

Celebrating the Dead: Gone but Not Forgotten

By Jeanette Stehr-Green

Many religions and cultures have celebrations to honor those who have died well after their bodies have been cremated or buried. These observances are usually anchored in history and steeped with rituals and traditions.

Here are just a few of the ways people around the world celebrate the dead.

All Saints' Day

All Saints' Day (also known as All Hallows' Day or the Feast of All Saints) originated in the early Christian church to celebrate the departed faithful who were in Heaven with God. Prior to that time, only canonized saints (i.e., individuals declared with certainty by the church as being in the presence of God) were celebrated, usually on the anniversary of their death (known as their feast date).

The growing number of Christian martyrs during the Roman persecutions, however, made the designation of specific feast dates impossible. Thus, a common feast date, All Saints' Day, was adopted in the 4th century.

In Western Christianity, All Saints' Day is observed on November 1. Although historically focused on Christians who died for their faith, over time the observance has opened a space for expressions of gratitude for all who have passed.

Common practices on All Saints' Day include offerings of flowers, lit candles, and prayers at the graves of loved ones. In some Christian faiths, special church services are conducted on this day.

Dia de Los Muertos

Dia de Los Muertos (also known as Day of the Dead) is a multi-day celebration, observed mostly among those of Mexican heritage, but also in Central and South America and Haiti.

During this celebration family and friends gather to honor departed loved ones, sustaining connections between the living and the dead. Some believe that during this observance a passageway between the spirit world and the material world opens so that souls of the deceased can briefly rejoin their loved ones.

The origin of Dia de Los Muertos can be traced back to ancient Mesoamerican cultures, particularly the Maya and Aztec who honored death as an integral part of life. The modern-day celebration – which occurs on November 1 and 2 and sometime other days – likely results from the imposition of All Saints' Day traditions on indigenous people by Spanish explorers and Catholic missionaries in the 16th century.

Dia de Los Muertos traditions include building home altars called “ofrendas” that are adorned with photos, food, and flowers to welcome departed spirits and visiting gravesites with gifts for the deceased. Public altars are built and community celebrations – such as local festivals, and

parades – also occur, bringing entire neighborhoods together, showcasing the artistry and spirit of the community.

Obon

Obon, also known as the Festival of the Dead or Lantern Festival, is a Japanese cultural event rooted in Buddhism that honors ancestors and departed loved ones. During Obon, it is believed that the spirits of the dead return from the afterlife to briefly rejoin their family members.

Although traditions vary by region, Obon is typically observed from August 13-16. On the first evening of the festival, many families light small bonfires or hang lanterns at front doors to greet their ancestors. On subsequent days, families clean and decorate the graves of their departed loved ones and offer flowers, straw figures of animals, and food at home altars. On the last day of the festival, small lanterns are floated down rivers and other waterways to guide ancestors back to their spiritual world.

Famadihana

Famadihana is a sacred ritual practiced by some ethnic groups in Madagascar. Also known as “the turning of the bone,” the celebration is a means of paying respect to one’s ancestors while emphasizing that their spirits are still part of this world.

Famadihana is observed every five to seven years after consultation with an astrologer. On the selected day, bodies of dead family members are exhumed and rewrapped with fresh cloth. Living family members then dance to music while carrying the bodies over their heads.

The remains of the loved ones are returned to their tombs before sunset and their crypts are again closed for another five to seven years.

Memorial Day

Memorial Day is a U.S. federal holiday dedicated to mourning and honoring Americans who died while serving in the nation's military. The observance is thought to have first emerged in Georgia after the Civil War with the tradition of decorating soldiers' graves with flowers, leading to the original name for the observance, Decoration Day. The first national observance was on May 30, 1868.

The name “Memorial Day” gradually became more common than Decoration Day and was officially declared in 1967. The observance was moved to the last Monday in May in 1968 following the passage of the Uniform Monday Holiday Act to create a three-day weekend.

Memorial Day is a solemn day to reflect on veterans and military personnel who are deceased. Across the country, people honor fallen U.S. military personnel by attending parades, decorating military gravesites, and lowering the American flag to half-mast from sunrise to noon.

Create Your Own Traditions

These religious and cultural observances strengthen community ties and help participants recognize that death is a natural part of the life cycle, not something to be feared. They also help participants remember their loved ones and process their grief.

Whether you choose one of these established observances or select some other date (e.g., your loved one's birthday or the anniversary of their death), take time to remember friends and family members who have died.

On the selected day, visit your loved one's grave. Host a dinner in their honor for those who knew them well. Go through photo albums and share stories about the departed. Or be more creative.

The effort will honor your loved one's memory and help you reframe your relationship with them. It will also keep your loved one alive – for as long as we remember, our loved ones are not gone.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.