

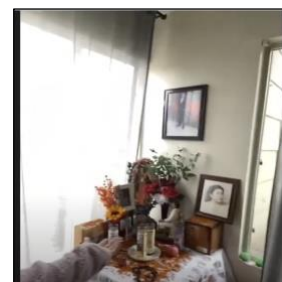
## RITUALIZING REMEMBRANCE in our SCHOOL CULTURES: *Día de los muertos*

Honoring those who have died is a key renewal practice. Mourning and remembrance are key pillars of school crisis recovery<sup>1</sup>: **we cannot recover and renew without holding space and creating a place to honor our experience with loss, death, and also welcome joy and celebration of the lives who were and will always be a part of our school community.** There are many ways to ritualize remembrance. *Día de los muertos* is just one of them.

**Mourning and remembrance are key pillars of school crisis recovery:** we cannot recover and renew without holding space and creating a place to honor our experience with loss, death, and also welcome joy and celebration of the lives who were and will always be a part of our school community<sup>2</sup>.

***Día de los muertos* (Day of the Dead) is an opportunity for school communities to honor the living and the dead, a holiday where death is seen as life.** A two-day celebration that incorporates indigenous and colonized traditions celebrating deceased loved ones, *Día de los Muertos* is a holiday/festival celebrated throughout Mexico, and the United States. One way of celebrating is setting up an *ofrenda*, an offering, that are usually altars displaying pictures, favorite items, and possessions of the deceased<sup>3</sup>.

As Monica Tello, a youth leader at [RYSE Center](#), explains, “During this time, traditions have helped my family. November 1st, we celebrate *Día de los muertos*, a day to celebrate the kids who have passed on, November 2nd is the day to celebrate the adults who have passed on...Our altar helps us bring us together and helps us to remember our family members who have passed on. We put offerings for them, stuff that they liked. We believe it's a time that they come to visit us here...**I'm blessed to have traditions**



**like putting up an altar, an ofrenda as we call it, to be able to heal together and celebrate together”** (image to the right is a snapshot of Monica's sharing during the 2020 MHTTC November Grief Sensitive Virtual Learning Institute)<sup>4</sup>.

**In this compilation, we offer:**

- **Reflective questions to ensure cultural humility when creating ofrendas**
- **Resources to guide conversations about death, and**
- **Links to lesson planning and curricula to create altars/ofrendas to celebrate those no longer with us.**

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<sup>1</sup> Find this guide and more resources on commemoration and memorialization [on our webpage](#).

<sup>2</sup> See [SCRR's full webpage on memorialization and commemoration](#) for programming, resources, and more

<sup>3</sup> See [dayofthedead.holiday](#) to learn more about the holiday.

<sup>4</sup> Watch Monica's clip or the whole panel (it's worth it): Monica's sharing of her family's ofrenda begins at minute 6 and 45 seconds. [Listening & Loving - A Conversation with Youth Leaders about Grief and Healing](#) panel at the 2020 Grief Sensitive Virtual Learning Institute.

## RITUALIZING REMEMBRANCE in our SCHOOL CULTURES: *Día de los muertos*

### I. Navigating positionality & power: 20 reflective questions for educators holding and creating space for and with students [for *Día de los muertos* and beyond]

by Oriana Ides, Noor Jones-Bey, and Jerica Coffey

Deciding to bring cultural practices and traditions that memorializes and commemorate our ancestors into an institutional setting such as a school is a responsibility and must be navigated with care and intention. Whether you are sharing practices that are close to your own lineage or those that come from different cultures than the ones held by students or the school community you are in, there is so much to consider ensuring respect, safety, cultural humility, and honor.

When thinking about celebrating *Día de los muertos* or another cultural tradition in our school communities, it is important that your rationale, your proximity to communities rooted in the cultural practices you are elevating. The container you hold those practices within, and your overall capacity should be taken into consideration when designing or delivering programming for *Día de los muertos* (or other traditions that honor ancestry that may or may not be of your own culture).

