

The Altar as a Living Bridge

History, Symbolism, Remembrance, Healing, and the Sacred Art of Keeping Our Dead Close

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Welcome

You are standing before an *altar of remembrance*, also called an *ofrenda*, a sacred space created to honor people who have died, acknowledge the lives they lived, and affirm that love does not disappear when physical life ends.

An altar is not simply a collection of photographs, flowers, candles, food, and beautiful objects. It is a meeting place between memory and presence, sorrow and gratitude, the living and the dead. It gives form to something grief often struggles to express:

**You were here.
You mattered.
You remain part of us.**

This altar was created for the National Latino Behavioral Health Association community as a place of homage, reflection, cultural affirmation, and collective healing. Although it draws deeply from Mexican altar traditions, it also recognizes that Latin America is not culturally uniform. Practices honoring the dead vary across countries, Indigenous nations, regions, families, religions, and generations. Some are solemn, some exuberant, some Catholic, some Indigenous, some secular, and many are beautifully blended.

There is no single altar that represents every Latin American community. There is no universally correct number of levels or mandatory arrangement of objects. The altar is both inherited and personal: a cultural form shaped by local tradition, family memory, spiritual belief, available resources, creativity, and love.

The Special Dedication of This Altar

This NLBHA altar welcomes the names, photographs, prayers, stories, and memories of loved ones carried by conference attendees. It is also presented with two special dedications.

At the head of the altar, we honor **Josie Torralba Romero**, the first president of the National Latino Behavioral Health Association and one of the principal leaders involved

in its formation. Her vision, advocacy, and service helped establish the organization that brings us together at this conference.

Because the 2026 National Latino Behavioral Health Conference concludes on *September 11*, this altar also honors the 2,977 people killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as those families, first responders, recovery workers, mental health and health-care professionals who have died since as well as to the survivors and communities whose lives were permanently affected.

These dedications do not limit the altar. Rather, they establish it as a place where personal, organizational, cultural, and collective histories can be held together with dignity.

In Honor and Memory of Josie Torralba Romero

At the highest place on this altar is the photograph of ***Ms. Josie Torralba Romero***, the first president of the National Latino Behavioral Health Association and a major leader in its formation.

NLBHA remembers Josie as a social worker, educator, advocate, and pioneer whose professional life was dedicated to improving mental-health, social-service, and child-welfare systems for Latino and other underserved communities. Her leadership was instrumental to NLBHA's progress following its establishment in 2000. She died in 2004.

Her placement at the head of the altar does not suggest a hierarchy of grief. Instead, it recognizes her foundational and ancestral place within the history of the NLBHA community. Josie Torralba Romero is at the head of the altar with gratitude for the vision and service that helped make NLBHA and this gathering possible.

Josie Torralba Romero, presente!

In Remembrance of September 11, 2001

The 2026 NLBHA Conference concludes on *September 11*, twenty-five years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

On that morning, four commercial aircraft were hijacked. Two were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third struck the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers and crew members attempted to regain control of the aircraft.

A total of 2,977 people from 90 nations were killed: 2,753 in New York, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 aboard Flight 93. The dead included 441 first responders, representing the greatest loss of emergency responders during a single event in United States history. ([911 Memorial](#))

Ancient Roots and Living Traditions

Long before the arrival of Europeans, the Indigenous peoples of what is now Mexico and other parts of the Americas maintained complex spiritual relationships with death, ancestors, the earth, agricultural cycles, and the unseen world.

Among many Mesoamerican peoples, life and death were understood not simply as opposites, but as parts of a continuing cycle. Seeds were buried before they emerged as new life. Crops were harvested and returned to the earth. Human beings died, traveled, transformed, and remained connected to family and community through memory, ceremony, offerings, and reciprocal relationships.

Different Indigenous nations held and continue to hold distinct beliefs. We should therefore avoid compressing the Mexica, Maya, Purépecha, Totonac, Zapotec, Mixtec, Nahua, Huastec, and many other peoples into one generalized “Aztec” tradition.

For ancient Nahua peoples, the destination of the dead depended in part upon the manner of death rather than upon a simple moral judgment of reward or punishment.

Many souls were believed to undertake a difficult journey through Mictlán, the realm of the dead governed by Mictlantecuhitli and Mictēcacíhuatl. Other deaths were associated with destinations such as Tlalocan or the house of the sun.

Offerings accompanied the dead and helped sustain relationships between the departed, their families, the sacred world, and the earth.

The contemporary Mexican Día de Muertos should not be described as an unchanged, three-thousand-year-old ceremony. The observance as it exists today developed through centuries of transformation.

