

## [Bringing Back the Dead](#)

November 2, 2015 by [Liz Fisher](#)



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I have been celebrating the Day of the Dead, Dia de los Muertos, for nearly forty-five years, ever since I moved to California from the Northeast. This holiday occurs for three days from October 31 through November 2<sup>nd</sup>. When I first discovered this celebration, it was not as well-known as it is today. At first it seemed strange to create an altar using ceramic and candy painted skulls combined with photos of those who had died. But, it also touched me in a place that made sense. After all, the skeleton holds the body together and lasts after the breath is gone.

Over the years, I have seen many altars and participated in a variety of activities, often some form of procession or ritual sharing. I have found that personal creativity is encouraged, intertwined with several reoccurring symbols. The most common are painted skulls and dancing skeletons, specially decorated breads, and colorful fruits, vegetables, and flowers.



These, combined with many personally meaningful objects, bring humor, beauty and the sacred of the everyday to the center of our attention. I enjoy making an altar in my home honoring both friends and relatives.

This holiday has caught on in many of our churches and pagan groups because it speaks to our need to share together, in a dramatic, ritualized manner, our feelings for those who may have passed but are still very much in our hearts. Included in these celebrations are both our family members and friends and the public figures who have influenced our lives.



My Day of the Dead celebration this year was quite an unexpected one. Recently I learned of a special event sponsored by the Friends of the local library at a beach named Lover's Point in Pacific Grove, California where I live. It was called a "paddle out" and was being held to honor Rachel

Carson, the world famous marine biologist whose work was largely responsible for the outlawing of DDT. The event was part of a three month program honoring the sea and the memory of Rachel Carson, which included a specially curated art exhibit and speakers on related topics. I had long admired Rachel Carson but did not know she was also a lover of the sea and considered

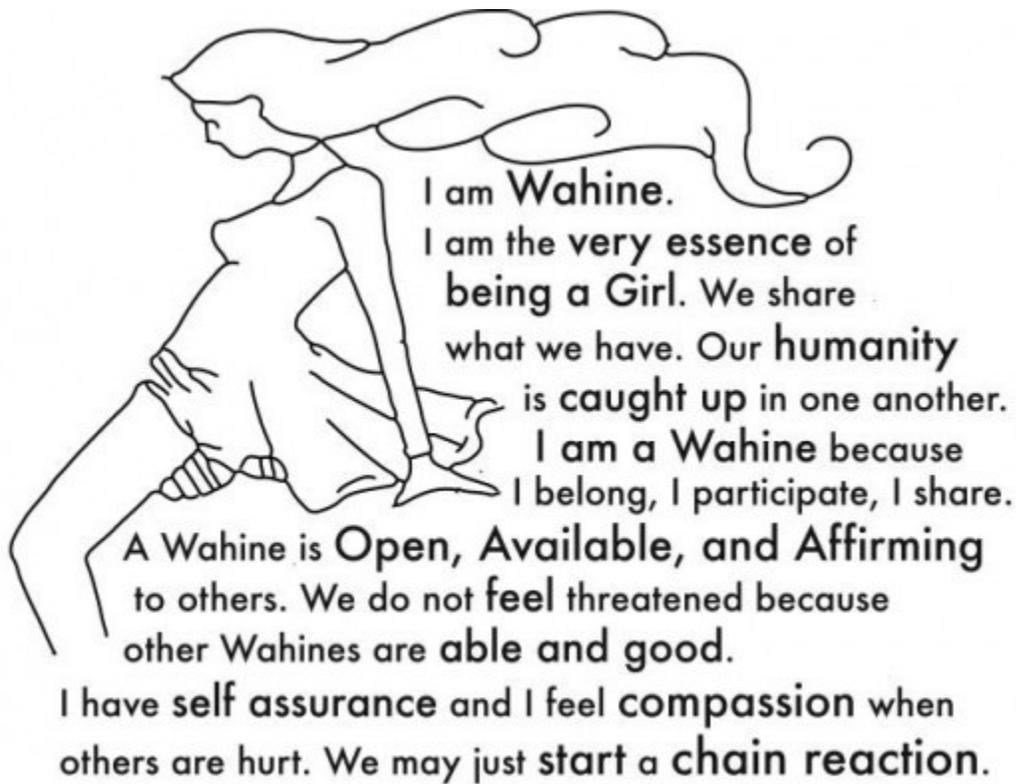
animals the equal of humans. I learned she had written several books about the sea before she took on pesticide poisoning.

This community event was not religious or pagan sponsored. Yet, it carried the same emotional content I experience in those rituals. To see the sacred and secular intertwined in a positive way without imposing dogmatic beliefs gave me a sense of hope for community-wide multicultural communication and cooperation.

I've lived near the coast of California on and off for many years but had never really known what a paddle-out is. The pictures included here give you a good feeling for what took place. I have added a bit of background for context.

When I arrive, I find this event is sponsored by two groups: the first, the Friends of the Library, and the second the Wahini Project which is the brainchild of Dionne Ybarra who is a Mexican American who lives in Salinas, California. She started this

organization to teach girls of all ages and income levels to surf. It not only cures them of their fear of the water, but helps with confidence building and cooperation. Their mission statement says it all.



Dionne proudly brings to the event her Hispanic culture. She had put together an altar near the water. This is the third year she has organized such an event. This year, Rachel Carson and those who are personal to the participants are all honored. This combination of science and spirituality and public and private concerns is also in keeping with my UU pagan values.

Dionne remembers her father who died when he was twenty in Vietnam when she was only three months old. She tells those gathered that he still lives within her. She shares how being able to honor those who have passed on in this ceremonial way enriches her own life. Each day she is taking part in activities she loves she feels his life is also being fulfilled. Food for thought, for sure.

Marigolds are included in most altars to honor those who have passed. In this ceremony each person takes a flower with them as they paddle out into the water. They then toss it into the water once they say the names of the people they are honoring and share a few words about them.



The ceremony also includes those of us who cannot paddle out. We stand on the pier above those girls, women, boys and men who were sitting on surf boards below. I toss my marigold from the shore as I speak the name of my mother, Mary Bryan, whose presence has stayed with me since she died in 1980; and Lucile Longview, the author of the 1977 Unitarian Universalist Women and Religion Resolution who passed in 2010. I remembered them both as feminists who were deeply concerned about securing freedom and opportunity for girls and women.





Lucile is especially present for me. I am celebrating also my completion of the first stage of putting on-line *Lucile's Red Notebook*, a collection of her best writing and presentations that she compiled in the last years of her life in the hope that they would be helpful to others. This has now been accomplished, with more to post in the future.

Lucile was most concerned about overcoming expectations that imposed limits based on gender. She was athletic her entire life and though deadly serious about her intentions and mission, she also frequently exhibited both a sharp wit and engaging humor. Take a few minutes to visit with her at [www.LucilesRedNotebook.org](http://www.LucilesRedNotebook.org).

She would have loved this paddle out by a group that empowers girls by getting them to overcome their fears of the water and claiming their own power to do something that has often been off limits for females.

To learn more about The Wahini Project click here:  
<http://www.montereyherald.com/article/ZZ/20130303/NEWS/130308768>

The Day of the Dead then, for me, is as much about the living as about the Souls of the Dead. By remembering those whom we still love, we continue their legacies and fulfill, at least in part, their unfinished aspirations. And, it seems to me, they stand ready to assist us in all we do. It was gratifying to share this feeling with others whom I connect to in spirit though are unknown to me in everyday life. During this time of thin veils, I discover once again our common humanity that extends to the past as well as the present.

*All photos in this article taken by Bob Fisher.*

