

Halloween is Once Again Upon Us

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Halloween is once again upon us. It's a holiday with many roots and many manifestations. It's even a holiday that is not a holiday. Nothing closes for Halloween, it's not on the list of federal holidays. Yet it is one of the oldest annual celebrations still being observed.

Halloween's ancestry can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt. The Egyptians observed an annual fall festival during which the souls of the dead returned to feast with their living relatives.

The Greeks observed a similar holiday "Anthestia", their dead had a full week to spend in the mortal realm. At the end of the week priests would use rituals to send the souls back to Hades for another year. The Roman festival of Feralia fell in October. Romans honored their dead and received visits from the departed. The Romans realized that some of your dead ancestors might not be the best house guests and would carry around lit oily rags inside hollowed out gourds to ward off hostile spirits who might be abroad on these autumnal nights. Right after Feralia Romans celebrated the feast day of Pomona Goddess of the Harvest on November 1st. They would honor the goddess by exchanging gifts of fruits and nuts with each other. Pomona was particularly identified with apples and our custom of bobbing for apples derives from her festival.

The great source of Halloween was of course the Celtic festival of Samhain (Sahwen), New Year's Eve on October 31st. On this night the sun god was at his weakest and would experience an annual death. He needed to be revived. This night the veil between this world and the next was at its weakest without the sun god's intervention. The dead could join with the living to enjoy the festival. It was a celebration of the gifts received from the gods over the year, a time of acknowledging the abundance provided by death too. This was the time of year when those animals who it would not be possible to feed over the long winter were slaughtered, the only time of year when meat was in great supply. The festival thus acknowledged the dependence of life on death.

Sacred bonfires were lit on this night to offer encouragement to the sun god and to emphasize the dependence of the people on one another each household would relight its own hearth fire from the community bon fire. Of course there was another side to this, the sun god's revival required sacrifice. Into the bonfire were thrown living victims, human and animal. Cats were a particular favorite for this ritual, it seems the souls of the evil dead preferred to reincarnate as cats so their sacrifice served a dual purpose. For a long time to come Halloween would be a bad time to be a cat, particularly a black one.

A feast requires provisions so priests and others would wander the village before the sacred night and solicit contributions from the villagers. Giving generously brought the favor of the gods, refusing brought on their wrath. A good year was assured by treating the gods well, failure to do so invited divine tricks for the year to come (and a divinity can pull some mighty nasty tricks).

When the Romans conquered some Celtic lands the two people's traditions underwent some merging. The Roman God of the Underworld, Pluto (Greek Hades) came to be identified with October 31st. Pluto would come in time to be seen as an avatar of the yet to be invented Christian Devil. However the Romans did not approve of all Celtic traditions and had a particular distaste of the Druids and their human sacrifices. Druidism was along with

Christianity one of the few religions the Romans actively persecuted. What to do with these Celtic traditions which so many of the people would not abandon would be a problem the Roman Catholic Church would inherit from the Roman Empire.

As it would do very successfully in many instances the Church would find ways to co-opt many of the practices of the past religion of its new subjects. In an interesting parallel what the church did in Europe with Halloween it would repeat in Mexico with Day of the Dead.

In Europe the Church moved a very minor observance. All Saint's Day (which honored the Saints who did not have their own festival day) from the spring to November 1st. Thus New Year's day on October 31st became All Hallow's Eve, Halloween.

The night before the festival of the blessed dead became the perfect contrast. It was the festival of the unhallowed dead, the evil and malignant spirits. This was the night they could freely wander the earth and embodying the constant threat to all Christians from the temptations of the Devil on this night anyone caught in even the most trivial sin could be hauled straight to hell by an evil spirit.