Indigenous remembrance practices encountered the Catholic feasts of All Saints’ Day on November 1 and All Souls’ Day, or the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, on November 2.

European religious images, crosses, saints, candles, prayers, and liturgical observances became intertwined with Indigenous flowers, foods, copal, agricultural symbolism, ancestral relationships, and understandings of death.

UNESCO describes the Indigenous festivity dedicated to the dead as a fusion of pre-Hispanic religious rites and Catholic feasts, bringing together Indigenous belief systems and worldviews introduced by Europeans during the sixteenth century. ([ICH UNESCO](#))

This is often called religious and cultural syncretism: not a simple replacement of one tradition by another, but a complex process of blending, adaptation, resistance, survival, and recreation of meaning. The result is not one fixed celebration but a living family of traditions.

In the Huasteca region, the season may be observed as Xantolo. In Yucatán, Maya communities observe Hanal Pixán, commonly translated as “food for the souls.”

In other regions, ceremonies include cemetery vigils, the cleaning and decoration of graves, prayers, bells, music, processions, dances, community meals, storytelling, and the preparation of foods associated with particular ancestors.

UNESCO recognizes the Indigenous festivity dedicated to the dead as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It describes the observance as a time when deceased relatives and loved ones are welcomed in a temporary return to the world of the living.

In many Indigenous communities, this period also coincides with the completion of the annual cycle of maize cultivation. Flower petals, candles, favorite foods, handicrafts, and other offerings are used to help welcome and guide the returning souls. (ICH UNESCO)

Tradition as a Living Cultural Process

One of the most respectful ways to understand these traditions is to avoid treating culture as something frozen in the distant past. Folklore is not merely old material preserved without change. It is a living social process.

Communities inherit symbols, beliefs, rituals, stories, foods, music, and ceremonies, but they also reshape them in response to new relationships, new losses, migration, changing family structures, public tragedies, and evolving ideas about whose grief deserves recognition.

Altar traditions are not culturally meaningful only because they are old. They remain meaningful because communities continue to use them to respond to changing relationships, emerging social realities, and losses that need recognition.

Some observances are rooted in longstanding Indigenous and Catholic traditions. Others have developed through folklore, family practice, regional custom, migration, and popular cultural need.

Together, they show that remembrance is both inherited and continually recreated. This does not make newer customs false or less legitimate. A practice does not need to be ancient to be culturally meaningful.

There is sometimes an assumption that a tradition is authentic only when it can be traced unchanged to a precolonial source. Cultures survive, however, precisely because they adapt.

Mexican altar traditions themselves developed through Indigenous foundations, Catholic observances, local customs, family practices, artistic movements, migration, and contemporary community needs. Their strength lies not in remaining untouched, but in continuing to make meaning.

Clinically, this matters greatly. Grief is often shaped by what society permits us to mourn. Some losses are publicly recognized and surrounded by ceremony. Others pet loss, miscarriage, overdose, suicide, estranged relationships, former partners, chosen family, migration, undocumented lives, and people whose identities were not fully recognized may receive little acknowledgment.

When communities add a candle, a date, a flower, a category, or a new ritual for these losses, they are doing more than modifying folklore. They are creating a form of social validation.

They are saying:
This relationship mattered.
This death created grief.
This grief deserves a place.

When a community expands a ritual to include a previously unrecognized loss, it is not weakening the tradition. It is enlarging the circle of belonging.

The Passage of Days: The Days of Arrival

Although the two principal Mexican observances for the dead are November 1 and November 2, many families and communities begin preparing their altars several days earlier.

Popular contemporary calendars sometimes assign different dates to particular groups of the deceased. These dates may be especially familiar through family tradition, schools, social media, community celebrations, cultural centers, churches, public altars, and contemporary Mexican and Latino popular culture.

These dates should not be understood as a single official or universal calendar followed throughout Mexico or Latin America.

Practices vary by region, town, family, Indigenous community, religious tradition, and generation. Some of the detailed dedications are longstanding local customs, while others appear to have become more widely practiced in recent years. They form part of the folklore and living culture surrounding the altar.

October 27: Companion Animals

October 27 - is now commonly dedicated to deceased companion animals.

Families may place photographs, water, food, collars, toys, blankets, paw prints, or favorite treats on the altar to welcome beloved animals who have died.

Animals have long held important spiritual, symbolic, and practical roles in Mesoamerican cultures. Dogs, including the Xoloitzcuintli, have been associated with death, companionship, and assistance during the soul's journey.

The designation of October 27 specifically as the day for deceased pets, however, appears to be an evolving popular observance rather than one universally ancient date. This newer observance reflects a significant cultural and social development.