In a plea to honor and not appropriate cultural traditions (in this context, for *Día de los muertos*), culture keeper Aya de Leon asks us, "Do you really not know how to sit at the table? To say thank you? To be a gracious guest?...Hold tradition with reverence."<sup>5</sup> These questions are important for educators to consider individually, collectively, and communally as we approach this powerful holiday that is an opportunity to hold space and one that comes with an invitation for cultural humility and reflection.

**Below are 20 questions for you as educators or student leaders to consider when planning to hold cultural spaces that memorialize and commemorate ancestors within your school setting.**

*Reflecting for yourself:*

1. Why might you and your colleagues be interested in bringing these cultural and spiritual practices to your school community?
2. What are the ways beyond *Día de los muertos* that you honor your own ancestors?
3. What practices and rituals are a part of your life that help you lift up the memories and legacies of those who have passed?

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<sup>5</sup>[Dear White People/Queridos Gringos: You Want Our Culture But You Don't Want Us – Stop Colonizing The Day Of The Dead](#) (de Leon,10/31/2014)

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4. How are you engaging in healing work outside of this effort? What regulatory skills and resources do you, yourself, have access to so you can create and hold space with steadiness?

### *Reflecting on the culture of your school community:*

5. Consider the existing culture of your school community and the values that your school hopes to uphold. Is your school culture and values supportive of tender space?
6. Are staff and students able to hold cultural practice with respect and care? If not, how might you build that readiness?
7. Beyond creating the altar, do you also have the capacity to tend to and clean the altar, protect it and ensure it is being respected by your school community?
8. How might you take the *ofrenda* down in a timely and respectful, ritualized manner?

### *Reflecting on your pedagogy, partnerships, and community-engagement:*

9. What structures and check-ins can you put in place that increases your awareness regarding student need as a result of potential activation caused by discussing loss and/or being in the presence of a multigenerational altar?
10. Have you scaffolded classroom curriculum and staff professional development time to encourage intentional school wide learning and engagement with the altar on or before *Día de los muertos*?
11. How might you prepare a thoughtful school wide presentation that invites community participation and collaboration and teaches the origins and practices?
12. What partnerships have you cultivated with community elders and organizations rooted in indigenous practice that can you support in guiding the creation of your altars and activities?

### *Reflecting on your cultural humility:*

13. What ways have you extended beyond the school space to support/uplift communities who uphold the cultural/historical knowledge of *Día de los muertos*?
14. What ways will you create space for youth to learn about the history/cultural knowledge from those communities?
15. What ways can you continue to honor local indigenous community and youth ancestry beyond *Día de los muertos*?
16. How might you offer opportunities for interested students to learn/research more about the lives of those they choose to honor/their own ancestry?

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17. How might you offer language on ancestry that is inclusive of students whose family lines have been ruptured by the violent forces of colonization and enslavement?
18. Have you done research to provide examples of communal ancestors (with descriptions) for youth seeking connection beyond blood lines (e.g., poets, writers, teachers)?

*Reflecting on your grief readiness:*

19. The beautiful essence of *Día de los muertos* is that of celebration. Your school community (students, staff, partners, families)'s beliefs around loss and experiences of talking about loss in school can feel even more difficult for some than others. How might you think ahead of time of loss held by students and staff and which members may need more support during this time?
20. How might you prepare to support students and staff who might get activated and honor their grief?

Educators are responsible for doing the same deep and vulnerable heart work we often ask our students to engage in. *Día de los muertos* requires us to take intellectual risk, explore moments of personal challenge and transformation through studying and learning, and sitting with asking more questions than having answers to ensure we ritualize, create, and hold space with radical humility.

