

Enjoying the Miracle of What You Have

By

Daniel E. White October 21, 2024

In my first year of writing *About Aging*, I noted my new appreciation for an old holiday celebrated widely across our hemisphere, “Dia de Los Muertos.” I wrote:

“The magic of ‘Dia de Los Muertos’ is that the living make a conscious effort, at least on this one day a year, to breathe life into the memories of the dead. To be so remembered requires no other accomplishment than to have been born, integrated into a family or a community, thereby touching the lives of others. ‘Dia de Los Muertos’ is an egalitarian form of immortality; there are no limitations of class, wealth or accomplishment.”

“I understand ‘Dia’ to be celebratory, filled with dancing and revelry, if not actual, then in spirit. Any and all of the dead are invited.” The spirits of the departed are alive to the living. “Maybe it is an important ritual for the newly dead who, it would seem, are integrally involved in a transition, too.”

In 2024, as in all of the other years since those lines were written, there are new invitees to the party, friends and family who have moved on from their earthly lives. Their departures have left unmistakable holes that are never filled but often made bearable by new experiences for those left behind. A day like “Dia” strikes me not only as an opportunity for joyfully remembering the dead but an invitation also to consider the joy in living that might still lay ahead for us.

An article in *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2024, by Professor Philip Weinstein, begins with a description of how the professor and his wife, both in their 80s, begin each day. Weinstein titled the essay “Free.”

On a typical day, he wakes up first and goes to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. He loads a tray with mugs of coffee and some pastry and goes back to the bedroom. There, he and his wife sit sipping their coffee, not speaking much at first as they take in the view of not-too-distant Vineyard Sound. The resident birds appear and offer their contributions to the music of nature, muffled by the closed window.

When they choose to talk more, the usual topics are the TV shows from the previous night or what they each had learned at the dinner party or what to do with the day ahead. Rarely do they talk about world affairs. Their focus is themselves. Then they get up and start the day.

About this, Weinstein wrote, “I call it a ritual, but the word ceremony is equally apt...Our little doings are familiar and available to everyone yet who but the elderly would indulge them...our ritual is ours alone.”

“At this point, a strange recognition may spring into focus: it is only us, the old ones, not our children or grandchildren, whose time is entirely our own.”

Citing the tragic end of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* wherein the King and Cordelia are imprisoned, the retired professor of English wrote “the prison walls bespeak the approaching end, but they also shelter a *beyond* that those outside its wall, bent on power and advancement, remain blind

to: the *beyond* when there’s nothing more you want, when you enjoy the miracle of what you have. A *beyond* that becomes a *here*. Is this the meaning of freedom itself?”

“Our morning ritual and the aimless chatter that accompanies it enacts our freedom...We are, however diminished, our own agents.”

“That may not seem like much, and it may not last that long. But we never had it earlier, and for us it is enough.”

People of a Certain Age, some might have to live a long time, as have the Weinstains, to arrive at the obvious contentment they enjoy with what they have. Some might enjoy the grace that comes with enjoying what one has earlier in life. If so, they are, indeed, fortunate.

The new invitees to my ritual of remembrance this year have all left holes in the lives of those who have loved them. That’s the crummy part for those left behind. Also crummy is the possibility, even probability, that either Judy or I will face such a hole, unless we go down together in a plane crash or some such.

It is well and good to acknowledge that none of us will live forever, that death is a part of the bargain for life. The ache of separation is real, though. The hole will hurt.

All the more reason, as our own agents, however diminished, to cherish what we have. And, as Mom and Chad proved, sometimes the unexpected shows up and a 70-year-old infatuation becomes a happy nine-year marriage.

Dia de Los Muertos is first and foremost a day to breathe life into the memories of the dead. Perhaps it is also a chance to renew a sense of the joy of living in the celebrants for the here and now.

The Weinstains don’t wait for the first of November to renew that sense.

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