For many contemporary families, an animal is not simply a *mascota* or household animal. A companion animal may be a source of attachment, routine, emotional regulation, safety, comfort, affection, and unconditional presence. The animal is understood as a member of the family.

The death of a companion animal may therefore produce profound grief, even though that grief is often minimized by society. A recognized day of remembrance helps make that relationship and its loss visible.

The emergence of this practice demonstrates how living traditions can respond to changing understandings of family, attachment, bereavement, and belonging.

October 28: Sudden, Violent, or Tragic Deaths

In some Mexican communities, **October 28** - is associated with people who died suddenly, violently, tragically, or in accidents. They may be referred to as *los matados*.

Families may place a candle, a glass of water, a white flower, or a separate offering in memory of those whose lives ended unexpectedly or violently.

This day may hold particular meaning for families affected by accidents, homicide, war, disappearance, disaster, or other traumatic circumstances.

October 28 is also the Catholic feast day of Saints Simon and Jude, and devotion to Saint Jude Thaddeus is especially strong in Mexico. Saint Jude is popularly invoked in desperate, difficult, or seemingly impossible situations.

Although the remembrance of tragic deaths and the feast of Saint Jude occur on the same date and families may connect the two spiritually the precise historical relationship between these observances is not firmly established. It is therefore most

accurate to recognize the coexistence of the customs without asserting that one necessarily caused the other.

October 29: Deaths Associated with Water

Some widely circulated contemporary calendars designate **October 29** for people who drowned or whose deaths were associated with water.

This dedication is found in popular and regional practice, but it should not be presented as a universal Mexican observance.

For families who follow it, water may carry several meanings. It may refer to the circumstances of the death, the spiritual journey, purification, passage, thirst, or the boundary between worlds.

October 30: Forgotten, Unclaimed, or Solitary Souls

October 30 - is sometimes dedicated to forgotten souls, people without known relatives, unidentified or unclaimed people, and those whose deaths are no longer remembered by name.

Some traditions refer to the *ánima sola*, the solitary soul, or remember souls believed to be in purgatory. The precise date varies. In some communities, remembrance of forgotten souls is incorporated into the general altar rather than assigned to a separate day.

The inclusion of these souls carries profound ethical and clinical significance. It acknowledges that a person's worth is not determined by whether someone remains alive to place a photograph on an altar.

It also recognizes those who died without family present, without a funeral, without identification, without public acknowledgment, or without anyone able to tell their story.

To offer a candle for an unknown or forgotten person is to resist the idea that any human being should disappear completely from communal memory.

October 31: Preparation and the Arrival of Children

October 31- is commonly a day of preparation. Families clean and arrange the altar, gather flowers, prepare food, place photographs, light candles, and make the home ready for the arrival of deceased children.

In some regional or popular calendars, October 31 is specifically associated with infants, unborn children, miscarried or stillborn children, or children who died before baptism.

These particular distinctions are not universal. Many families simply prepare the children's offerings on October 31 so the altar will be ready for November 1.

The night before an observance is significant because the souls are often believed to arrive during the night or in the early hours of their designated day.

Doors or windows may be opened symbolically. Flower petals may create a pathway. Candles, copal, prayers, bells, and music may help guide the returning visitors home.

There is no nationally standardized hour of arrival. The timing is determined by family, regional, and community belief.

November 1: Día de los Angelitos

November 1 - corresponds with the Catholic Feast of All Saints and is widely dedicated in Mexican popular tradition to deceased infants and children.

They may be affectionately called:

- *Los angelitos* — the little angels
- *Los muertos chiquitos* — the little dead
- *Los niños difuntos* — the deceased children

The offerings may include milk, water, fruit, sweets, chocolate, toys, small breads, flowers, favorite foods, clothing, photographs, or objects associated with play. The altar may use white flowers, delicate decorations, small candles, or objects chosen to reflect childhood and innocence.

Calling the children *angelitos* is an expression of tenderness, not a denial of the devastation of a child's death. The observance gives families permission to continue parenting through memory. A toy can still be chosen. A favorite food can still be prepared. A birthday can still be remembered. A child's name can still be spoken.

The relationship continues in a changed form, making this day deeply meaningful to many; a reminder that death changes the relationship, but does not end the bond.

On **November 1**, the altar gives deceased children a place within family and community memory and acknowledges the enduring grief of parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, and all who loved them.

November 2: Día de los Muertos Grandes

November 2 - corresponds with the Catholic *Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed*, commonly known as All Souls' Day.

In much of Mexico, November 2 is devoted especially to deceased adults, sometimes called *los muertos grandes*. Families may visit cemeteries, clean and decorate graves, pray, light candles, play music, tell stories, and share foods associated with those being remembered.

