

Coinage for Caring: Capitalism, Christmas, and Día de los Muertos

Huge burgundy flowers dwarf the heads of the little girls next to me on the bus. Well, they were next to me a second ago, flitting this way and that in t-shirts advertising their dance company home. One little girl chose sunflower gold for her eyeshadow while her sister picked bright turquoise. Faces painted white with black curlicues and flower petals to make a skull, the girls' eyes go wide as the bus lurches and rocks—their first bus ride, mom explains. My first Día de los Muertos.

Skulls, symbols so integral to the holiday as to adorn the face of small children, are something fairly new to the Día de los Muertos exhibition. Throughout the 60s and 70s, as new generations began to migrate from the poorer Mexican barrios, holiday rituals such as cemetery visits and vigils remained secluded within these bounds of economic restraints. New holiday emblems arose as the holiday followed these new migrants north of the border. Soon, depictions of skulls and skeletons dominated the holiday scene—so much so that new generations think these spooky figures have always represented Día de los Muertos.

The two girls traveling on the bus were no exception to this rule. Their mother was feeding them new ideals in addition to the ones presented by society's cultural appropriation of tradition for profit.

Huffing about the homeless people littering the street, mom complained, "I thought there would be security here. You don't expect to take little kids to a festival and come to this," She waves her arms wide, gesturing at the shirtless homeless men paired with women in raggedy bright clothing. There's a preacher on the corner in a purple shirt, shouting bible verses into a microphone that reverberate off the asphalt and add tenacity to the air. He sounds like an auction

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announcer, his voice insincere for something so sentimental. Like an auctioneer, the preacher hypnotizes his listeners as we are all hypnotized beginning in Fall, a mantra beaten into our bones: purchase or perish, meaning sold to the highest bidder. His words are presented as free, but all who answer the call of caring pay a price for the lifestyle change. The homeless women dressed up for something—was it for the impromptu sermon, the Day of the Dead festivities? Was it for themselves? Mom didn't seem to think so: the “disgusting” homeless people merely marred the scenery. Her idealistic vision of Día de los Muertos: ruined from the beginning.

The skull emblem knows no strangers. About one hundred feet from the main festivities, at the festival's entrance, colorful murals leap from the walls. Hunched over a bike on an oceanside road, a cadaver wears a helmet to protect his skull—the bare bones are extra fragile. A skeletal horse and bull trod the horizon while human joggers take in the city's happenings: skating, barking bones, and tourists snapping pictures. Across the steps, the oceanside road broadens into the sea where a flaming skull leads a rock'n'roll band from a boat surrounded by mere carcasses of fish. Just as before, the living blend in with the dead. Upon first glance, it is difficult to distinguish between the skeletal spirits and the American festival goers dressed in masks.

The vendors' tents have settled into their oasis among the skyscraper-like buildings clothed in fabrics of sandstone and shale. The smell of smoked meat permeates the cool breeze, adding another degree of heat to the first warm day in a while. White tents on the left, colored on the right. Like an advertisement saying “Choose me! You'll stop to shop over here!” Colors explode—gold, violet, burnt sunset screaming for attention. And attention they have. Lookers, myself included, meander through the wares—mostly jewelry with some eccentric wine bottle chandeliers and Christmas ornaments that require a double-take.

The festival, due to officially commence in ten minutes, already has a large turn-out courtesy of advertisements. This festival was advertised in local Corpus Christi publications, found its home on the internet, and bought a seat in university classrooms as well. Commodified, advertisement draws attention to other commodities: preaching to the choir. During the earliest celebrations of what we would now recognize as Día de los Muertos, newspaper coverage of the holiday's happenings was slim and vague. Mexico's upper-class leaders feared civil unrest from the role reversal of life and death Día de los Muertos practiced.

This role reversal is evident: death is celebrated—especially among these craft booths where death equals profit. One booth offers handmade necklaces. Polymer clay, the wife informs me.

“She’s been working on these since June. Everything must be hand-made at the festival, so we can’t go down the street and buy it to sell it back to you here,” her husband explains. Nothing about tradition is mentioned; the focus flatters primarily profit.

Through handmade wares and the paper-crafted marigolds that adorn this tent stand and almost every other, the profit and enterprise culture masquerade as tradition and substance. The stand-owner hesitantly allows me to photograph a particularly colorful hand-painted skull. Its creamy base boasts violet flowers for eyes and floral intricacies in the place of hair. “I normally don’t allow them to take pictures. Sometimes, they’ll copy my ideas,” she says, referring to all festival-goers with the vague, alienating pronoun. I assure her I am just admiring her handiwork. Small talk leads haphazardly into the location of the nearest ATM as her husband says they sold out of some of her skeletal doll necklaces last year— as if that should make me jump to own the lace-skirted miniature skeletons hanging from the leather straps.

Upon asking the meaning of the doll necklaces, I am assured they have none.

Bright jewel-toned hues stand stark against the asphalt as if downtown didn't already see enough commerce. "I make only one-of-a-kind handbags and jewelry," a gray-haired vendor tells me as I finger the loose stitching on one of her bags. Her big beads, the necklaces' centerpieces, are plastic and glued to their anchor: pretty but flimsy.

