Sophia Remembers

DAY OF THE DEAD

Eduardo Barraza

First Edition 2011
HISPANIC INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL ISSUES
Mesa, Arizona
Contents

7 Preface

11 Sophia Remembers

15 The Altar

21 Gladioli at the Cemetery

25 Remembering Sophia

29 Reflecting on the Day of the Dead
Deeply rooted in the Mexican custom of remembering the dead, *Sophia Remembers, Day of the Dead*, describes the devout ritual of a woman who expressed her most profound sorrow for her deceased loved ones on November 2nd of each year. Following the traditional rite, Sophia would prepare a humble altar with mystical devoutness and respect toward those spirits who -according to tradition- would visit the world of the living in search of a spiritual offering especially for them. The flames from the small candles lighted for each dead loved one illuminated a tiny room with tables, where photographs of the deceased were placed adding an air of mystery, along with the respective glasses of water and pieces of bread to feed the souls, becoming almost sacred and hallowed. *Sophia Remembers, Day of the Dead*, depicts with realism, accuracy, and truthfulness the Day of the Dead tradition, as well as the fervent holiday's observance of a woman who celebrated it with tears, mourning, and sadness.
Sophia Remembers

DAY OF THE DEAD
Tears began to roll down Sophia’s cheeks days before the annual day to remember the dead. By mid-October of each year, a penetrating, blended fragrance of incense burning and cempasúchil flowers at the marketplace was the unequivocal sign heralding on the streets the soon arrival of another day of remembrance. This aroma of marigold flowers and incense became the dominant, unmistakable, and peculiar smell of mid-Fall, the impregnating fragrance of the Día de los Muertos.

The religious holiday of the Day of the Dead was not to be observed until November 2nd. However, a couple of weeks before, flower and incense vendors began to prepare the way and the hearts for the day when —according to the deeply-rooted and ancient tradition— the souls of the fieles difuntos or the faithful deceased would arrive to receive the spiritual offering arranged for them by their living loved ones. Offerings arranged with dedication and devotion by people like Sophia.

The tradition of formally and religiously remembering the dead on a special day is richly expressed both in
the intimacy of people’s homes and in the open, inside markets and on the adjacent narrow sidewalks overflowing with street vendors. Thus, through the representation of many symbols, death positions itself for a few weeks at the center of the social and religious life of the people. Life and death oscillate toward and away from each other like pendulums through this cultural manifestation where both overlap either in the form of a sugar skull or a lighted candle.

Nevertheless, remembering the dead was for Sophia more of an intimate and a spiritual expression than a cultural festivity or a celebration. The very core of a day like the Day of the Dead was for her a deep emotion, a sorrowful act, and a sentiment cascading an inner flow of sad memories that crystallized in many tears. In this sense, Sophia’s act of remembering her dead relatives was the true essence of a day she did not look forward to, a duty she faithfully observed in the privacy of her home.

Remembering the dead in the traditional context of Día de los Muertos is pure spiritual action, not spiritual thinking. As the holiday summons millions of people to a massive commemoration of those who have passed away, the call is to carry out an active tribute, to go beyond the ordinary mental memories a person has of his or her deceased loved ones. It is this conviction that moves people to create altars to honor and remember the dead, visit cemeteries, clean and adorn graves, thus creating a unique atmosphere that permeate the social mood and transfigures the surroundings into a two-dimensional
world: the world of the living and the world of the dead. Both spiritual and physical entities bump into each other in the most natural manner, the same way people bump into each other on the narrow sidewalks.

So it was in the midst of this flower and incense-scented ambiance, on the narrowness of the sidewalks surrounding the market, in the width and the depth of the mystical encounter of the living with the dead that Sophia began preparing for the day of the dead, as tears would roll down her cheeks and her heart readied to remember.
El Día de los Muertos arrived at Sophia’s house moving quietly under the front door, travelling almost imperceptibly in the aroma of incense and cempasúchil flowers. The essence of the holiday found its niche inside a tiny, one-window room where a Day of the Dead altar would be arranged there by the woman who in her lifetime would experience the passing of her parents, brothers, sisters, sons, a daughter, a son-in-law, her husband, and stillborn twin grandchildren. So many deaths of family members —some very tragic and sudden— made the arrangement of Sophia’s altar a busy chore and meticulous mission.