The altar may include photographs, favorite dishes, coffee, chocolate, bread, fruit, personal belongings, religious images, flowers, candles, and other offerings.

The commemoration may be deeply solemn, but it may also include conversation, music, laughter, food, and companionship. Death is acknowledged directly, but it is not given the power to erase identity, relationship, personality, or belonging.

November 2 is one of the two principal or días mayores of the observance, together with November 1. These two days are the most consistently recognized dates across Mexican and Mexican American Día de Muertos traditions, even as the details of their observance vary.

Departure and the Closing of the Altar

Some families believe the visiting souls depart at the conclusion of November 2 or during the early hours of November 3.

The offerings may then be removed or shared. Food may be eaten by the family, although some traditions hold that the spiritual essence, aroma, or nourishment of the food has already been received by the dead.

Other families leave the altar standing for several more days. There is no single required time for dismantling it.

Closing the altar may itself become a small ritual. Candles are extinguished. Flowers are gathered and photographs are handled carefully. Food is shared or removed.

Names may be spoken again and gratitude may be expressed for the visit. The closing acknowledges that sacred time has ended, but the relationship and memory continue.

The Meaning of Return

The idea that the dead “return” does not have to be understood in only one way.

For some, it is a literal spiritual belief. For others, it is religious, ancestral, symbolic, poetic, psychological, or communal. A person may believe that the soul visits the altar. Another may understand the return as the reappearance of memory and yet another

person may experience the loved one's presence through a song, fragrance, recipe, photograph, dream, or family story.

Many may choose to participate out of cultural respect without holding a specific belief about an afterlife. The altar has room for these differences.

The return may be understood as a temporary crossing of worlds, but it may also describe what happens within the living: On a time such as this a name that has not been spoken is spoken. A story that was fading is told again knowing that this is part of honoring their memory.

A mother or a daughter may devote themselves to the recipe that is prepared. A photograph is taken from a box. A child learns the name of an ancestor. A family pauses together to acknowledge their loss, grief and the continuity of life itself.

A person who has died becomes present again in language, feeling, and relationship. In this sense, memory itself becomes a form of return.

Altar, Ofrenda, and Offering

The terms **altar** and **ofrenda** are often used interchangeably, although they are not precisely identical. The altar is the structure or sacred space. The ofrenda is the offering: the flowers, food, water, candles, photographs, prayers, objects, music, and acts of love placed upon or around it.

The Spanish word *ofrenda* comes from the idea of offering.

The emphasis is not on displaying possessions but on giving something meaningful: Nourishment.

Beauty.

Fragrance.

Light.

Attention.

Memory.

Prayer.

Labor.

Affection.

An altar may be elaborate and architectural, or it may consist of a photograph beside a glass of water and a flower. Its spiritual and emotional power does not depend upon its size or cost.

The Levels of the Altar

Mexican altars may have *two, three, seven, or more levels*, and many household altars have no formal tiers at all.

Their construction varies by family, community, region, religious practice, and artistic intention.

Two Levels

Two levels may represent:

- Heaven and earth
- The spiritual and material worlds
- The living and the dead
- The visible and invisible dimensions of existence

Three Levels

Three levels are often interpreted through Catholic or cosmological symbolism:

- Heaven, earth, and the underworld
- The divine realm, earthly life, and the realm of the dead
- In some Catholic interpretations, the Church triumphant, the Church living on earth, and the souls awaiting purification

In some communities, the three-level form is common, although the placement and meaning of objects are determined by local tradition rather than by one national formula.

Seven Levels

Seven-level altars are sometimes described as representing stages or challenges through which the soul travels toward rest, transformation, purification, or reunion.

The number seven may also carry Catholic associations, including the sacraments, virtues, sorrows, or spiritual completion.

Some modern guides connect the seven steps to the soul's journey through Mictlán. Ancient Nahua sources, however, more commonly describe *nine levels of Mictlán*, not seven.

For that reason, seven-level explanations are best understood as evolving regional, Catholic, or popular interpretations rather than as one unbroken pre-Hispanic rule.

The essential principle is not mathematical perfection. The levels create a sense of ascent, passage, transition, and sacred order. They lift the honored person's image above the ordinary while surrounding it with the objects that made that life particular and beloved.

The Elements and Their Meanings

No altar must contain every element listed below. Meanings vary, and families often add objects whose significance is known only to them.

Photographs

A photograph identifies the person being remembered and makes the relationship visible.