## II. How to have conversations about death with students

### [Day of the Dead \(Dia de los Muertos\): An Opportunity to Start a Conversation About Death](#)

This one-page guide invites Dia de los Muertos as an opportunity for schools to talk to children about death, exploring children's experiences during grief and providing tips on classroom activities and what to say if a child might be activated. Source: the Coalition to Support Grieving Students & the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (08/2020)

### [Día de los Muertos: A Latin-American holiday offers an opportunity for discussion and grieving](#)

An educator's recounting of how teaching a unit about *Día de los muertos* transformed their identity as an educator and prepared them as a school community "to share our grief and process our loss together" when a student died. Source: Dale Weiss, Rethinking Schools, n.d.

### [Late Tempe High Teacher Honored as Dia de Los Muertos Tradition Continues](#)

A high school in Arizona honors a teacher who died by creating an altar. Source: Tempe Union High School District, n.d.



### III. Creating altars/ofrendas (virtually & on campus)

#### Create an altar for Black Lives & hold space for Black grief

KT Kennedy offers us [this beautiful guide to create an altar for Black lives \(Fall, 2021\)](#).

Ages: Elementary-elders.

- > **Connected research:** this article is to discuss how through a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that addressed extrajudicial killings by creating a Día de los Muertos float led to youth finding critical hope, which lent itself to radical healing: [Remembering and honoring the dead: Día de los Muertos, Black Lives Matter and radical healing](#) (July 2019)
- > **Connected work:** Renée Ater's Instagram-Based Memorial, "I Can't Breathe"-[read about it here](#) and [visit her digital work](#).
- > **Connected scholarship:** Shiv R. Desai (2020) Remembering and honoring the dead: Día de los Muertos, Black Lives Matter and radical healing, Race Ethnicity and Education, 23:6, 767-783, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2020.1798391

**Contribute your own offering:** [Día de los Muertos: California](#) offers a community digital ofrenda gallery; you can add your own offering to the [collective virtual ofrenda](#)

**Get tips for culturally responsive altars:** [A Houston curator on how to make an authentic Día de los Muertos altar](#) (10/13/21)

**Explore photo examples of ofrendas:** [Día de Los Muertos: 13 Essentials To Build Your Own Altar](#) (10/25/2018)

#### Access videos for your classroom // student learning:

- [Día de Los Muertos / Day of the Dead](#): Artbound offers a more intimate look at Día de los Muertos through the story of artist Ofelia Esparza, who continues the tradition of building altars to remember the dead. Journey with her as she travels back to Mexico in search of her ancestral roots
- [Día de los Muertos How to Build an Altar or "Ofrenda"](#): A personal demonstration of how someone creates an ofrenda and the meaning behind the ritual.
- [Understanding Ofrendas | Day of the Dead](#): Narrated by a student, Iowa PBS produced this short video to explain to those who are new to Día de los Muertos what it is and how it can be impactful.

### IV. Supportive resources to begin or deepen lesson planning, curriculum design, and school programming around *Día de los muertos*



## RITUALIZING REMEMBRANCE in our SCHOOL CULTURES: *Día de los muertos*

### General

- [The Most Recognizable Symbol of Día de Muertos Started As Political Satire](#)
- [Day of the Dead Lesson Plan: Build an Ofrenda](#)
- Educator Guide from the University of New Mexico Latin American & Iberian Institute: [Día de los Muertos](#)
- A K-12 Curriculum Resource Guide developed and presented by the Stone Center for Latin American Studies, Tulane University (2012): [Día de los Muertos Teacher Workshop](#)
- [Day of the Dead Dia de los Muertos](#) Instructor Guide (Smithsonian Latino Center)

### Subject/Content Specific

- [ELL & GLAD-Inspired Strategies For teaching About Día de los Muertos](#)
- [Here's How to Have a STEM-Themed 'Día de los Muertos' Celebration](#)
- [Theater based lesson plans](#) (2019)
- [Day of the Dead Activities and Resources for the Spanish Classroom](#)
- U.S. History (high school): [Dia de los Muertos Altar Project](#)



Those who love us never truly leave us. Los que nos aman nunca nos dejan.

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**SCRR remembers Marissa Snoddy always and forever.**

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