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REMEMBERING: DAY OF THE DEAD

Many societies see losing a family member or friend—or death in general—as a time of mourning and a solemn occasion. But for those who celebrate the Day of the Dead, it is a joyful time for people to remember and honor their deceased loved ones. The holiday is traditionally observed in Mexico, as well as many Latin countries, on November 1 and 2. It is believed that during these two days the dead are able to visit from the underworld so families and friends get together to welcome them with food, music and dancing. While views about the origin of the Day of the Dead vary, it is generally accepted that it is rooted in Aztec traditions that were later influenced by the Catholic Church during the Spanish conquest in the 16th century.

Day of the Dead has become increasingly popular around the world. It has inspired movies such as Disney's *Book of Life* and *Coco*, exposing millions to its unique traditions and imagery and the belief that our loved ones remain connected to us. Parades and other cultural events are held annually in cities, such as Los Angeles and New York.

While most people associate the Day of the Dead with lively festivals, there are misconceptions about the history and significance of the holiday. It is often compared to Halloween because it is held around the same time of year and death is a theme. Both holidays are tied to the Catholic days of prayers and remembrance, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, and both are also rooted in the belief that during this time there is no barrier between the living and spirit worlds. However, Halloween's origins are traced to Celtic pagan festivals, when people would build bonfires and dress in costumes to ward off evil spirits. The Day of the Dead dates back to pre-Columbian festivities surrounding the belief that the dead embarked on an arduous four-year journey to Chicunamictlán, the Land of the Dead. As they traveled, the living would provide food, water and tools to help them on their way. This journey and the offerings are central to today's practices of people placing a loved one's favorite food and drink on Altar de Muertos that they construct in their homes to guide them back to the Land of the Living.

Among the offerings are sugar skulls, which have become synonymous with the Day of the Dead and emblematic of Mexican culture. In pre-Columbian civilizations, the skulls used in rituals were made of clay. The iconic skeleton with the skull adorned with a crown of flowers is how the Aztecs represented the Goddess Mictecacihuatl, who was the ruler of the afterlife and keeper of the dead. Following colonization, people started using a

sugar paste that originated in Spain in the skull molds. Today, the name of the deceased is written on a piece of paper on the forehead of the sugar skull, which is often eaten at the end of the holiday.

The Day of the Dead is celebrated in three parts. Día de los Angelitos—Day of the Little Angels—begins at midnight on November 1 and lasts 24 hours. Families put photos of their deceased child on their altar, along with their child's favorite snacks, candies and toys as way to help them reunite. Día de los Difuntos starts at midnight on November 2 and is about honoring adults who have died. It is a festive time of recounting stories of their loved ones, dining on tamales, pozole and pan de Muertos (day of the dead bread), drinking tequila, playing games and dancing to local bands. The next day is Día de los Muertos, Spirits of the Dead, when everyone joins together at parades. Many people have their faces painted as Calveras (skulls), and papel picado, perforated sheets of colorful tissue paper, are strung over streets. This is also when families visit the cemetery to clean the headstone and leave sugar skulls, marigolds and gifts on the grave.

In the end, regardless of where the Day of the Dead is celebrated or the size of the festivities, the holiday is really about staying connected to the people we have loved and lost, and celebrating their lives.