It tells visitors: This is not “the dead” in the abstract. This is someone’s mother, child, sibling, partner, teacher, friend, colleague, or ancestor. Photographs restore individuality to people whom death can otherwise reduce to a date, diagnosis, statistic, or tragedy. In some traditions, the photograph is placed at the highest level. In others, it stands near the center of the altar. Some families include several generations, creating a visual genealogy of belonging.

Water

Water is offered to relieve the thirst of the soul after its journey. It also represents purity, restoration, life, welcome, and hospitality. To offer water is to say: *You have traveled far. Rest here. You are welcome.*

Salt

Is associated with purification, preservation, protection, and continuity. Some traditions explain that it helps preserve the spirit during its journey or protects it from corruption.

Candles and Light

Candles, votive lights, or flameless candles represent fire and spiritual illumination. Their light guides the returning souls and communicates watchfulness: someone has remained awake in memory.

Each flame may represent a person, a prayer, a direction, or a pathway. At this altar, flameless candles may be used for safety. The symbolism remains: *Light continues even in darkness.*

Cempasúchil and Other Flowers

The brilliant orange or golden *cempasúchil*, commonly called the Mexican marigold, is among the most recognized flowers of Día de Muertos.

Its Nahuatl name is often connected with *cempohualxochitl*, sometimes translated as “twenty flower” or “many flowers.” Its vivid color and strong fragrance are traditionally said to help guide the souls. Petals may be arranged in a pathway from the entrance to the altar. Flowers also remind us that beauty is temporary. They bloom magnificently and then fade, an honest symbol of human life.

Other flowers may include baby’s breath, cockscomb, white flowers, purple flowers, calla lilies, or blossoms important to a particular person or community.

Copal and Incense

Copal is an aromatic tree resin with ancient ceremonial use in Mesoamerica. Its smoke is associated with cleansing, prayer, sacred communication, and the elevation of offerings.

Catholic incense became part of many altars through the encounter between European and Indigenous traditions. Both copal and incense can mark a transition from ordinary space into ceremonial space. Where smoke or fragrance would be unsafe or inaccessible, the element can be represented symbolically.

Papel Picado

Papel picado, intricately cut tissue paper, provides movement, color, delicacy, and celebration.

It is often said to represent air or wind; one of the classical elements present on the altar. Its fragile openings also offer a powerful metaphor: Human life is beautiful, intricate, and vulnerable. The paper moves with a breath we cannot see, just as memory can be stirred by forces that are invisible but deeply felt.

Food

The favorite foods of the deceased are prepared not as generic decorations but as gestures of intimate recognition.

A particular mole, tamal, fruit, candy, tortilla, cup of coffee, bowl of beans, plate of enchiladas, or favorite snack may say more about a relationship than a formal speech ever could.

Food communicates:

We remember what nourished you.

We remember what delighted you.

We remember how you sat at our table.

There is still a place for you here.

Traditional foods vary widely by region. They may include tamales, mole, chocolate, atole, fruit, maize, seeds, nuts, regional breads, or dishes associated with a family's homeland.

Pan de Muerto

Pan de muerto is a sweet ceremonial bread prepared in various regional forms.

The familiar round loaf may be interpreted as representing the cycle of life and death, with crossed pieces of dough resembling bones and a central piece suggesting a skull, heart, tear, or center of life.

Not all communities use the same bread, shape, recipe, or symbolism. Regional breads may be decorated with faces, colored sugar, sesame seeds, or distinctive designs.

Beverages

Water is traditional, but families may also offer coffee, chocolate, atole, soda, beer, tequila, mezcal, wine, or another drink the person enjoyed.

The intention is not excess. It is specificity. Perhaps the deceased never began the morning without café de olla. Perhaps a grandfather loved a certain soda. Perhaps an aunt's evening cup of tea was nearly ceremonial. The beverage recalls a life as it was actually lived.

Earth, Seeds, Fruit, and Crops

Fruit, maize, squash, cacao, beans, seeds, and other gifts of the earth connect the altar with cultivation, harvest, nourishment, and renewal. They remind us that human beings are not separate from nature. We live because something else grows, is harvested, is transformed, and is shared.

Personal Objects

Eyeglasses, books, tools, jewelry, musical instruments, recipes, toys, handwritten notes, medals, hats, art, textiles, work objects, or cherished belongings help tell the story of the person.

For children, families may include toys, sweets, or small objects associated with play.

For companion animals, families may include collars, tags, toys, blankets, bowls, or photographs. These items answer the question: *Who was this being beyond the fact that they died?*

Religious and Spiritual Images

Crosses, rosaries, saints, the Virgin Mary, the Virgen de Guadalupe, angels, prayer cards, scripture, and other Catholic images appear on many Mexican altars.

