

# "Day of the Dead Celebration"

## LESSON INTENTION

This is a Mexican celebration of ancestors.

### History

Generalizing broadly, the holiday's activities consist of families (1) welcoming their dead back into their homes, and (2) visiting the graves of their close kin. At the cemetery, family members engage in sprucing up the gravesite, decorating it with flowers, setting out and enjoying a picnic, and interacting socially with other family and community members who gather there. In both cases, celebrants believe that the souls of the dead return and are all around them. Families remember the departed by telling stories about them. The meals prepared for these picnics are sumptuous, usually featuring meat dishes in spicy sauces, chocolate beverages, cookies, sugary confections in a variety of animal or skull shapes, and a special egg-batter bread ("pan de muerto," or bread of the dead). Gravesites and family altars are profusely decorated with flowers (primarily large, bright flowers such as marigolds and chrysanthemums), and adorned with religious amulets and with offerings of food, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Because of this warm social environment, the colorful setting, and the abundance of food, drink and good company, this commemoration of the dead has pleasant overtones for the observers, in spite of the open fatalism exhibited by all participants, whose festive interaction with both the living and the dead in an important social ritual is a way of recognizing the cycle of life and death that is human existence.

In homes observant families create an altar and decorate it with items that they believe are beautiful and attractive to the souls of their departed ones. Such items include offerings of flowers and food, but also things that will remind the living of the departed (such as their photographs, a diploma, or an article of clothing), and the things that the dead prized and enjoyed while they lived. This is done to entice the dead and assure that their souls actually return to take part in the remembrance. In very traditional settings, typically found only in native communities, the path from the street to the altar is actually strewn with petals to guide the returning soul to its altar and the bosom of the family. The traditional observance calls for departed children to be remembered during the first day of the festivity (the Day of the Little Angels, "Día de los Angelitos"), and for adults to be remembered on the second day. Traditionally, this is accompanied by a feast during the early morning hours of November the 2nd, the Day of the Dead proper, though modern urban Mexican families usually observe the Day of the Dead with only a special family supper featuring the bread of the dead. In southern Mexico, for example in the city of Puebla, it is good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each rounded loaf. Friends and family members

give one another gifts consisting of sugar skeletons or other items with a death motif, and the gift is more prized if the skull or skeleton is embossed with one's own name. Another variation found in the state of Oaxaca is for bread to be molded into the shape of a body or burial wrap, and for a face to be embedded on one end of the loaf. During the days leading up to and following the festivity, some bakeries in heavily aboriginal communities cease producing the wide range of breads that they typically sell so that they can focus on satisfying the demand for bread of the dead.

The Day of the Dead can range from being a very important cultural event, with defined social and economic responsibilities for participants (exhibiting the socially equalizing behavior that social anthropologists would call redistributive feasting, e.g. on the island of Janitzio in Michoacan state), to being a religious observance featuring actual worship of the dead (e.g., as in Cuilapan, Oaxaca, an ancient capital of the Zapotec people, who venerated their ancestors and whose descendants do so to this day, an example of many traditional practices that Spanish priests pretend not to notice), to simply being a uniquely Mexican holiday characterized by special foods and confections (the case in all large Mexican cities.)

In general, the more urban the setting within Mexico the less religious and cultural importance is retained by observants, while the more rural and Indian the locality the greater the religious and economic import of the holiday. Because of this, this observance is usually of greater social importance in southern Mexico than in the northern part of the country.

This may all seem morbid and somewhat ghoulish to those who are not part of that culture. But, for Mexicans who believe in the life/death/rebirth continuum, it's all very natural. This is not to say that they treat death lightly. They don't. It's just that they recognize it, mock it, even defy it. Death is part of life and, as such, it's representative of the Mexican spirit and tradition which says: "Don't take anything lying down - even death!"

It sounds so mysterious, the celebration for when dead relatives, both young and old, are allowed to return to the mortal world for two days to visit loved ones. Spirits coming down and walking among the living, sampling earthly treats and joining in the festival ... it sounds like a merry version of our Halloween holiday.

But instead of scary goblins and blood curdling shrieks, the people in Mexico welcome the spirits of their families with the delicious smell of food in the air, tasty candies decorated like skulls, and lighted candles to guide them home again. Gravestones are decorated, and the whole family will gather in the graveyard to await and pay respects to those who have already passed on.

## **Summary Points**

- ② It is not the Mexican version of Halloween. Mexicans have celebrated the Day of the Dead since the year 1800 B.C.
- ② It is not scary or morbid. There are no images of dead people, ghosts, witches, or the devil.
- ② It is not a cult. This ritual has nothing to do with cults. It is a Catholic Christian ritual intermixed with folk culture. Going to mass is an essential aspect of this celebration.
- ② It doesn't honor death, but our dead relatives. We welcome the opportunity to reflect upon our lives, our heritage, our ancestors and the meaning and purpose of our own existence.
- ② Altars or ofrendas are not for worshiping but for offering our love and remembering our departed family members.
- ② It is not a sad ritual. It's a day of happiness because we will be remembering our loved ones. Although when in the graveyard, people assume an introspective attitude.
- ② It is about Love not Fear.
- ② It is not a "strange" ritual. It is very similar to going to a grave and leaving flowers or stuffed animals, lighting a candle to remember the defunct.
- ② It is not a careless or fearless confrontation of death. It is a moment to reflect upon one's life and the cycle of life and death.