The color distracts from the craftsmanship, but the craftsmanship detracts from the color. Tradition cheapened and commodified. Mexicans celebrating Día de los Muertos at its birth went into debt to create ofrendas honoring their deceased loved ones. This was due partially to commercialization of the objects and food included in traditional ofrendas, yet the devotion to memorialize loved ones remained the main concern.

Coryna Trevino, classmate and celebrator of Día de los Muertos, says the holiday helped her understand the fragility of life. "[I can] cherish those who are still with me," she says.

This booth is just an imitation of that devotion: the fragility of life has translated to the flimsiness of products, remembrance of loved ones calculated into coinage as the vendors equate support for the tradition with the money one spends. I move on.

Tzintzuntzan's Night of the Dead has witnessed this commercialization first hand. Traditional graveyard rituals have been pushed out in favor of a fair: cameras ostracize the event, electricity flows through the air, and the smell of heavy fair foods, like funnel cakes, assaults guests' noses. The fair atmosphere has invaded all such Día de los Muertos festivals—traditional food like Pan de Muertos and fruit are moved aside for fried Oreos and turkey legs. True tradition doesn't need an advertisement, but it doesn't always sell.

A monarch butterfly has landed on the yellow potted marigolds in front of the wine-bottle chandeliers. In Mexico, the monarch butterfly migration often correlates with Día de los Muertos, and citizens believe the spirits of their ancestors rest on the butterflies' wings. Yet, there is no sign for the butterfly, no promise of an up-front view of tradition with a surcharge. Symbolic beauty doesn't boast with bright colors or affirmations of uniqueness and craft; it just is.

A coarse, throaty voice commands the air, "Do not fear. The angel of death is here." Giant speakers accompany the slow rise and descent of the skeleton into a truck bed. Juxtaposed are two words that many quake before: angel and death. But death holds no menace here.

Small children's cherub cheeks are painted white, sections of their faces blacked out to depict skulls. The children view the paint as no more than an extension of a Halloween costume.

"Día de los Muertos is a lot more than a cute Halloween costume," Trevino says. "I can't visit [my loved ones'] graves, so talking to them is my way of visiting them. I feel like they're still with me when I'm speaking to them. It means the world to me to keep them updated on my life, even if they aren't here to witness it." Outsiders do whatever it takes to be near the dead even just for a day. Distract from life and they'll follow death; distract from death and they'll hug life. However, Día de los Muertos intertwines this dance of life and death: death, a natural occurrence, doesn't need distraction.

CHRISTMAS AND CAPITALISM

Some Mexican natives equate Día de los Muertos to the Christmas. Offerings left for beings unseen, cheap decorations that outlast the season, economy that flourishes and bustles: the similarities between the Americanized counterfeits of both holidays are aplenty. Painted

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Christmas balls call from a miniature tree at the corner stand. Profiles of skeletal faces with ruby lips and elaborate floral headgear retail for twelve dollars. Announced by their brightly painted backgrounds, these prices are non-negotiable. The soft peridots, bright sapphires, and deep rubies overwhelm the tree they adorn. Tradition is overshadowed by marketing that persists even when the supply overestimates the demand. One can buy a whole set of ornaments at a big box store for less than one here, but it's the 'sentiment' that sells. Yet, the stand remains empty. I am the only customer.

Drive the ever-shortening distance to your nearest big box store to be affronted by a marked difference in scenery. Christmas merchandise screams from the shelves: tempting, branded holiday gift sets that conveniently only surface this time of year boast bold colors while Santa Claus, ten-foot-tall snowman inflatables, and reindeer reign nearby. The snowman is the ultimate signifier of caring, a symbol to show by-passers: here lives a big participator in Christmas! Or, maybe the owner of the snowman inflatable down the street is simply trying to meet the holiday demands of their young children—capitalistic grooming must start early to gain another devout consumer. Yet, aren't holidays worth more than the objects associated with them? But what would Christmas look like without jolly Santa Clauses and tinsel every three feet? Forget the people in Africa who don't know it's Christmas at all—would we know the holiday without the seeing the symbols that voice our support?

I'd argue yes. Since Europeans' rising class status transferred trans-Atlantically to establish markets in America, vendors have been tweaking our perception of these symbols: rabbits for Easter, cupids for Valentine's Day, and Santa for Christmas started long, long ago. As in 200 years ago, long ago. Capitalism has turned the display of these symbols into claiming support. And, as if that wasn't burden enough, with the growing middle class, bigger and better

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gifts came to represent as much the status of the giver as the sentimentality of the gift given.

Caring really *was* communicated by coinage. Spend less on one family member at Christmas than you did on the other? It's obvious which one you care for more. Price tag anxiety is prevalent for both parties—Oh, he only spent \$10 on my gift—did I do something to upset him? Does he even care about me at all? Again, in answer to the latter question, I'd argue yes. As millennials new at parenthood prepare for the holiday season and gifting their children, focus has moved from gifting the hottest new toy to giving something that can create an experience, increase time gathered as a family, meet a need, or educate their offspring.