A table bestowed the foundation upon which the altar for the visiting spirits would become tangible. Each dead family member would be remembered individually, and represented by a set of altar items, including photographs of some of them. Sophia’s devotion and dedication was a form of spiritual gift, as she remembered every single relative who had passed away throughout her lifetime. Hers was a dutiful talent fulfilled diligently and with earnestness,
as if she would have been chosen to live a long life to become the warden of her family’s Día de los Muertos ritual. The tiny room, the still empty table, the silent portraits; all became alive for the dead under the thoughtfulness of Sophia’s heart and the labor of her hands.

The portraits emerged from boxes or plastic bags like spears, wounding Sophia’s soul. They were there again; almost alive, suspended in time, departed but not forgotten, looking directly into her eyes, near and distant, summoned from eternity into the reality of a special, yet somber day. They were there again —the dead— as when they were alive; they are here today —those who were alive— now silently dead. Sophia’s hands trembled as she placed one, two, a dozen more photos on the table, vertically standing, perpetually immovable. Aged pieces of photo paper taking their place on the altar; voiceless memories on print
speaking loudly from their lifeless stillness.

A colorless, tasteless, and odorless symbol of life—water—gave essence to Sophia’s offering for the dead. Glasses of water would be served and placed on the table for each relative remembered. Among the solemn appearance of the altar, water stood out with its representation of life among the photographs of dead family members. Water for the souls; water to quench their thirst; water as a reverberation of their life. Water as the most devoted gesture from Sophia for the loving memory of those who for a long-brief time were among the living. By offering a glass of water, Sophia was quenching, at least momentarily, her own thirst and longing for her departed relatives.

Then there was the bread, one piece individually assigned, just as with the water, for each family member.
Together with the water, bread defined her formula of observing the Day of the Dead ritual, since they are the two most basic elements of survival. Hers was a simple yet very powerful way of “feeding” the souls, of making sure no one went hungry or thirsty, that is, no deceased family member would be forgotten in her heart. Sophia’s altar was humble, personal, and limited to the four walls and the small window of the room. Sophia’s altar was true to its purpose. Sophia’s altar was evocative and powerful.

The matches that lighted up the many candles Sophia added to her offering in the Día de los Muertos was the prelude of a continuous visual, a gloomy spectacle of small flames. The candles were the culminating moment when the altar began to fulfill its intended purpose: “to remember the dead.” The combined effect from the many candles illuminated the small room with a mysterious light that reflected everywhere, adding a melancholic appearance to the photos, and creating an atmosphere that inspired reverence. More fundamentally, each candle came to represent the life of each family member who was being remembered. And just as each candle was lit into a self-consuming purpose, the metaphoric element of a wick symbolized the beginning and the end of life.
Gladioli at the Cemetery

Wearing mourning black clothes, Sophia would fulfill her duty of visiting the cemetery, reluctantly but faithfully. She would kneel down at the feet of the tomb, say a prayer, and cry abundantly. A dead son, daughter, brother, mother and son-in-law… All loved-ones, all deceased. All remembered.

Beneath the surface covered by a tombstone made of marble were buried the remains of some of Sophia’s closest and most loved family members. That was the place where she witnessed the burial, where she gave the last farewell to a loved one, and the casket descended, taking away forever the object of her love. Going there was not a choice but a duty, a responsibility she did not elude in spite of her sorrow. Visiting the cemetery would be another ritual Sophia carried out with sadness but devotedly.

The area contiguous to the cemetery was plentiful of flower sellers. A colorful landscape created by the many flowers contrasted with the somber reason Sophia would visit that place. Among the many flowers, she would pick freshly-cut gladioli of different colors for the tombs of her
relatives. She would later place them with carefulness inside the built-in flower marble vases.

The gladioli gave color and a beautiful view to an otherwise depressing landscape, but their ornamental effect was not sufficient to decrease Sophia’s grief. Nevertheless, Sophia would clean the tomb, deposit flowers in the built-in vases, and make sure it was well kept, thus honoring the memory of her departed relatives.

On the Day of the Dead, entire families would visit cemeteries, crowding the space and altering the sepulchral silence. Sometimes Sophia would prefer to visit the cemetery a few days before to ensure she would have the silence and peacefulness to concentrate on her prayers.

The way back home from the cemetery was quiet but somewhat comforting. A sense of fulfillment gave Sophia some relief. She closed her eyes and pictured in her mind the tombs of her dead family members. They were adorned with colorful gladioli.
For many years Sophia fulfilled her assumed role of remembering her dead relatives in the same traditional way. Year after year, when November 2nd approached, Sophia would perform her ritualistic routine with dedication and seriousness. She remained more devoted to the core value of the Día de los Muertos than to the cultural aspect of this holiday. She was more concerned about truly remembering the dead in a reverent and sincere way. Hers was a simple yet powerful way to make sure the memory of those who have died was kept alive, and that this was done faithfully.