A great way to try and avoid this was to dress up as one of the damned to fool them into leaving you alone. Another was the old roman trick of the lantern, only now hollowed out turnips were used. The story is of a nasty spirited mean man named Jack. He was afraid of nothing, not God not the Devil. Indeed he bested the Devil in some sort of contest and wrung from him a promise that Hell would never admit Jack's soul. When Jack did in fact die the Devil kept his word. Too bad for Jack Heaven would not either so Jack is doomed to wander the earth forever as a disembodied spirit. The Devil however felt enough pity to give Jack one of the eternally burning coals of Hellfire to light his path. Jack put this into a turnip he had hollowed out and carried it before him. Good Christians emulated this Jack's Lantern on Halloween night so the evil spirits would leave them alone thinking they were the onerous Jack. So we now have the Devil, evil spirits, trick or treating , black cats and jack o lanterns and costumes. joining the Halloween revels. Witches were soon entering the picture. Classical and Celtic religions included females among their priesthood, Catholicism abhorred the idea of a female priest. So females in the service of demons (ex gods) easily morphed into witches. The wise crone herbalist of the Celts became the wicked bride of the Devil practicing black magic. And the Bible tells us "though shall not suffer a witch to live" nor her pet cat either. It is important to realize that this was no mere ploy on the part of the Church. The danger from wicked spirits, the Devil and witches was perceived as very real.

Thus the old New Year's day became something of a folk holiday, surviving in an altered form in the Celtic areas of Europe, particularly Ireland. With Irish immigration Halloween came to America. At this point one more tradition enters, or rather morphs. Turnips are hard to hallow our and carve, New World pumpkins are easy.

These are the historic masks Halloween has worn. In our own time it continues to masquerade.

The basic themes have been set, except for one. As the Celtic holiday settled into America and adapted to a more rational and even puritanical society the rough edges smoothed away and the costuming and begging were taken over by children. What is just silly for a rational adult is allowable play for children. So with the children the idea of having fun became part of All Hallow's Eve. For many years the American Halloween would be a children's festival with all the old meanings hiding below the surface. It is only fairly recently that adults have started to reclaim Halloween, oh yes and the marketers.

In our time what are the guises Halloween goes trick or treating in? There seem to be 4 major

ways Halloween manifests today. For some, thankfully a small number it is taken as a license to indulge their anger and desire to harm. We have devils' nights (although oddly these usually happen the night before Halloween) with fires being set, cars and property vandalized. There is not much to be said about this mask of Halloween other than acknowledging that we humans do sometimes perpetuate evil in this world. We like to blame the Devil or malignant spirits or social injustice but I would say that we also have to accept that human nature includes the propensity to create havoc. History seems to bear this out.

Halloween can help us to deal with this, for most of us the desire to be evil is not a major component of our personality and letting it out for a little controlled mayhem once a year may well keep it in check. Things like gruesome haunted houses and terrifying lawn decorations speak to this part of our nature and this is one of Halloween's masks. It gives us the chance to say this is part of what I am but I can control it and not let it control me.

Indeed fear has long been associated with Halloween. It is the time of year for scary movies like the Halloween series and the Exorcist (dating myself here) and so on. Busch Gardens and King's Dominion among others have learned the power (I nearly said of the Dark Side) of this Halloween mask. Many people seem to enjoy confronting fear and dealing with it in this controlled way. We all have fears and need to acknowledge that. The fear of death is one of the biggies, it has been with us since the beginning. As we have seen Samhain dealt with the fear of death of the sun god and thus of everything, faced it and acknowledged that it was real. It then counters it with the re-emergence of life, and the acceptance that life indeed depends on death. For those who enjoy wearing this mask fear needs to be felt to be dealt with, but Halloween allows it to be felt in safety, a simulation if you will that allows for a catharsis. The world can be a very frightening place indeed. Halloween gives us a sense of evening the odds. There is an interesting permutation of this, in the Mexican day of the Dead tradition the powerful are made fun of, the political leaders, the clergy, the wealthy. In our Halloween we see more and more masks of our leaders. In some ways this allows us to confront our resentment of their perceived power over us, to claim some of that power or to make the statement " you are just one of us". Tying it in to Halloween makes the dramatic statement that no matter who one is one is human and thus mortal with no more power over death than anyone else.

