

Transcript of Wiser World E45. What is Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)?

What is Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead? How long has this holiday been around and what are its ancient roots? Who participates and why is it important to them? What traditions commonly go along with this holiday? We'll dive into these questions and many more in today's episode, What is Day of the Dead?

Welcome to Wiser World, a podcast for busy people who need a refresher on all things world. Here we explore different regions of the globe. Giving you the facts and context you need to think historically about current events. I truly believe that the more we learn about the world. The more we embrace our shared humanity.

I'm your host, Alli Roper. Thanks for being here.

Hello! I'm excited today to share with you all about Day of the Dead, or in Spanish, that's Dia de los Muertos, which is a holiday celebrated typically in Mexico and parts of Latin America, or where folks of Mexican or Latin American heritage descent celebrate. Live, for example, I live in the Western United States and it's definitely celebrated here.

Day of the dead usually is celebrated on the 1st and or 2nd of November. So this is a great time to learn about it because it's coming up in about a month. And even if you aren't of Mexican heritage, I think this holiday has. Really beautiful concepts that anyone from any culture could incorporate into their lives.

So it's absolutely worth knowing about. Personally, I think there's a lot of wisdom in this holiday that we all can learn from. So the major concept of Day of the Dead is this. It is a day where families get together to honor their deceased loved ones, to honor their dead, the people they love, who have lost passed away.

The theory is that no one is really dead as long as they aren't forgotten. And there are a lot of unique and rich traditions that go along with this holiday that I'm going to get into, but let's start with first where this tradition

It's likely that this holiday originated from ancient traditions of indigenous tribes in Mexico and Central America, Mesoamerica, possibly dating back to 3, 000 years ago. And at least it's going back to the Aztec and Nahua people who saw the height of their civilizations from around 1300 to early 1500s AD.

So at the very least, its roots are probably 600 years old and maybe even go back thousands of years. The Aztec people believed that death was essential. Obviously essential and a continual part of life. And once a year, they honored their ancestors through festivals. And just an aside here, recognizing your deceased family members or recognizing your ancestors is a common theme in.

Many to most ancient traditions from around the globe, many of those traditions are still alive and well today. And there's kind of a spectrum in terms of honoring ancestors. One end of the spectrum would be something like going to the grave of the family member, telling their stories. Things like that, that's common in Europe, that's common in the United States, that's common in a lot of countries.

And then there's one, the other end of the spectrum would be actual ancestor worship, right? And that's a little more common in East and Southeast Asia, in parts of Africa, even in particular Pacific islands, that's more ancestor worship. But usually there's some kind of traditions of ancestor veneration or respect in large swaths of the globe, right?

And in many Middle Eastern practices, there's a very strong emphasis on family connections and knowing your genealogy, knowing where you came from, who you came from, and knowing about the people who came before you and their stories and what made them unique and how that makes your family unique. So what I gather from all of this is that, you know, we humans all have Throughout history to modern day, this deep desire to feel connected to the past, to know where we came from, who we came from, and to understand kind of how we fit into this chaotic, messy world, right?

This seems to be part of our shared humanity, this desire to connect to our roots. In fact, there's quite a few studies that have been done that show that kids who know about their genealogy, their family history, where they came from, And they have a strong family narrative. They have a better sense of identity.

They know who they are. It's more like identity, self identity. They're more resilient. They can handle hard things better, and they also feel more connected to their families. And one researcher called it the intergenerational self, kind of this feeling that their identity stretches hundreds of years as they understand their family history and genealogy.

So anyway, I. I digress. My point is that honoring ancestors is a centuries old thing, and that Day of the Dead, which originated in Mexico, plays on this human desire. So let's go back to the history here. When the Spanish came to Mexico in the early 1500s, they brought with them two traditions. One is called All Saints Day, and the other is called All Souls Day.

And this tradition was set by Pope Gregory III in the mid 8th century as a day to honor all of the Catholic saints, the apostles, martyrs, or people who have been murdered in the cause of Christ. And there were special masses on these days, probably processions or other rituals. And the idea is to focus on commemorating and honoring the important people of Christianity.

