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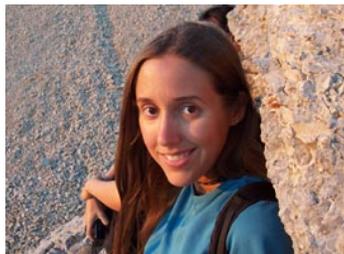
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June Drake



2003 - 2004 University Scholar

Mentor: Michael Warren
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

In the United States, communicating with the dead is usually viewed as a superstitious, taboo act practiced by Dionne Warwick's psychic friends and New Orleans voodoo priestesses. But in Mexico, recognizing and appeasing the spirits of deceased loved ones is a socially acceptable, time-honored tradition that aids in the grieving process. University Scholar June Drake, an anthropology senior, has traveled to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico to study the death perceptions of its people.

"In Mexico, death—though unfortunate—is seen more positively," Drake says. "Even though they have lost the physical presence of a loved one, they feel their spirit still remains and that they retain some sort of contact. Here, when someone dies, it is an abrupt stop in the social realm of their lives. When we lose a loved one it is very hard to detach and heal, but for them, I think this is part of their way of coping with death, continuing to be integrated as a whole with their loved ones."

By conducting surveys with cemetery keepers and those visiting gravesites while living and studying in Mexico in the Summer of 2003 through the Department of Anthropology's Yucatan Summer Program, Drake gained first-hand knowledge of how people deal with death in Mexico, how they treat the remains of loved ones, and the rituals they practice.

Following the death of a family member, Drake says, the traditional practice during the past few centuries is to have a Catholic funeral service and, after the mass, the family comes to the cemetery with flowers to pray and seal off the tomb. The burial of the individual is then followed by eight days of continuous Catholic prayer at the tomb. These nine days in total constitute a "novena," an important concept in Catholicism.

Throughout the year, the grave is visited often, and on November 2 each year a nationwide festival honoring the souls of the deceased, "The Day of the Dead," is celebrated. The Catholic festivities of the Day of the Dead are combined with the ancient Mayan practice of "Hanal Pixan" which means "food for the spirits." The festivities actually start October 31 with a day of remembering children, followed by a day of remembering adults, then "All Soul's Day" on November 2.

Day of the Dead activities generally consist of families welcoming their dead back into their homes through the elaborate decoration of an altar in their houses adorned with bright flowers, photos and cherished objects of the deceased, and a bounty of their favorite foods. The grave is decorated with giant floral arrangements, and the tomb is repainted in the deceased's favorite color, or with a bright, pleasing color of the family's choice. The family meets at the gravesite to retell stories of the dead, followed by a meal of the food left at the altar in their homes.

"It's definitely Catholic in nature, All Soul's Day is a celebrated internationally, but other Catholic areas of the world do not demonstrate the importance of going through this process," Drake says. "I have a strong belief that in the Yucatan the Day of the Dead has a strong Mayan influence that has produced these practices."

Another interesting phenomenon in Mexico is that a few years after a family member is buried and decomposition has taken place, the body is exhumed and the bones are placed in a tin box and stored in a small concrete house at the gravesite. Often, the remains of different family members are slowly added to the same house.

"The main idea behind all of these practices is that they don't want their parted family members to feel forgotten," Drake says. "This is their way of showing the spirits that they are still with us."

Drake completed her USP paper based on research from her 2003 summer trip to the Yucatan, but she returned to the region in August 2004 and is in the middle of completing a year-long independent study there and expanding her USP paper into an honor's thesis.

She returns home in July and will graduate from UF with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and minors in Spanish, zoology and Latin American studies in August. She plans to become a forensic anthropologist and wants to do human rights work in Latin America.

"Prior to my USP project I was interested in cultural anthropology, but more focused on

biological anthropology," she says. "I think doing this research has really proved to me that it is important to integrate all the different fields of anthropology and always take a comprehensive view of your surroundings. As a forensic anthropologist I should be considerate of the population I am dealing with and how they would want me to treat their remains." Drake is hoping to attend graduate school at UF or the Autonomous University of the Yucatan.

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