Halloween also can be a celebration of the occult. This is tricky territory. For many the idea of ghosts, people with para normal powers and spirits both good and evil remain very real. The idea of the veil thinning on this night is not for them a metaphor. Halloween becomes an acknowledgment of this dimension. Thus we will have the Ghost hunter's Halloween marathon tonight on television.

For me this mask of Halloween does not appeal. Yet I do see something in it. On a larger scale Halloween can help us to acknowledge that we are not all there is to the universe, that we are limited beings. That there are forces and powers abroad that are larger than we are. Occult powers they may not be, but the idea of the occult underlines that there is much we do not, or do not yet understand or control. We need sometimes to think on this. The idea of the thinning veil also offers us something to meditate on and that is the very real presence of the dead among us, not as ghosts but as sharpers of the world we live in and on a personal level sharpers of our very selves. We all owe much to the dead and in our hearts and minds we all have the living memory of some who have passed beyond the veil. I think the occult mask of Halloween can serve to remind us of those powers and forces beyond ourselves that we are to some degree beholden too.

There is another magical mask Halloween wears. It is the holiday when we get to play with our identity. We get to wear masks. We can reach inside and find those parts of ourselves that

do not manifest everyday and put them on for an evening. In earliest days the idea was to trick the evil spirits into thinking you were one of them, well maybe to a tiny degree you are. Or you may be the self reliant provider type and dress up as a baby to let out that part of you that wants sometimes to be cared for and dependent. You might see your self as powerless or meek in daily life and dress up as a super hero. You could even choose to make fun of some aspect of yourself that you take too seriously. It is a way a chance to briefly escape from your usual self and get to know your hidden selves. There may be good reasons these are lesser and hidden aspects of your identity and they may just need this one night to come out and play, or you could go for irony. In "It's the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown" Lucy opines "A person should always dress as something in direct contrast to her own personality" as she dons a witch's mask. I'm dressed sort of like Dracula, I don't really have a lot in common with an evil blood sucking vampire. But then again I do work for a local government and it is campaign season and I have heard what some candidates are saying about government workers, so....

This brings me to my favorite of Halloween's masks. Halloween can just be fun. Fun is no small thing and it is not without it's own depth. Many things are fun because they explore truth in a way we can handle that is with a candy coating. Among my favorite Halloween traditions is the aforementioned "It's the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown" which is a lot of fun. Yet it deals with many of the themes we have talked about. Charlie Brown's fear of rejection manifests in the line "I got a rock." Snoopy really explores hidden nooks of his personality by becoming the World war I Flying Ace, brave, suave with the women, devil may care. A hero when his real life is being a pet. Linus clings to a belief in the Great Pumpkin, a magical being who never shows up. Linus' faith can be seen as heroic or as cutting him off from others and from the real joy to be found in living.

He misses both tricks of treats and the Halloween party, the modern manifestation of the Samhain feast (complete with Roman bobbing for apples). And in the end Lucy who has been wearing her bossy mask all through the story shows her true self, she is the one who brings Linus in from the pumpkin patch where he has fallen asleep and puts him in his own bed as the dream world of Halloween fades back into daily life.

It is the fun version of Halloween I love. I have ghosts on my balcony, but they are cute little light up ghosts. There's a devil hovering over that instrument of torture, the keyboard of my computer, there are goofy candle carrying skeletons and a witch who is also a candy dish. I play spooky music but a lot of it is pieces like Purple People Eater and My Friend the Witch Doctor. Yes Halloween is very much about confronting fears and anxieties, about acknowledging truths, I just prefer to do it with a laugh and to have fun with my friends, to light the hearth fire of my life from our communal bon fire once again. To know that the terrors of the dark season lay ahead but that we have gotten through them before and can do so again. To know that the last night of the year gives way to the first day of the next. That it is after all the eve of All Hallows. My jack o lanterns all smile. Happy Halloween!