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The mourning after death

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Why it's important for us to properly grieve and honor our dead.

By Sandra M. Gilbert
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AS THE DAYS shorten, the wheel of the year cycles down toward two resonant holidays, the feast of All Saints (Nov. 1) and the feast of All Souls (Nov. 2). The first celebrates the dead who were especially holy; the second the departed spirits of all the dead. Perhaps because darkness increasingly encroaches

on daylight, the dead seem especially close at this season. They must seem so in the corners of Europe, where these festivals are celebrated as La Toussaint, Allerheiligen or Tutti i Santi, and in Mexico, where El Dia de los Muertos is a major fiesta.

In the United States, though, such holidays have been subsumed into the quirky merriment of our contemporary Halloween, with its costumed send-ups of dread: trick-or-treating kids dressed as ghosts and skeletons; jack-o-lantern skulls glowing on porches. Do we party so hard on this night to ward off our fear that the dead are too close?

As a country, we're clearly ambivalent about death and mourning. We're living in a time and place in which the procedures for grieving are problematic. As the Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote, in the nuts-and-bolts world of facts that he identified with the United States, "death is merely one more fact" -- one that our American "philosophy of progress" tries to make "disappear, like a magician palming a coin." Nearly 60 years after Paz wrote these words, we still live with the discomfort he described.

The traditional funeral, which emphasizes the ineradicable sorrow of loss, increasingly is being replaced by the so-called celebration of the life, which emphasizes the joy of what was and evades the painful shock of absence. In 2006, New York Times reporter John Leland noted that some services for the dead are now being orchestrated by party planners, one of whom said the popularity of cremation is one reason for the change. With no corpse present, he said, services can be less somber.

"The body's a downer, especially for [baby] boomers," this "funeral concierge" said. "If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us up to do what we want. They may want to have [a memorial service] in a country club or bar or their favorite restaurant. That's where consumers want to go."

But as the poet and funeral director Thomas Lynch shows in his gravely beautiful book "The Undertaking," the dead matter -- not because, to venture a pun, they are dead matter but because the bodies that we cherished need our care, and the spirits we loved deserve our honor.

One in an extended family of undertakers, Lynch writes eloquently of procedures for mourning. "Where death means nothing, life is meaningless," he notes, discussing the difference between "death that happens and death that matters." PBS' "Frontline" has just filmed an episode based on Lynch's meditative classic (airing Oct. 30), and it follows him, his brothers and sons through the ceremonial aftermath of several deaths, watching as bodies are prepared for burial and rooms are set up for family farewells. To dress the dead, say the Lynches, is to do something for someone who can no longer do anything for himself. And to view the dead is to truly grasp what we passionately don't want to be true.

For me, the poignant images of the Lynches going about their difficult but necessary business bring back memories of the moments when I myself have gazed at the dead, astonished at the extraordinary change I was witnessing: Someone I had deeply known was becoming utterly other as he or she faded away from the body I had loved. Such grief and astonishment are feelings we mustn't hide from ourselves, even while we rejoice in our good memories of those we've lost.

As for trick-or-treaters dressed as ghosts and skeletons, researchers remind us that

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our practice of doling out sweets originates, as does the celebration of All Hallow's Eve itself, in the customs of the Celtic feast of Samhain, when the invisible veil that separates this world from the realm of the dead supposedly became permeable. Perhaps darkening days let the spirits slip through; perhaps the heaped-up bounty of the harvest lured them.

The living left out "soul cakes" to appease the hunger of the ghosts straying among swirling autumn leaves. And they built bonfires and hung lanterns, the ancestors of our beaming pumpkins, to guide the wandering dead through shadows -- and maybe reassure them that they were truly missed and properly mourned.

Sandra M. Gilbert is the author of "Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve," and a professor emerita at UC Davis.

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