

"Halloween as a Religious Holy Day"
October 30, 2011
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When I was four years old, my older sister told me to put my hand in a box and feel what was inside. It was round and cold and wet. "What is it?" I asked her.

"It's an eyeball," she said, smiling.

It was, actually, a peeled grape. I had my mother show me just to make sure. It is my earliest memory of a strange holiday.

Today Halloween is celebrated primarily in the United States and Canada. Each year it becomes a bigger event. One estimate is that this year Halloween will generate up to 8.6 billion dollars on costumes, candy, cards, and decorations. In terms of money, only Christmas is a bigger holiday.

But is Halloween a religious Holy Day? As a parent I followed the rituals of Halloween with my children, buying costumes, buying and decorating a pumpkin, and handing out candy to children who came to our door. But I wondered, why do we do this? As an amateur historian, I decided to investigate.

I discovered that the word Halloween is Christian in its origin. We derive it from the phrase "All Hallows Even," which refers to the eve of All Hallows Day. Hallows means render holy by means of religious rites. All Hallows Day is an old English name for what today is called All Saints Day. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III set November 1, as All Saints Day. Today the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the Episcopalians and the Lutherans celebrate All Hallows Day or All Saints Day on November 1. The celebration honors all Christian Saints. I discovered that in Mexico, the Aztec Day of the Dead celebrations were originally in August. However, the Spanish Roman Catholics moved the August Day of the Dead celebrations to November first.

Two hundred years after setting the date for All Saint Day, the Catholic Church set November 2 as All Souls Day to honor every Christian who has died. The Church intended that the prayers said on November 2 would help souls move from purgatory to heaven. In England, people carved out turnips and placed candles in them, lighting the candles to help people move from purgatory to heaven. After English emigrants came to America, they discovered the Pumpkin and found that it was easier to carve out than a turnip. So, next time you carve a Pumpkin and put a candle in it, remember that the original purpose of this activity was originally to help souls move from purgatory to heaven.

Both these dates, November 1, November 2, fell near the Celtic harvest festival of, Samhain (pronounced sow-an or sow-in) celebrated in Ireland and Scotland. This has led to the belief that the Catholic Church selected November 1, as a way of co-opting the ancient Celtic harvest

festival. Actually, there is no evidence that Pope Gregory had this in mind when he chose November 1, for All Saints Day. In fact, for years the Irish ignored the Roman Catholic calendar and celebrated All Saints Day on April 20. An accident of history, rather than an intentional plan, causes us today to combine the Celtic festival of Samhain with the Christian holy days of All Saints and All Souls.

The word Samhain in Gaelic means "summer's end." In the Irish calendar, this is the time when summer goes to rest. Historians do not know what went on in Ireland and Scotland to mark Samhain. We do know that by the middle ages in Ireland and Scotland fires blazed from hilltops, and they placed the ashes in circles around which they danced.

In the Middle Ages "All Hallows Even" was more about dating and marriage than about ghosts. October 31 single young men and women tried to predict the future of their courtships by doing magic. Young women placed a sprig of rosemary under their pillow on Halloween to help them dream about their future husbands. A man or a woman would test the fidelity of their lover by putting two nuts into a fire. If the nuts did not pop open, a love match would prosper. If they flew apart, so to would the lovers. Bobbing for apples was another way to predict a future courtship. Each Apple represented a different potential mate. The apple you got your teeth into was symbolic of person you would marry.

In New England the Puritans, out of which the Unitarian church grew, outlawed All Saints Day, which they associate with the corruption of Christianity by the Roman Catholic Church. This is why when I was growing up in a Unitarian Universalist household, I knew about Halloween but I do not know about All Saints Day.

Because of the Puritan ban on All Saints Day, in America there was little mention of Halloween until the great Irish immigration between 1845 and 1852. The Irish and the Scots-Irish brought "All Hallows Even" to America. They celebrated Halloween by performing pranks. Teenagers and young adults, dressed in disguises, used the night of October 31 as a time to carry out retribution against those elements in society that held them in check during the rest of the year.

By the first decade of the 20th-century the Irish and Scots Halloween pranks had spread to the general population. Many young working class Americans celebrated Halloween with tricks and vandalism.

This gradually got out of hand. The worst Halloween riot occurred in Chicago in 1934, when the Chicago World's Fair ended on October 31. At midnight 300,000 people plundered the exhibits for souvenirs.

In response to this and other riots, churches, clubs, and local city governments began to work to transform Halloween. They planned parties, trying to reduce young people's vandalism. And "trick-or-treating" was invented. The custom gradually spread, across the United States, reaching Florida in the 1940s. By the 1950s, trick-or-treating was practiced across the United States and Canada, transforming Halloween into a ritual of consumption.

By the late 1950s when I was old enough to walk the streets in my Zorro costume, most of the vandalism associated with Halloween had disappeared. When I was 12 I did go out with my friend Skipper and we wrote profanities in soap on a few car windshields, but for the most part Halloween was peaceful.

Then in September of 1982, seven people died from cyanide laced Tylenol pills. That year public participation in trick-or-treat declined and candy sales dropped by 20 percent. Churches and schools scheduled Halloween parties as alternatives to trick-or-treating. After 1982, the practice of trick-or-treating revived, but parents are still wary. As my kids were growing up, we would look over the candy to see if anything looked unsafe. Also as their father, I would eat random samples of their candy, just to make sure it was safe.