In particular, Roman Catholicism on that, those particular days. So when the Spanish came to Mexico and discovered the Aztecs and other cultures had traditions that honored their dead, they moved those indigenous traditions to All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Which is November 1st and 2nd, and over time, the holiday has become kind of a fusion of the Roman Catholic

holidays and the indigenous holidays, and obviously a lot of time has passed since then, and Dia de los Muertos was born.

So today, it is believed that on this day, The barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead is lifted so the spirits of the dead can return to the living and celebrate with their families. And of course, different areas of Mexico and Latin America are going to celebrate Dia de los Muertos differently because that's how culture works, right?

Every area has to make itself unique. That's, that's how we build community. So there are some, you There are a lot of different ways to do it, but there are some key concepts that are typically part of a normal Dia de los Muertos celebration. So let's, let's talk about those for a little bit. A major part of Dia de los Muertos is ofrendas or altars.

Ofrenda in Spanish means offering. So families typically create these altars in their homes that honor their loved ones. The idea is that the loved one's spirit would come back. From the land of the dead to the land of the living and come to this altar. So typically it's decorated with pictures of the person or people if you're honoring multiple people Along with personal items from their life like a hat Or an article of clothing as well as that person's favorite food That's it That they really loved while they were living.

Some families do this on a flat surface, like a table where they lay all of this out. It really depends on what region of Mexico you're from, what your family's like. Some ofrendas have three levels. That's pretty common. Those three levels represent heaven, earth, and the underworld. Really elaborate ofrendas can be seven levels high.

Usually an ofrenda has something to represent the four elements, water, wind, earth, and fire. So water is usually left in a pitcher so that the spirit can drink from it, can quench their thirst when they come to the altar. Then for wind, people make traditional paper banners called papel picado, and those represent, again, the wind.

They are brightly colored papers cut into intricate patterns. They're so beautiful. For earth, that is represented by food. Again, the person's favorite food and almost always is bread present. We'll talk more about which kind of bread in a minute. And then for fire, there's usually candles, and they are often left in the form of a cross.

That shows the four directions so that the spirits can find. Their way, often families will put a wash basin, maybe a mirror or sometimes soap and a towel so that the deceased spirit can refresh themselves when they get to the altar. Typically, these altars are very brightly decorated and they have a lot of color.

They're meant to be beautiful and joyful. Obviously there's sadness in this too, right? But the point is to remember the person to. Find joy in remembering them. And the altar is not just about reminding the family about the person, but also welcoming that spirit back to the land of the living through meaningful ways that make them feel comfortable.

So now you might, you might be wondering, cause I know I did. How do you choose which family members to honor during Dia de los Muertos? Well, there's no real strict rules. Often families will focus on people who passed away most recently, especially if they passed away in the last year. Typically, people honor their close relatives like parents and grandparents or siblings or children, but sometimes people will honor their distant ancestors because they want to feel connection to their family history.

So some families make altars for several generations back. And you also don't always have to only honor blood relatives, people can honor friends or teachers or mentors or anyone who made an impact in their lives. So the idea is to keep the memory of that person alive and help them feel comfortable when they return back.

You are celebrating their memory. Alright, let's pause for a second to hear from this episode's sponsors. If you want to learn about fascinating moments in history in the most relaxing way possible, you can try the new podcast, Calm History. Each episode is narrated in the calmest voice, you guys. He is so calm, and it helps you to relax or even to fall asleep.

You'll learn about famous explorers, leaders, inventions, civilizations, and ancient wonders. There's even a six part series about the Titanic. Just search your favorite podcast player for Calm History or tap the link in the episode notes. All right, now that we've talked about ofrendas, let's talk about other decorations.

A common decoration in Dia de los Muertos is the marigold flower. These flowers have been seen as sacred since the Aztec days. They're also known as the Flor de Muerto, which is another word for flower of death. And it's strong smell is believed to guide spirits back to the world of the living. So people will use marigold petals as a pathway.

from graves to ofrendas or to altars and they will also decorate the ofrendas with marigolds, petals and flowers. I happen to love that the marigold flowers also used in India for the Diwali celebrations, which are same time of year. I just think, you know, they both represent joy, a celebration. They have spiritual connections.

Anyway. I just think we're all way more connected than we think across the globe. We have a lot more in common than we realize. But anyway, another thing that families do for Day of the Dead is they clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones. So often people will spend the night in the cemetery.

