

## Life @ Death 2018 “Day of the Dead”

In Mexico they celebrate the “Day of the Dead”. Yes celebrate! Actually it takes several days to celebrate meaningfully with all those who have passed away. Festivities begin at midnight on October 31. November 1 is dedicated to dead children who it is believed can return to be with their families for 24 hours, while on November 2 adults who have died are honoured.

How are the dead celebrated? Joyously rather than with mourning. During El Dia de Los Muertos the dead are remembered and their lives celebrated with food and art. Decorated sugar skulls, whimsical skeleton costumes and make-up, and gatherings at grave-sites are all part of the festivities. To view the images of these celebrations can be confronting at first (look them up online). But maybe death needs to be confronted. Maybe the un-nameable needs to be named. In our own culture, albeit now filled with many belief systems from many nationalities and cultures, the dead still have an uneasy relationship with the living. The Day of the Dead suggests a much more open path between those who have passed away and those who remain.

In our own Western culture we have tended to see death as a finality – a complete loss from which there can be no return and no contact. At best death is seen as a recycling of matter. But there is more and more these days a celebration of the dead person’s life and a strong emotional resolve to remember them (for ever). They “remain in our hearts” and their lives are an example to us.

The Christian belief of life after death and an eventual resurrection of the dead at a future time and as a future hope remains in our cultural psyche in the form of “going to heaven”. It is from this latter tradition and way of thinking that All Saints Day and from it Halloween has come. The dead are in some sense still alive and are a “cloud of witnesses” for those who remain. Actually it is quite common to encounter people of faith and no faith who feel the tangible presence of their lost loved ones on an almost daily basis.

So what would it mean if we more openly celebrated the dead? If we confronted the symbols of death (skulls, skeletons, etc) and made use of them to open a way to honouring the dead as “changed but still with us” people? Would this help in our very important process of mourning, which is the process of coming to terms with a new state of affairs, a new relationship with loved ones? There are parts of our culture which allow this – Anzac Day and Remembrance Day are prominent – but can we do better for those who have lived much more ordinary lives?

Life@death 2018 invites artists and interested people of all cultures and beliefs to make a contribution to a discussion around the theme “The Day of the Dead” in the form of art works or even costumes and food. Our artist in residence for 2018 is Korean born fashion designer **Nathan Song** and we look forward to his creative contribution to the exhibition and discussion on our opening night.

We are also pleased to have the sponsorship of **Alfred James Funerals** and welcome their support of Life@death’s commitment to discussing issues around death in our culture.

Dieter Engler