It is incredible that two countries, two societies, as geographically close to each other as the United States and Mexico can have such different perspectives on the topic of death. In the United States, death is often feared and considered taboo to talk about whereas in Mexico, death is a commonplace, accepted process of life; death is even celebrated. I find culture differences to be particularly interesting; I specifically became interested in Mexican culture after taking four years of Spanish in high school. This interest in Mexican culture and the importance of Día de los Muertos in Mexico and Latin America prompted me to write this paper.

Often more so than in the United States, family is an extremely important aspect of peoples’ lives in Mexico. Family size/number of children per woman is also greater than those in the United States. Families are often extremely close, and the elderly usually remain at home with their family members; women are often the primary caretakers of the elderly in the family structure. Contradictory to medical ideas in the United States, a research team studied the Mexican elderly and their related caregivers and found that informal care provided by daughters decreased the risk of dying and probability of experiencing a decline in daily living and instrumental activities in the elderly. Because of the close familiar bond and sense of responsibility to care for the elderly family members in young relatives, a majority of older people remain at home for care instead of resorting to nursing homes or hospitals; therefore, unlike in the United States where many people die in hospitals or ICU, it is not uncommon for elderly or ill to die in their homes. Also, unlike in the United States, medical care for the elderly and aging, as well as geriatrics is largely lacking for the country as a whole; there are roughly four hundred certified geriatricians in Mexico. Current public services catering towards the aging in Mexico lack knowledge on health and social care services and prevention strategies.

The deceased are remembered, celebrated and catered to during Día de los Muertos, The Day of the Dead; this is the one time each year the spirits of the deceased can return to the land of the living. Taking place on November 1st and 2nd, Día de los Muertos is a celebration of both the living and dead; its main goal is to demonstrate love and respect for deceased family members-often in an explosion of color and life-affirming joy. Although each town and city throughout Mexico has their own unique tradition(s), there are almost always revelers in bright makeup, skull face paint and fancy costumes, parades, parties, songs/dances and offerings to the deceased. Celebration styles and customs differ by region, depending on the region’s predominant pre-Hispanic culture. Día de los Muertos is an extremely social celebration that is shared between the members of entire cities and towns. While the holiday originated in Mexico, it is celebrated in all of Latin America and even abroad in some Spanish cities/towns. The centerpiece of the celebration of a deceased person is an altar, ofrenda, built in the privacy of ones’ home that contains many of the deceased’s favorite things and offerings. Marigolds are also a prominent item during Día de los Muertos as the flowers, and their petals, guide wandering souls back to their place of rest from altar to gravesite. Día de los Muertos’ originated thousands of years ago with the Aztec, Toltec, and other Nahua people. These pre-Hispanic people considered mourning the dead to be disrespectful. For these pre-Hispanic cultures, death was a natural phase in life’s long continuum. The dead were still members of the community, kept alive in memory and spirit—and during Día de los Muertos, they temporarily returned to Earth. This concept is extremely different than the traditional “western” way of thinking as in Europe and the United States, once someone dies, they never come back.

During Día de los Muertos, the deceased are not only remembered and celebrated; the deceased, living and death itself are also attacked and mocked through satirical, biting, humorous poems called calaveras. Calaveras emerged in the late 18th/early 19th centuries as sarcastic tombstone epitaphs etched to mock the living. In the modern era, short biting poems and epitaphs are read aloud during celebrations and broadcasted on television and radio. Calaveras themselves have become a staple in Día de los Muertos celebrations and activities. This practice is also different than traditional epitaphs in the United States as epitaphs are often respectful and serious. Overall, most Mexicans have a sense of familiarity and humor towards death; as Mexican writer Octavio Paz wrote, “The Mexican…is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates with it. He thinks of it as his favorite plaything and most lasting love.” Because death is an open topic in Mexican culture, a sense of closeness and acceptance has developed to allow such a sense of *comfort*; contrasting the common perception and fear of death in the United States, Octavio Paz conveys the idea that Mexicans do not turn away from death: “At least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain or irony,” facing death with only a shield of satire and a weapon of hope.

The stark contrast between the celebratory remembrance of the deceased in Mexico and the grief-stricken mourning of the deceased in the United States is both shocking and incredible. It is amazing to see how two countries’ histories and ways of life, their cultures, can affect their perception of the same topic, death, in different ways. I have usually thought of death with the common perception of most in the United States: death is sad, one desires to avoid it for as long as possible, and people are to be mourned because they are gone, and we will never see them again in this world. However, I can understand and appreciate the Mexican perception of death in which people are remembered, celebrated and death is but a normalized/accepted presence in peoples’ lives; the Mexican perception of death and the celebration of the deceased during Día de los Muertos reminds me of a quote from Winnie the Pooh which connects both viewpoints in a sense of “grieving optimism”: “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened”. I was initially surprised and then impressed by the Mexican peoples’ acceptance, humor and satire towards death; compared to the culture of the United States in which death is a feared topic, I found these people to be admirable for their confrontation and acceptance of the inevitable end as their stance towards death is not commonly seen in the world’s “western cultures”. While I was interested in Mexico, its people and its culture prior to researching the influence and importance of death, I was amazed by my findings, specifically the attitude people have towards death and its commonplace nature in Mexican culture and daily life. After researching the Mexican perception of death, I believe that I will attempt to incorporate their way of thinking in the future as it seems more realistic in a sense as they accept the presence of death in the course of life whereas the in the United States most people avoid the topic of death. As undesirable as it may be, death comes for us all…At least in Mexico, they have a sense of humor about it.

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