As inflation has formed a somewhat ragged economy, millennial parents believe “caring” has less and less come to be equated by coinage. Yet, unfortunately, one cannot often speak for the many. Advertising runs rampant—symbolism of the holidays begins in seemingly haphazard paths earlier every year in the big-box stores we perused earlier. Soon, “Christmas in July” may actually mark the start of the advertisers' initiation to the busiest, most wonderful (read: most profitable) time of the year. Advertising's strategic approach to lure in consumers began long ago as well: newspaper companies learned that, in exchange for a cheerful holiday poem recited by the corner newspaper boys, passers-by would eagerly give coins. This “tradition” was so enjoyed by consumers—or so effectively marketed by big newspaper bosses—that it found a welcoming abode in Calvinist New England among Puritans who once vehemently opposed this “Pagan” reiteration of holiday celebration. In these once-strict communities, money slowly conquered tradition and sacredness.

Unfortunately, the battle between religious Christmas celebration and this new epitome of Christmas cheer would see a victor with the rise of America's consumerist culture: free enterprise, or “chaotic competition” dominated the market. Again, caring communicated by

coinage within a population hungry for the next big thing. And, really, why not answer the call of consumerism by purchasing the “New, Even Better, model (now with a free, complimentary back-scratcher!)”? Isn’t it a win-win-win situation? The gift-giver’s status is displayed when able to afford the newer gift, the manufacturers make more money from providing (and up charging) the new product, and the gift recipient receives a new gift that seems to communicate the giver’s level of affection for them. Everyone wins, right? Not quite.

Let’s go back to the anxious \$10-gift recipient wondering about how drastic his shortcomings were to receive only a \$10 gift. If he had no knowledge of the cost of the gift—if the gift was one not obsessively advertised—but the cost had still equated to about \$10, would his disappointment and worry even exist? I don’t believe so. But how do you keep the cost of a gift secret where Google can easily inform the recipient of the price of the item they were gifted? Easy. Don’t offer the price. Give a gift where the amount shelled out is more difficult to determine. Make a homemade gift. Let your craftsmanship—not coinage—communicate caring this holiday season. Every year, I gift my religious gardener grandmother a hand-painted flower pot, painted with a bible verse and themed scenery circling the pot’s exterior. I place a symbolic silk flower within it, “soil” typically made of candy like Hershey’s kisses. The Christmas after my grandpa—her husband—passed away, the purple silk flower represented the flower type he had most enjoyed from her garden. Altogether, the materials probably cost around \$10, but she tells me she looks at the flower pot every morning. This simple yet meaningful gift has become a tradition. Here, tradition is not for-profit. No culture has been appropriated or wallet thoroughly emptied in the name of establishing or celebrating this tradition.

I have always enjoyed crafting sentimental gifts where time spent far outweighs the monetary contribution. Caring is communicated through, well, *caring*.

My grandpa's memory was preserved through gift-giving, just as the native celebrators of Día de los Muertos memorialized their loved ones with ofrendas at the Corpus Christi Día de los Muertos festival. Marigolds crest ofrendas where ruby, sunflower gold, and turquoise explode, and hand-drawn or hand-painted portraits illustrate loved ones passed over. The ofrendas of the festival are a maze that curious passers-by are guided through with candles and *papel picado*. One ofrendas offers an explanation to non-Native participators in the holiday: “[Dia de los Muertos] is a day of joyous remembrance, not of sadness.” Bright colors confirm this. An ofrenda so large it was given its own crevice of the room boasts paintings and huge paper marigolds—far larger than even the heads of the little girls we met earlier on the bus—intricate, red maracas, and cascading silk floral arrangements that grace the top of the memorial. A miniature guitar and rolling pin likely indicate the loved one's interests and passions.



This is tradition done right—a personalized, intimate celebration with no advertisement.

It was easy to miss the faded red building that housed the ofrendas, and the volunteers at the doorway didn't offer explanation as to what laid inside.

Caring at these memorials was *not* communicated by coinage—no entry fee accompanied the maze of treasured memories and no emboldened, brazened advertisement accompanied the treasured objects within. To understand the candles, the water and tequila, and the beautiful, almost bejeweled bread that accompanied most of the ofrendas, one must educate themselves of the symbolization. The candles guide loved ones' spirits home on the only night of the year they can cross the bridge from the afterlife and return to the land of the living where water and tequila quell their thirsts following the journey from one world to the next.

Coryna created an ofrenda for her grandfather. Yet, curiously enough, it is not an object once owned by him that stirs up one of her most cherished memories of him. “Now, almost 10 years [after his passing], I'd give anything to hear him sing one more time.” No object reigns and controls her mind—it is an experience she loves the most. Like the experience millennials seek to gift their children this holiday. Time spent with family isn't valued by objects exchanged but by, well, time spent. In a country and season dominated by the ebb and flow of consumerism, will you choose the ultimate expression of care going into the holiday season? Remember, caring is not communicated by coinage. All pressure is off. Just care—that's all I want for you for Christmas.

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