

Nov. 6, 2016

# Heaven is just a breath away

We recently celebrated All Souls Day ... well, we didn't really *celebrate* it. We *noted* it. We saw it on the calendar and said, "Oh, this is All Souls Day. *Hmmmm*. How about that? ... You know, I could really go for a Graham cracker."

I know *I* didn't really celebrate it. Not *really*. Maybe if we had an All Souls Day tree. Or a basket filled with All Souls Day goodies brought by the All Souls Day possum or armadillo or something.

This is where, I believe, I can learn a lot from many of my Spanish-speaking brethren. And *sisteren*.

For people of south-of-the-border ancestry, the day also is known as "The Day of the Dead," which is actually celebrated Nov. 1-2, combining "All Saints Day" and "All Souls Day". This is when families take special time to honor their loved ones who have died.

They may set up altars in their home or church that contain a cross, a photo of their loved one, some items representing that person's earthly loves—a baseball, a journal, etc... (An altar set up in my honor would include a package of Double Stuf Oreo Cookies and a video of "It Came From Outer Space")—as well as sugar sculptures: skulls, little caskets with tiny skeletons inside, or other items depicting life in death.

And this is where some of you may put on the brakes. I understand that it may *look* a little macabre, but it's far from it. In fact, the tradition of sugar sculptures—whether it be skulls or toy skeletons in tiny caskets—was brought to the New World by Italian missionaries in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. (*So, you see? It's a Catholic thing! I'm just sayin'....*)

The Day of the Dead is one of the only celebrations designed specifically to recognize that our relationships with our loved ones don't end at death. Those relationships continue. The "Day of the Dead" celebrates those ongoing relationships. Our loved ones aren't gone as if in a *poof* of smoke, they've just relocated. And really not that far away. Closer than Arkansas, I think. Closer even than Wichita. In fact, Heaven, I think, is only a breath away.

So, when you go into a store, a church, or someone's home and see a sugar skull or skeletal action figures dressed in wedding garments or some sort of costume, don't think "macabre." Instead, know that these represent a Catholic/cultural celebration of the unending love between the living and the dead, and the dead and the living.

Which brings me to my great-grandpa. I've shared this story before, usually around All Souls Day, but I think it is worth repeating. Every word of it is true.

My great-grandpa was a farmer. When he was approaching middle-age—after having had several children—he lost his sight to glaucoma. Obviously, life became a struggle for the young man, who suddenly had to depend on his wife and children to help him learn once again to master his surroundings, which he did to great success (except when one of the boys forgot to cover the trap door in the barn loft).

My great-grandmother later gave birth to twins, Hiram and Homer (Hi and Ho as they were affectionately called), but of course Great-Grandpa was never able to see them.

Great-Grandpa was a faith-filled man who lived a good, long life, and when he finally died, his funeral was attended by many.

Several years after his death, my grandmother Leota, a school teacher, approached her brother, Arthur, an English professor at a local university. She had something to share that had dogged her since their father's funeral.

She told him that at the funeral, she had seen the face of their father at the front of the church looking down at the twin boys—now young men—and smiling through seeing eyes.

Arthur's response? He gave her an astonished look, paused for a moment, and replied, "I saw him, too!" This isn't a story that was passed down several generations; it was told to my sister by my grandmother herself—a first person account, as we in the biz say. (You outside of the biz are allowed to say it, too.)

What a great gift! We don't need proof of the life-after; we've got Jesus's word, after all. But, hey, we're human. A little proof of the life-after ain't such a *bad* thing either!

Chances are fairly good that some of you have your own personal stories related by family or friends, or this incredible event may even have happened to you. I would love to hear your story!

Another story regards my uncle (on the other side of the family) who died on the operating table and saw his grandmother standing in her apron as she had so many times while he was growing up, her arms outstretched to him. Obviously, he came back from death's door to tell the story and lived many more years. I don't know that I could have known the story had he not come back, what with the time it takes to send a letter these days.

The "Day of the Dead" celebration gets it right. I can almost hear the frustrations of my friends and loved ones who have passed, yearning for us to accept and know that they are alive with the Lord and, by the way, having a great time! This is, after all, what God has promised us, and you gotta admit, it sounds awesome:

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him."

-- 1 Corinthians 2:9