Other families may include Indigenous symbols, representations of the four directions, objects from African diasporic traditions, Jewish memorial elements, Buddhist symbols, Protestant scripture, secular poetry, or no religious images at all.

A community altar should not presume that everyone relates to the sacred in the same way.

The Arch

An arch made from reeds, palm, flowers, or other materials may represent an entrance or threshold between worlds. It announces that the altar is not merely a shelf. It is a doorway of remembrance.

The Four Elements

Many contemporary explanations identify the four elements through objects on the altar:

- **Earth:** food, seeds, fruit, bread, or clay
- **Water:** a glass or vessel of water
- **Fire:** candles or lights
- **Air:** papel picado, incense smoke, music, or movement

These elements place human life within a larger natural and cosmic order.

Calaveras, La Catrina, and the Wisdom of Humor

Skulls are not included simply to frighten people.

Calaveras may be made of sugar, chocolate, clay, paper, ceramic, or other materials.

Their bright colors and sometimes smiling faces transform the skull from an object of terror into one of recognition. The calavera tells the truth plainly:

Death belongs to everyone.

Rich or poor, powerful or forgotten, glamorous or ordinary, we share the same bones. The elegantly dressed skeleton known as *La Catrina* grew from the satirical print tradition associated with Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada and was further popularized through the work of Diego Rivera.

She mocks pretension, class vanity, and the fantasy that wealth or social status can protect anyone from death. Literary *calaveritas* are playful or satirical verses that imagine living people encountering death. They may tease politicians, public figures, friends, relatives, or even the writer.

Posada's popular skeleton images used wit and satire to criticize political leaders and social elites while reminding viewers of humanity's shared mortality. Humor is not disrespectful when it emerges from relationship, cultural knowledge, and affection. In many Mexican and Mexican American families, humor is one of the languages of survival.

We give death nicknames:

La Flaca.

La Huesuda.

La Pelona.

We tease it, write poems about it, dress it in an enormous hat, feed it sugar, and remind it that although it will eventually come for everyone, it does not get to take itself too seriously. This is not denial. It is a form of psychological and spiritual resistance.

Humor allows us to approach what terrifies us without being completely overwhelmed. It lowers the emotional temperature. It makes room for stories that are tender, ridiculous, imperfect, and recognizably human. A person should not be remembered only by the solemn circumstances of their death.

They may also be remembered for burning the tortillas, singing off-key, telling the same joke repeatedly, hiding emergency cash in strange places, dancing badly and enthusiastically, or refusing to share a cherished recipe. Laughter at an altar does not cancel grief.

Sometimes laughter is grief breathing.

Music, Prayer, Story, and Sound

Music can summon memory with extraordinary immediacy. A song may return us to a kitchen, a wedding, a car ride, a hospital room, a childhood home, a funeral, or a person's embrace before we have time to prepare ourselves.

For this reason, music belongs naturally within remembrance. Families may play mariachi, rancheras, corridos, boleros, cumbias, hymns, Indigenous songs, ceremonial drumming, recorded voices, favorite popular music, or songs associated with a particular generation.

Music can express what ordinary language cannot contain. A melody may hold grief, faith, anger, gratitude, longing, or joy without requiring the mourner to explain any of it.

Prayer, poetry, chanting, bells, conversation, storytelling, and even silence also shape the sound of an altar. The dead are honored not only by what is placed on a table but by what is spoken around it:

Their names.

Their sayings.

Their accomplishments.

Their struggles.

Their humor.

The stories that should not be lost.

The Clinical Meaning of Remembrance

From a psychological perspective, an altar gives grief a place, structure, language, and action. Grief is an internal experience, but ritual makes part of it visible. The bereaved

person is no longer required to hold every memory, emotion, and unfinished sentence inside the body. The hands can choose a photograph. The feet can walk toward the altar.

The voice can speak a name. The body can light a candle, arrange a flower, prepare a food, play a song, cry, pray, laugh, or stand silently. These embodied actions can help transform overwhelming, unstructured emotion into meaningful participation.

Continuing Bonds

Older models of grief sometimes implied that healthy mourning required people to “let go,” detach from the dead, find closure, and move forward. Contemporary grief theory recognizes that many bereaved people do not end the relationship.

Instead, they develop a *continuing bond*: an ongoing internal, spiritual, symbolic, ethical, or relational connection with the person who died.