Having remained true to the real and fundamental purpose of observing the Day of the Dead, Sophia taught with her silent example the importance of remembering. She did that in a respectful manner mainly because she was moved by her own feelings, and because hers was a genuine sorrow for those relatives who departed during her lifetime. Making the effort to create an altar each year, she maintained alive the memory of her father and mother, her brother and sisters, her sons and daughter, as well
as other relatives who had passed away. Because of this personal and private devotion, today others remember Sophia.

While in other countries the Día de los Muertos gains popularity, in Mexico its original value continues to be diminished. The influence of foreign customs like Halloween first blended and then took relevance over the traditional way of observing the Day of the Dead. In contrast, here in the United States there is a growing interest to learn about this old and deeply-rooted tradition. Times have changed and continue to change. Nevertheless, remembering the dead remains a strong tradition.

Sophia passed away some years ago. Because hers was a large family, and tragedy struck her many times, hers was a particular case of a woman who throughout her
life had the misfortune of seeing many very close family members die. Remembering the dead was consequently an important duty that she fulfilled to the letter.

Today Sophia is remembered not only on November 2nd by her survivors, but also through her inspirational story in this book. Perhaps her example will instill a similar devotion in new generations who may become motivated to follow the tradition and express it in their own unique way. Remembering the dead is ultimately inherent to the human experience, whether it is done formally or otherwise.

In spite of her continuous sorrow, Sophia lived to see many descendants and enjoyed life to the extent of her possibilities. The many tears that frequently rolled down her cheeks did not overshadow her smile, patience, and endurance. Yesterday, Sophia remembered; today, we remember Sophia.
Reflecting on the Day of the Dead

Los muertos. Our dead loved ones. The ones that were around us and are no more. Those who were as alive as we are today, and as dead as we will be tomorrow. Men and women who linger in our memories with an unfathomable presence, in spite of their departure. Their last breath became the motive of our sighing, and our longing for what’s gone. Their presence is much alive, because we are alive, and we keep them alive.

They remind us that we are alive each year, each November 2nd, when the Day of the Dead —their day— prompts us to pause and think about them once again, this time, in a more formal, reflective and melancholic manner. Reminiscences of what they were, recollections of what they meant, and still mean in our lives, leads us to light up a candle, to look at their pictures —images where their perennial smiles remain— and to place a glass of water, a piece of bread, next to those portraits to feed and quench —not their souls— but our own hunger and thirst for them.

We had them for a time. They were much of what we were yesterday and are today. In their latitude of silence,
their lifetime appears in our minds and hearts in seconds; seconds that we breathe on their behalf. A part of us died with them; a part of them lives in us. Together –their absence and our presence– they become a full circle of life and death, a circumference encompassing both the reality of life and the dreading of death. An endless loop always ending and always beginning, but yet reminds us of their and our finite journey.

Do we, the living, try to perpetuate ourselves by perpetuating the memories of them, the dead? Do we celebrate the Day of the Dead to ensure someone will celebrate for us when we become “them?” Is the candle we light for them today seeking to earn a flame for us tomorrow? Can we blackmail ourselves observing the ritual of the dead, thinking that our self-compassion will be an after-death applicable guarantee? Or are we simply fulfilling our duty, no matter who may remember us, who may forget us tomorrow?

We bring the flowers; nevertheless, their aroma saturates the room and gives scent to our remembrance. We fill the glass with water, and see the images of both the dead and us through an inexplicable transparency: what is water, what is life? And then, we place the piece of bread. In its unassuming appearance, bread is still bread: it feeds us, literally and figuratively. So metaphorically, the bread feeds us in more than a couple of ways. More than anything, it nourishes our yearning to feed the deceased one’s spirit. However, the incidental effect of this desire ends up feeding us. And thus, celebrating the dead, we
are satiated. Today, we are alive. Don’t we know anyway that God “is not a God of the dead, but of the living?”

On the Day of the Dead, let’s be assured that tears are allowed; after all, death is a very sad event. Laughter is acceptable as well; after all, the concept of celebrating the life of the dead is a catchy distraction that entertains our minds and consciences from the somber, future, inescapable reality. Laughter won’t hinder grief; sadness won’t deter happiness. Both entwine and become one. We rejoice that our dead were once alive; and then we retreat, realizing with sorrow that our dead are that, dead. Laughter and grief symbolize our beginning and our end. They both are also needed to close the circle. Laughter will lessen our heart’s burden. Tears streaming down our cheeks might quench the candle’s flame, but they won’t quench the memory of those who have moved on.