## ALTARS...



**1** - Photos of saints of particular importance to the family sit on the altar along with photos of the deceased relatives the family is waiting for.

**2** - Candles are always present on the altars. They are usually made from beeswax or parafin and come in different shapes, sizes and designs. Families light candles on the altars and on the gravesite of the deceased.

**3, 5 & 6** - [Pan de muertos](#) (Bread of the Dead) represent the souls of the dead. The essence or soul of the bread is consumed by the dead when they visit their loved ones.

Most of the bread loaves are shaped as ovals (said to be the shape of one's soul), though each loaf may vary with different ingredients and decorations. In some parts of Mexico, the bread may be shaped as humans or animals.

Other foods associated with Day of the Dead include mole and tamales. For children, sweets and other foods are left for the dead to eat when they come to visit.

Mole is usually set out for adult spirits. The thick sauce made from chilis, sesame seeds, herbs, spices, chocolate and/or fruit is thought to be too spicy for the child spirits. Tamales made from meat, cheese or nuts are also added to the altar. Children might get a sweeter version of the tamale made with fruit.

**4** - Flowers, which symbolize the brief life of man, are used as an offering on the altars. Alter builders must rely on a network of relatives and neighbors, or purchase flowers for their display.

Yellow marigolds, known as "the flower of the dead," and other fragrant flowers are used to communicate to the spirits the richness of the offering. Sometimes paths of marigold petals are created by families to aid the souls in finding their way home.

**6** - In Mexico, death is something to be celebrated. Skeleton dolls and toys are made for living children to play with. Thus, the child's first acquaintance with death is a cheerful one.

## Pre-session Activity

### WELCOME AT THE DOOR

- Ⓢ This is the time we create a safe & sacred space for the children.
- Ⓢ Invite a teacher and students to greet the children at the door to the Youth Room. The teacher needs to be at eye-level with the children.
- Ⓢ Possible greeting: ***"It's so good to see you. We've been waiting for you."***
- Ⓢ If the children have toys with them invite them to place them on the shelf where they can pick them up on the way out.
- Ⓢ ***Invite them to sign in.***
- Ⓢ If they have not done so, invite them to choose a Job Card/Service Opportunity. ***Every child needs one.***

### OPENING ACTIVITIES

- Ⓢ Create name tags
- Ⓢ Create Prayer Sticks

## GATHERING CIRCLE

- Ⓢ At 11:15 am, after the children have completed the Opening Activities, ***invite the "Gong Sounder"*** to sound the gong to call everyone to the Gathering Circle. The children then choose a carpet square and take their seat in the circle.
- Ⓢ The teacher now "sets the circle" and reinforces the ideas that we are all one and we are in a safe place. ***Now is the time to review the Heart Agreement that should be posted in the area.***
- Ⓢ Invite the ***Daily Inspiration Reader*** to read the Daily Word.
- Ⓢ Pray for others. Either lead the children in a prayer for others or use this time to pray with the prayer stick requests. ***Place the "Prayer Bowl" in the center of the room and one by one the children read their prayer word or words and place their stick in the bow.***
- Ⓢ Collect a love offering.
- Ⓢ Movement/Song – ***"I Wish You Well" – Words on Power Point.***

## Activities...

### **Create an Altar**

#### **What you need:**

• The most important thing to put on your Day of the Dead altar is a photograph of the person to whom you are dedicating the altar.

• The three tier altar is covered in "papel picado" - which is bright colored tissue paper with cut out designs. The paper can be either handmade or purchased. Three important colors are purple (for pain) white (for hope) and pink (for the celebration).

• Candles are also placed all over the altar. Purple candles again are used to signify pain. On the top level of the altar, four candles need to be placed - signifying the four cardinal points. The light of the candle will illuminate the way for the dead upon their return.

• Three candy skulls are placed on the second level. These represent the Holy Trinity. On the center of the third level a large skull is placed - this represents the Giver of Life. All bad spirits must be whisked away and leave a clear path for the dead soul by burning in a bracero, a small burner used to cook outside. Or you can use a sahumerio to burn copal or incense. A small cross of ash is made so that the ghost will expell all its guilt when it is stepped on.

• The Day of the Dead bread, pan de muerto, should be accompanied by fruit and candy placed on the altar. Pan de Muerto is plain round sweet bread sprinkled with white sugar and a crisscrossed bone shape laid on top. You can also add the person's favorite food.

• A towel, soap and small bowl are put on the altar so that the returning ghost can wash their hands after their long trip. There is a pitcher of fresh water to quench their thirst and a bottle of liquor to remember the good times of their life.

• To decorate and leave a fragrance on the altar, the traditional cempasuchil flower is placed around the other figures. Cempasuchil comes from Nahuatl cempoalxochitl, that means the flower with four hundred lives. The flower petals form a path for the spirits.