A continuing bond may include:

- Remembering what the person taught us
- Speaking their name
- Telling their stories
- Maintaining a tradition they valued
- Cooking their recipes
- Visiting a meaningful place
- Carrying forward their work
- Imagining what guidance they might offer
- Creating art, music, ritual, or service in their honor
- Allowing their values to influence how we live

Continuing bonds can support meaning-making and adaptation when the bond is flexible, affirming, and integrated into the mourner’s present life. They are not automatically helpful in every form or for every person, but neither are they inherently unhealthy. The altar embodies this truth:

*Death changes a relationship.
It does not erase its significance.*

Meaning-Making

Death often disrupts our assumptions about fairness, safety, identity, faith, family, and the future. Ritual helps organize questions that may not have complete answers:

Why did this happen?

Who am I now?

Where does my love go?

How will this person remain part of my life?

What must our community remember?
What will we carry forward?

Cultural rituals of remembrance can help mourners restore emotional and social meaning by placing personal loss within a larger worldview, family history, spiritual tradition, and community narrative.

The altar provides a structure within which the mourner may tell the story of the person who died, the relationship that existed, the circumstances of the loss, and the life that continues afterward.

Catharsis and More Than Catharsis

An altar may have a cathartic impact. The tears may come and tension may release. Emotions may finally be expressed. But healing is not measured by whether someone cries. One person may weep immediately. Another may feel numb. Another may smile. Another may experience anger, peace, confusion, gratitude, discomfort, or nothing noticeable at all. Catharsis is not emotional performance.

No one owes the altar tears.

The deeper value of ritual may lie not only in releasing emotion but in containing it. The altar creates a boundary around grief. It says:

*There is a place where this can be held.
You do not have to carry it alone or explain it perfectly.*

Collective Grief and Community Witness

Some deaths are mourned publicly. Others are minimized, politicized, stigmatized, or forgotten.

Community altars can acknowledge:

- Deaths related to violence
- Suicide and overdose
- Migration and displacement
- Racism and historical trauma
- War and political oppression
- HIV/AIDS
- Substance-use disorders
- Maternal mortality
- Missing and murdered people
- People who died without family present
- Health-care and behavioral-health workers
- Elders, culture bearers, advocates, and teachers

- Deaths that received no funeral, public acknowledgment, or adequate goodbye

To place a name on a communal altar is to resist erasure.

Witnessing does not remove suffering, but it changes the conditions under which suffering is carried. Pain that is recognized is different from pain that must remain hidden.

Disenfranchised Grief

Some losses are not fully recognized or supported by society. The relationship may not have been publicly acknowledged. The manner of death may be stigmatized. The mourner may have been excluded from formal rituals.

The person who died may have been marginalized in life as well as in death.

An inclusive altar can make space for these losses without demanding explanation or proof. A name may be placed without disclosing the circumstances. A candle may represent a relationship that could not safely be named. A flower may honor someone whose death was never publicly mourned. A photograph of a companion animal may acknowledge a relationship whose emotional significance others did not understand.

In this way, the altar quietly communicates:

Your grief is real.

Your relationship mattered.

This life is worthy of remembrance.

Cultural Protection and Belonging

For Latino, Indigenous, immigrant, diasporic, and border communities, an altar may also function as cultural protection.

Colonization, forced assimilation, migration, discrimination, and language loss can interrupt the transmission of stories and rituals.

Recreating an altar allows younger generations to ask:

Who are these people?

Where did we come from?

What did our family survive?

What do these objects mean?

Why do we still say their names?

The altar becomes an archive not only of death but of endurance.

Memory as an Act of Care

Memory is not a perfect recording. It changes as we change. An altar does not freeze a person into a single image or require us to idealize every aspect of a relationship.

Families may carry love alongside disappointment, anger, conflict, or unfinished business. Honest remembrance can hold complexity and a person may have been generous and difficult. A relationship may have contained tenderness and pain. Grief may include relief as well as sorrow. The altar does not require us to rewrite history. It invites us to approach memory with truth, compassion, curiosity, and care.

Homage, Legacy, and the Work of Carrying Forward

To pay homage is more than to praise.

Homage is an acknowledgment that another life has shaped ours.

It may involve gratitude for what was given, recognition of what was endured, and responsibility for what has been entrusted to those who remain.

A legacy may be carried through family traditions, professional service, cultural practices, social justice, mentorship, scholarship, storytelling, or acts of everyday kindness.

Josie Torralba Romero's legacy is visible in the continuing work of NLBHA and in its commitment to developing a culturally and linguistically responsive behavioral-health workforce.

The legacy of those lost on September 11 remains present in their families, communities, public service, memorials, and in the continuing care of survivors and responders.

The legacy of every person represented on this altar lives in the particular ways their presence altered the world around them.

Legacy does not require fame.

Sometimes legacy is a recipe.

A phrase.

A song.

A child who was loved.

A student who was encouraged.

A patient who was treated with dignity.

A family tradition that continues because someone taught it to the next generation.

