

The Rising Popularity of Halloween and the Day of the Dead

Barry Spector

Each year it seems that Halloween becomes more popular. Now we have Halloween “stores” all over the Bay Area, many of them opening for business as early as August. The newspapers will be full of events, and not all of them for children. Halloween in the Castro district of San Francisco is one of the biggest public events of the year. Everywhere children and adults will be dressing up in masquerade, often in oddly comic versions of ghosts, demons and witches, those inhabitants of the traditional nightmare. But what is really going on, below the surface of this playful fascination with the macabre?

Behind Halloween lie the older Catholic holidays of All-Saint’s Day and All-Soul’s Day, which metamorphosed into the Latin American

Days of the Dead when the Spanish invaded Mexico. And behind them all lies the ancient Celtic celebration of *Samhain* (pronounced Sah-win). While children and rowdy adults celebrate Halloween with the expected festivities, surprisingly large numbers of people in the Bay Area will be attending to the rituals of Day of the Dead and Samhain with a somewhat more serious (if no less festive) intent. Partially as a result of the relatively recent surge of interest in ancestry and partially from the continuing influx of Latin Americans into the area, these ancient rituals of welcoming the spirits of the dead are gaining great popularity. But why?

Samhain is the most important date in the old Celtic calendar, the point – usually figured as around November first – when the light half of the year changes over to the dark half (changing back again on May first). The three-day period has always been known as a time when the “veil between the worlds” is the thinnest, when the boundaries between the seen and unseen worlds become permeable and the spirits of the dead walk briefly among the living. It is a time for loving remembrance, for setting

out the foods that the beloved dead liked best. But it is also a liminal time, sacred time, a time out from the chronological time of the clock, when great things are possible. It is a dangerous time as well, since some of the spirits who come to us are said to be hungry for something other than physical food.

Indigenous cultures from Bali to West Africa to Central America agree that there is a reciprocal relation between the worlds. What is damaged in one world can be repaired by the beings in the other. Thus, such cultures affirm that much of our problems in this world actually result from the fact that we have not completely allowed the spirits of the dead to move completely to their final homes in the other world. And these cultures agree that the dead require two basic things from us: *beauty* and *our tears*. It is the fullness of our grief, expressed in communal celebrations of great beauty that feeds the dead when they visit, so that when they return to the other world they can be of help to us in return. And by feeding them with our grief, we are allowed to drop some of the

emotional load we all carry simply by living in these times.

Such beliefs are nearly universal, except of course, in modern Western culture. But the old gods are returning as they sense our interest in healing the old unfinished business of the past. This is the real reason for the upsurge of interest in these celebrations.

This year, there will be Day of the Dead celebrations all over the area. There will be art installations at the Oakland Museum and the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, as well as at many shops in the Mission district, which will also host the annual Day Of the Dead Procession on the evening of November 2nd. And Samhain – the Witch’s New Year – will be celebrated in the annual *Spiral Dance Ritual* hosted by the Reclaiming Collective. Take advantage of the time – dress up and celebrate, or build an altar to your ancestors at home. Better still, get together with friends; make a safe ritual space. Tell poems and stories and put your feelings into song. Welcome your beloved dead and feed them with your tears. It will nourish

them, even as you release some of the weight on your own shoulders. As the poet William Stafford writes, “The darkness around us is deep.”
