

## Dia de los Muertos: In Memory of...

*And how can the dead be truly dead when they still live in the souls  
of those who are left behind?*

*Carson McCuller, THE HEART IS A LONLEY HUNTER*

I grew up in North Dakota. Every Memorial Day, until we moved, my extended family gathered at the cemetery to tidy up the graves of my ancestors, plant a few flowers and hope for rain.

Post World War II changed the country. Family farms and living within an hour drive of aunts and cousins slowly came to a close as one relative after another moved away to work in urban settings. My father never really liked farming so instead of leasing our farm he sold out and moved us several hours away, just 50 miles from the Canadian Border. Memorial Day visits to our ancestor's graves dwindled to the point of near extinction.

After my parents retired from their city jobs they made another move, this time to the sunny southwest. They would never shovel snow again. Their new home was established in a small desert town just 30 miles from the Mexican Border. Not long after I followed them.

For over 20 years I embraced the desert culture and synthesized it with my North Dakota Lutheran self. I am very fussy with how my red chili is prepared and I still own my high powered bread mixer that has a big motor capable of running a tractor. I want nice fat beef from the heartland and not the skinny desert cattle. I break out with my spanglish "EEEE hua Lah" and Norwegian "Uff Dah" in the same run-on phrases. (After years of asking I am convinced neither has a specific translation. Both expressions are like saying "holy cow!".)

This time of year, as Dia de los Muertos approaches I'm sometimes unaware that a certain sadness is seeping through me. Maybe it is mourning for the long sunny days

of summer but I really think the season reminds me of the anniversaries of my loved ones passing. The Day of the Dead. As the season cools and darkens it brings on a certain contemplation. It's a time to pause and remember those who have passed on. Some were loved ones, some were known for other reasons. All are remembered.

The southern region of the United States was Mexico until 1853 when the Mexicans of the region were informed, "Ta Da, you are all Americans now" as a result of the Gadsden Purchase. The traditions of Mexico and America merged in the region. Stores start tempting shoppers with Halloween inspired plastic junk from China while families start thinking about cemeteries. In the fall, particularly around October, cemeteries become hubs of activity in preparation for Dia de los Muertos. The Day of the Dead.

Offrendas are set up in homes and businesses honoring and remembering individuals who have passed on. They are tiered and decorated with good cloth, favorite foods and favorite objects of the deceased. Candles, sugar skulls when available and the traditional pan, a sugary topped yeast bread, are attractively arranged for the deceased to enjoy in the afterworld. Multiple generations of family stop by to examine photo albums, listen to family stories, laugh and shed a few tears.

Because the holiday typically falls on November first and second, Dia de los Muertos gets mixed up with Halloween traditions, the off spring of All Hallowed Eve, and is often misunderstood. Where Halloween is celebrated with masks and the macabre, Dia de los Muertos is a celebration of lives well lived.

Skeletal political cartoons of Jose Posada became popular first in the early 1900s and continue to this day. Their original intent was to ignite the masses during the Mexican Revolution. Images of elegantly clad skeletons engaged in day to day activities, dancing, playing music, using a typewriter, drinking a toast was intended to make fun of the ruling class at the time. Eventually the images became linked to Halloween where most of us embrace the humor more than the political implications. Although Halloween is intended to be fun and frightening, Dia de los Muertos is a holiday for memory keeping.

I have heard that we actually die three times. The first comes when our bodies cease to function, our heart stops beating, our eyes cloud over and we are declared dead.

The second death comes when the body is buried in the ground or cremated. The third death takes place when there is no one left alive to remember us.

In my small town North Dakota culture we celebrated Memorial Day. Once, while bouncing along old roads and fields of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in a 1950 pickup with my best friend, who lived there, we came upon a memorial tucked way off where the road ended at Lake Sakakawea. (That spelling of Sakawea is the North Dakota spelling and we NoDaks feel her memory is ours to protect, she was born there and we get to spell her name. Don't write into the editor about Sakajewea, no apologies, period.) In a tattered, abandoned building we found a tidy, carefully constructed memorial, much like the offrendas of the border region. A buffalo skull faced the west window, the direction of the setting sun. Packs of cigarettes and matches, a single box of crackers, a candy bar, a few photographs and piles of blankets and cloth were carefully arranged. It was clear, out in the middle of nowhere, someone's memory was being tenderly cared for.

I attended a funeral once. No one could think of anything good to say about the deceased. Even the pastor who spoke had trouble getting beyond, "Well, he was a mammal". Even this memory brings with it lessons from a man no one understood but are still worthy of pondering what made his life bitter.

I think of those citizens in our region who left so much to be remembered for, in the arts, community service, gardening, and caregivers for abandoned animals. What a perfect time November first and second, would be to develop an offrenda and pay homage to the movers and shakers who have infused our communities with their self-less acts of kindness and community building.

As the earth turns towards winter, commercial holidays are thrust upon us with every newspaper and TV ad and every trip to the store. But for me, Dia de los Muertos is the most touching. I am reminded of my loved ones and, for whatever reason, I pull their memories close and I breathe them into me this time of year. I strive to live a life that is memorable. I am reminded of lessons from those who have passed on that are worthy of keeping alive. I am reminded that a life well lived will be a life well missed... and well-remembered.