

## **Using Dia de Los Muertos as Therapy for Grieving**

**The purpose of this paper is to introduce the tradition, celebration of Dia de Los Muertos, Day of the Dead, as a healing ritual or modality for grieving the loss of loved ones through death.**

**Dia de los muertos (Day of the Dead) is a major day of celebration in the Mexican culture. Death of our loved ones, whether it be family or friends or another significant person in our lives, is a traumatic and sad event, but the Latin culture elevates and deals with deep grief with celebratory events on November 2<sup>nd</sup> each year. This custom has roots in the ancient Indigenous culture there--Aztec, Mayan & other Indian cultures. Later, when the Spanish arrived in Mexico, this celebration was integrated into the Catholic Religious traditions. With the wave of evangelization, the Day of the Dead rituals have taken different forms, however, pre-Hispanic elements remain predominant.**

**I chose this modality from my own ancestry—both of my maternal grandparents were Mestizos (part Hispanic and part native Mexican-Aztec). As a child, I participated in the rituals, celebrations of the Day of the Dead. I witnessed the effects of these ritual, and how many family members and friends, through the years have found solace, comfort from mourning.**

**The Day of the Dead is also becoming a more popular celebration in parts of the U.S. And even though it has a taken a tint of commercialization, it still keeps its ritualistic meaning, especially among the Latino people, and in many communities through the border cities of the U.S. such as San Diego and the towns near the border in Texas.**

**People gather, share stories from their loved ones who have died. They don't keep their pain inside. They find comfort in others listening, and knowing that they are being listened to. Now they feel they are no longer alone as they share their stories and feelings. Furthermore, they celebrate and honor the lives of their departure family member or friends, as they gather, in a festive manner.**

**I believe this ceremony could be extended as a healing modality to anyone who grieves for their beloved departed and could be adapted to be carried out at any time of the year, not just on the official Mexican Day of the Dead November 2<sup>nd</sup>.**

**Now I would like to describe the actual details of the custom, and the meaning of each of the individual rituals and actions.**

**These ceremonies originated nearly 4000 yrs ago. They are centered around gathering together with family and friends, food, and very colorful altars upon which are placed other food reserved for the departed, flowers as offerings to the dead, and a later addition--photographs of the family members and friends who died. Water is also placed in each altar, signifying purification of the soul; and copal--resin incense—to purify the air & ambience of the place of gathering. The altar also includes candles—a custom added from the Catholic tradition.**

The food, both that placed on the altar reserved for the departed, & more of which the participants partake, includes skulls made of sugar, bread, chocolate and amaretto (a sweet, almond-flavoured, liqueur originating in Italy in the 1500s, i.e. 500 yrs ago) . The skulls are decorated and painted with bright colors. The bread--Pan de Muerto--is made with flour, baked, and decorated with dried fruit, and colors. Other foods may include fruits, tamales, & cacao. The altar may also include different kinds of exquisite dishes, such as tamales, mole, pumpkin flower dishes, and other specialty spicy dishes that the dead relative and friend might have liked. In addition, the altar can include mezcal drinks or any other drinks that the dead relative liked.

The flowers are very significant, especially the Aztec marigold *Tagetes erecta*, whose flower is called Zempoalxochitl or Tempa-Xochitl flower [or *cempazúchitl* (also spelled *cempasúchil*)] comes from the Nahuatl term for the flower literally translated as "twenty flower". Marigolds grow and wilt quickly, reflecting the fleeting nature of life. The Aztecs believed that the Zempoalxochitl's aroma helped lure the spirit back. They believed is that this flower helps to aid in the transition from life to death. Zepoalxochitl flowers in particular are said to hold the rays the of sun in them and therefore help keep the soul of the departed warm during its transition from life to death. Furthermore, the flower is believed to keep the life spark inside the departed loved ones, keeping the connection so that they will not be forgotten by their family members and friends.

Music is also a very important component of the celebration of the Day of the Dead & includes, singing, band trio, and mariachi.

### Utilizing Dia de los Muertos as Therapy

Dia de los Muertos ceremony or ritual, can be integrated into grief counseling with Latino clients. But I feel it can also be adapted & offered to people of ALL traditions. Death and sorrow are a common ground to all. My approach would be to introduce them to the reasons for and meaning of this ritual or ceremony, and how, with my help, they may benefit from carrying it out.

The following activities can be offered to clients:

Altar Ofrendas (offerings). are often a culturally acceptable form of expression. They can create a mini altar model during the session, and take it home. Eventually, this altar will be a symbol in their hearts.

Skull making and decoration. This could be a fun activity that can be incorporated with other modalities for healing. Painting skulls (calaberas) can be very therapeutic.

Flower pots. . Can be decorated any way the client wishes, then Zempoalxochitl (Aztec Marigold) seeds can be planted. Also, a picture of the client's loved one can be glued/attached to the pot.

This is a longer project, but it can be much more soothing and

**rewarding when they see the blooming of the Marigolds .**

**Bread baking or cooking.**

**The client can bake a mini pan de muerto, (Bread of the Dead) decorated and share it with family members and friends.**

**A favorite dish of the departed loved one can be prepared.**

**“The gathering of families, friends, old and young, their emotions are manifested thru color, taste, aroma, and music”**

**We begin to understand how this ritual/celebration can be incorporated as a healing modality to help clients through the pain of losing a loved one thru death.**

**I wish to thank my distant relative, Mary J. Andrade, for her contribution to this presentation.**

**Also thanks to my husband Jay who thought of the background music--he was struck by the “Zen” of this ancient rhythmic Didgeridoo music from the Australian Aborigine culture, back when training as a competitive cyclist & thought it may also strike a cord in the emotions & thoughts of those mourning loss.**