The altar helps us identify what has been passed to us and asks what we will do with it.

Participation, Consent, and Emotional Care

A communal altar should invite participation without demanding it.

You may choose to:

- Place a photograph, name, prayer, or small object

- Write a message
- Stand quietly
- Speak the person's name
- Share a story
- Listen to the music
- Observe without participating
- Leave and return later
- Decide that today is not the right day

All of these responses are valid. Please do not photograph another person's memorial item closely or share identifying information without permission. Do not move, remove, or handle an offering that is not yours. Avoid placing valuable, irreplaceable, unsafe, highly perishable, or difficult-to-retrieve objects on a public altar.

Remember also that grief rituals can activate powerful memories. A person who becomes emotionally overwhelmed may step away, feel their feet on the floor, slow their breathing, notice the environment around them, connect with a trusted person, or request support.

The altar is an invitation, not a test of culture, spirituality, strength, or grief.

This altar invites us to slow down in a culture that often rushes grief and to recognize the full humanity behind every loss. Remembrance may take many forms: prayer, silence, music, food, color, humor, ritual, storytelling, and shared memory and healing does not always require leaving the dead behind but rather finding meaningful ways to carry them forward.

For behavioral-health professionals, advocates, and community leaders, the altar also offers a deeper reminder: grief is shaped by culture, language, family, history, spirituality, and community. Honoring these dimensions means making room for collective, historical, spiritual, and disenfranchised grief, while respecting the knowledge carried through families, elders, traditions, and lived experience. In this way, remembrance becomes more than ceremony; it becomes an invitation to practice with greater cultural humility, compassion, and humanity.

A Closing Reflection

Approach this altar with reverence.

Notice the light, the flowers, the photographs, the names, and the objects gathered here with care. Each one carries a life, a relationship, a memory, and a story.

The names of those lost on September 11, 2001, are more than names remembered through history. They were fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, partners, friends, coworkers, godparents, nieces, nephews, neighbors, and members of communities. They belonged to people, and people belonged to them. Their lives reached far beyond the moment of their deaths.

Notice the ordinary objects made sacred because someone once touched them, used them, cherished them, or was loved through them.

Notice Josie Torralba Romero at the head of the altar, honored for the vision and service that helped bring this community together and whose legacy continues through the work represented here today.

Perhaps you recognize someone on this altar. Perhaps you are thinking of someone whose photograph is not present. Perhaps you carry a grief that has never been publicly acknowledged or given a place of remembrance.

There is room for them here.

Speak their name aloud or silently. Remember who they were in the fullness of their humanity their courage and their complexity, what made them laugh, what they cooked, what they sang, what they believed, what they fought for, what they taught, what they endured, and what remains in this world because they lived.

Grief is evidence that a bond existed. Remembrance is one way that bond continues.

The altar does not deny death. It acknowledges death while refusing to allow death to have the final word. It surrounds loss with flowers, light, food, music, memory, humor, story, and love and reminds us that even in sorrow, life continues to call us toward connection and gratitude.

*May those remembered here be honored.
May those who remember be held.
May those whose grief has been hidden be witnessed.
May our stories remain alive.
May memory become medicine.
May gratitude become responsibility.
May love continue its work.*

A Note on Language

Both **Día de Muertos** and **Día de los Muertos** are widely used.

Día de Muertos is common in Mexico, while *Día de los Muertos* is especially familiar in the United States and in many diasporic communities.

The term **ofrenda** emphasizes the offerings placed for the dead.

Altar refers more directly to the structure or sacred space upon which those offerings are arranged. Usage varies naturally across communities.

Cultural Acknowledgment

This educational statement recognizes Día de Muertos and related altar traditions as diverse, evolving practices rooted in Indigenous knowledge, Catholic observances, regional customs, family creativity, folklore, diasporic experience, and centuries of cultural endurance.

It does not attempt to define one universally correct altar tradition or to speak for every Indigenous, Mexican, Mexican American, Latino, or Latin American community.

This material should not replace the teachings of community elders, Indigenous knowledge keepers, tradition bearers, artists, historians, spiritual leaders, or families whose practices and interpretations may differ from those described here.

We offer this altar and educational statement with humility, gratitude, and respect.

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Authorship Note

This educational statement is an original synthesis prepared for the National Latino Behavioral Health Association Altar and Ofrenda. It draws upon the historical, cultural, organizational, and scholarly sources cited above, together with established concepts from thanatology, grief and bereavement studies, ritual studies, folklore, trauma-informed care, and culturally responsive behavioral-health practice.

Because altar traditions are living, regional, familial, and continually evolving, practices and interpretations may vary among Indigenous peoples, communities, regions, and families.