the Dead into Our Lives A Personal Narrative

By Maria Miranda Maloney

It is Friday evening, my children and I sit around the kitchen table discussing this year's *Día de los Muertos* family altar. My nine-year-old son, Ian, suggests we begin collecting the *ofrendas* or offerings, now that we have had a year to reflect upon last year's altar. We agree this year, our second year of celebrating the Day of the Dead, we will invite the extended family to present offerings, and hold a novena, a nine-day prayer vigil, for our deceased relatives.

Three years ago, I would have never dreamed of bringing the idea of "death" into our home. Like many of my Mexican-lineage generation, born in the United States who have lost the traditions of our ancestors, building an altar for the dead seemed unnerving, bordering on the sacrilegious. What benefit could be derived from such a pagan-like ritual? I thought. Would making an altar, and talking about death in a celebratory and mocking manner scar my children psychologically for life?

Luckily, I was not completely in the dark about *Día de los Muertos*. I had a point of reference. Three decades before, my grandfather Juan had introduced me to the ritual of visiting my great-grandmother's graveside on the Day of Dead. I was a little girl then, barely eight, and Grandfather Juan, who lived in California, took time off from whatever he did to travel to El Paso. He arrived by Greyhound at my parent's home several days before *Día de los Muertos*. On the day, November 2, he and I would take a bus to downtown El Paso where we boarded a trolley that took us across the border to Ciudad Juárez. A taxi would then drive us to the outskirts of the large metropolis to an old cemetery, the type depicted in old, spooky movies. Despite its debilitated state, it was a bustling and colorful center of food, flowers and candy vendors, music, and families. Around us, old and young alike carried buckets and plastic jugs filled with water, and armed with bushels of yellow and purple flowers for their dead. "*Flores de muerto*," my grandfather pointed out. He would buy a bushel of the pungent smelling flowers, and pay to have the wooden cross painted and the dry weeds pulled out from the dirt mound

where my great-grandmother lay buried. We spent the morning hours by her graveside. Grandfather spoke of her at length while I munched on candies and sipped on *agua de limón* he bought from vendors.

I was sixteen when my Grandfather died peacefully in his home while watching a re-run of his favorite TV show, *The Lawrence Welk Show*. The cemetery visits ceased all together but not the memory of *Día de los Muertos*. I never returned to my great-grandmother's graveside, and for many years as November approached, I recalled longingly those mornings spent with grandfather by her side. Years later, with my family, I toyed with the idea of commemorating his life, but did not know how to broach the subject with my husband and children. The opportunity presented itself when a local non-profit organization, La Mujer Obrera, sponsored a *Día de los Muertos* festival. It promised to be as authentic and grand as the celebrations of death in Mexico. I packed my children in the mini-van and drove the twenty minutes to downtown. I was a bit apprehensive, explaining to my children as candidly as possible what they were about to witness and why, gauging their response. To my surprise, they were as curious as I was, asking many questions about the event, but I could tell they could not imagine or fathom a festival celebrating death, not like they could a county fair or birthday party.

We arrived at the festival in time to see skeletons dancing, not scary people wearing grotesque masks, but dancers wearing smiling, skull masks dancing happily among the audience. My children were surprised, perhaps nervous, and held back when the dancers approached them, but as the dance peaked to an ecstatic swirl of movement, the audience clapped, and laughed, they relaxed so the next time a smiling skeleton held out its hand to my five-year-old daughter, Anna, she took it, smiling.

Next, we visited the artist exhibits of highly decorated and intricate skeleton and skull art like the famous, decorated sugar skulls, Posada-like paintings, and jewelry. We followed the exhibit to an adjacent room where more than thirty family altars were on public display. Each altar was dedicated to a loved one—a grandmother, grandfather, mother, sister, brother—or, in some cases, commemorated the life of a famous and loved public figure like Pedro Infante, Mexico's renowned, Golden-Age singer and actor.

And my children? They gasped, read quietly, asked questions, and walked thoughtfully through the maze of altars and pungent smell of flowers and burning

incense. Slowly, I watched how their apprehension, like my own, turned into smiles of recognition as if finally they understood the meaning of life, and this thing they feared, death, was not so scary after all.

That evening we returned home armed with new knowledge, feeling stronger and wiser. Ian was the first to suggest an altar for his great-grandmother, who until recently had shared hugs and candies with them. I did not speak but allowed the children to discuss their interpretation of the event. I was relieved to realize the festivities would not cause any long-term trauma instead, they were eager to begin their new project.

We gathered the little mementos Grandma Ana had left behind: a novena she had given me days before she died; a rosary; the earthenware she used for making gorditas and tamales; a tablecloth she had hand-stitched and embroidered with dainty, yellow daisies; her photograph celebrating a century of living. In the process of digging and unearthing, I came across my Grandfather Juan's old undershirt—how I had managed to keep the old, yellowing t-shirt after all these years still baffles me. The relic was folded neatly underneath my high school pictures and yearbooks inside a cardboard box. Seeing and recognizing it brought a smile and tears to my face.

We set up the altar inside the fireplace. First, we staggered three boxes on top of each other, covering them with a white tablecloth. My daughter Anna collected every scented candle scattered about the house, placing them on the altar. Ian took the garland of plastic flowers I kept for spring décor from the top of the closet and draped it on the altar, while Danny, my oldest, rummaged through photo albums and papers. The children scattered candy and flowers as offerings. We took turns setting down Grandma's belongings.

As the days progressed to the Day of the Dead, we added fresh flowers and bought *pan de muerto*. Every night we lit the candles, said a prayer, talked about Grandma Ana's and my Grandfather Juan. I told them stories of visiting the cemetery in Mexico. Other photographs began to appear on the altar: a picture of my oldest son's beloved cat, Zee, who had died a year before; our dog, Spot, who we had lost to an illness three years before; finally, my best-friend Gaby, whose memory I kept in a corner of my mind because I was unable to deal with her untimely death. Seeing her photograph every day and sharing memories of her with the children helped me heal quicker than I thought

possible. My children, too, seemed at peace with the idea of death and dying—a topic we had long avoided for fear it would cause nightmares and irrevocable damage. The family altar gave us a mechanism to deal with our recent losses, and I wondered why it had taken me so long to embrace this tradition, why it had taken me so long to bring the dead into our lives.

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