They'll listen to music, eat food, drink, celebrate together. You'll often see graves marigold petals and scattered candles, lots and lots of candles, as families gather around. When it comes to food, people usually celebrate with, again, the favorite foods of their loved ones. But it's also common, very common, to serve pan de muerto.

Pan means bread and muerto means death or dead. So it's bread of the dead, right? The name is fitting. It's a sweet bread. It's usually in a round shape. And it's flavored with, often flavored with, orange blossom and anise. And it's often decorated with kind of bone shaped designs. In like a cross across the top of the round loaf.

People also like calabaza and tacha on Day of the Dead. This is a candied pumpkin, which is often served with ice cream. If you look up Day of the Dead online, one of the key images that you're going to see right away is Are our sugar skulls. This is a major fixture of Day of the Dead. These are little decorative skulls that are made of white sugar with really brightly colored details to make the eyes, the mouth, and then usually flowers on the top of the skull, and people will use them to decorate ofrendas.

People also decorate With sculptured skulls, or calaveras, and skeletons, which is calacas, often these are made of clay or plastic, and they are, again, intricately painted in bright colors. And speaking of skulls, the Day of the Dead's central symbol is typically a skeleton. This makes sense, right? So around 1910, 1913 ish, somewhere around there, a Mexican artist and printmaker named Jose Guadalupe Posada, he created something called La Calavera Catrina, which is this iconic print of a skeleton with a wide brimmed hat full of flowers.

And it's not like this scowly, creepy skeleton. It's this smiling, toothy, happy skeleton. It's, I think it's beautiful. It's a symbol of ancestry and Mexican heritage. And today this skeleton is often called La Catrina. Katrina is used for almost everything Day of the Dead related and artists will make Katrinas out of all kinds of materials, sometimes even having contests on who can make the best Katrina.

She's pretty famous and in some areas, especially in big cities like Mexico City or Oaxaca City, people have street processions and parties where people will dress up as skeletons and fancy. Clothing, usually like old, old clothing, like 1800s looking clothing, and they will represent their ancestors. In the United States, sometimes people say that this is the Halloween of Mexico, but that's not actually, that's actually not right.

That's not, it's not what it is. This isn't going around in costumes and collecting candy like Halloween. It has spiritual significance. It has ancestral significance. And at its core, it's not actually meant to be spooky or creepy. It's meant to be honoring and celebrating the dead. I watched a video about Dia de los Muertos and preparing for this episode.

And one author, Regina Marchi, said something that I really liked. She said, quote, many people feel like there isn't a time or a place where you can publicly celebrate the lives of those people that meant so much to you, that helped shape who you are, who you still love, even though they are no longer physically with us.

So this wonderful holiday is a real gift from the people of Mexico. End of quote. And I've given this some thought, and I think that's really true. In my culture, there really isn't like a designated time of the year where it's Recommended to look back on the people that I've lost that year or

recently and think about their contribution to my life and celebrating their life and cooking their favorite foods.

And I think that there's something really profoundly connective about respecting, respecting and honoring loved ones who have passed away and having a designated special day for that. So after studying this and spending some time with people who celebrate this holiday, it's made me want to take a day.

Um, maybe even that day to celebrate my family members who have died. I love the tradition of serving food of, you know, the people that the people loved when they were living, honoring their memory with their stories. And I think that's really bonding is something that anyone can incorporate into their family.

This is one of the reasons that I love studying the world. I think every culture and people have something beautiful to share with others. And I think that this is one that Mexico and people of Mexican heritage do so well, so that is a little bit about Dia de los Muertos. Thanks for learning with me today.

If you're interested in learning more about this holiday, I'm sharing some ideas on my Patreon, [patreon.com slash wiser world](https://www.patreon.com/wiserworld). I include some movies, videos, books that you can help. That can help you to visualize what we've talked about in the episode. Some great options for kids too. And if you enjoyed this episode, make sure to subscribe on your favorite podcast app.

So you're notified when the next episode drops. And thank you to all those who share the podcast and leave positive reviews on Spotify, Apple podcasts. It means so much to me and helps people to find the podcast. And if you celebrate Dia de los Muertos, I hope you have a great one. And until next time, let's go make the world a little wiser.

Sources used in this episode:

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