In 1978, the film industry released the first Halloween movie. Since then they have made Halloween 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Although I have not seen these movies, I suspect they are popular because they stimulate the production of adrenaline. At first, there is that feeling of fear, but when the fear passes, when we are safe the fear is replaced by a feeling of serenity and calmness. This is why some of us like to ride roller coasters; why some of us like to go sky diving, or rock climbing; and why some of us watch a horror movie. The experience of being frightened, but not actually being harmed, leads to a chemical change in our brain that gives us a feeling of serenity and calmness. This artificial fear, this safe danger, has become a part of many people's Halloween ritual.

Halloween has long been the one time of the year when people could engage in a night of role inversion, a time when well-behaved people can behave badly. Costumes are part of that social inversion. At Halloween, a shy person can dress up like superwoman. A rich person can dress up like a poor person. Poor people can dress up like rich people. Men dress as women. Women dress as men. A minister can dress up like a gangster and a gangster dresses up like a member of the clergy.

In the 1970s, this inversion of roles moved from private parties to public street parades. In Greenwich Village in New York City, and the Castro district of San Francisco, in Georgetown in Washington, DC, and in Key West thousands of people dressed in costumes, acting out fantasies. One man said, "You had to follow the rules in everyday [life], but on Halloween you can dress up according to your fantasy."

The costumes that people choose reflect popular media. Because of a television show this year Zombies are popular. Because of movies Captain America and Green Lantern are popular. Of course, you can also dress up to look like Michele Bachmann, or Rick Perry, or Herman Cain, or Barack Obama, or a wall street protester.

Halloween costumes give us a chance to play, to be flamboyant exhibitionists, to shock people with the grotesque, to show our creativity, to make joke, to spoof celebrities, to make fun of politicians, and to promote causes. In New York City, planners expect tomorrow night's 39th annual Village Halloween Parade to draw 50,000 participants, and 2 million spectators. In Key West yesterday an estimated 100,000 people attended the Halloween Fantasy Fest parade.

In contrast, Christian Conservatives have their own unique approach to Halloween. They have created what they call Hell Houses. A Hell House focuses on sin and the fate of unrepentant sinners in the afterlife.

One of the first Hell Houses was "Scaremare," created by Jerry Falwell in Lynchburg, Virginia in the 1972. Its website claims to have attracted over 300,000 people. Scaremare presents fun-house rooms and scenes of death in order to confront people with the question "What happens after I die?" The organizers claim to have scared over 26,000 people into converting to Christianity.

The success of the Lynchburg hell houses has led fundamentalists creating hell houses around the country. "Judgment House" at Calvary Baptist in Clearwater is one example. According to the web site "Everyone who walks through the drama will be confronted with both the reality of heaven and the reality of hell and given an opportunity to choose their final destination for eternity."

Others have taken Halloween in a different direction. Wiccans have developed their own harvest celebration. One Wiccan group decorates a place in their homes with autumn flowers, pinecones, small pumpkins, and decorative gourds. They purify themselves by taking a solitary bath. They create a sacred circle within which they conduct their ceremony. The circle is usually marked with four candles of various colors aligned at the four directions of the compass. They share food such cakes and wine, or muffins and cider. The ritual ends by ending the circle, blowing out, and putting away the four candles.

Obviously, in the United States and Canada, people go in many directions when it comes to marking the evening of October 31. But is there any connection between the children's pranks, the candy, the scary movies, the costumes, the Parades in New York and Key West, the Hell Houses, and the Wiccan rituals?

Of course, it is all about our feelings about death. Halloween is half way between the Autumnal Equinox, and the Winter Solstice. In Scotland, Ireland and New England this date marks the time when most plant life is dead. In the past this was a time where food would be limited and living conditions would be less than favorable. So Halloween is a astronomical event in the northern hemisphere, a time when people in cold climates explore the meaning of growing darkness and death. All of these activities are at their root an attempt to deal with our feelings about death. And this of course is a religious issue.

Pranks and candy and costumes all are motivated by the feeling that, if we cannot stop the light from getting shorter, if we cannot stop the growing darkness, we might as well enjoy ourselves, playing tricks, eating food that is bad for us, and having fun wearing costumes. We say to children, it is true that we all die, but have some candy.

The scary stuff is our attempt both to explore death and to get the adrenaline going so that we feel alive. The festive Parades help us feel the joy of life. The fundamentalist hell houses and the Wiccan rituals are very different ways of exploring human feelings about death. All Saints

Day and the Day of the Dead are also ways of exploring our feelings about death.

Given that this is the underlying theme of October 31, how should Unitarian Universalists in Sarasota spend the evening of October 31? In this church, each of you gets to decide. There are several possibilities.

You can pass out candy to the children. This is a way for adults to say to children: life is short, but do not despair. Enjoy yourself. Have some fun.

You can go to the movies. "The Thing" just came out, although I must warn you that the reviews are not good. This is a way to get our adrenaline going so that we feel more alive on a dark night.

You can drive to Clearwater and see the "Judgment House." This is another way to get our adrenaline going.

You can have a Wiccan ceremony marking the transition from summer to winter. This is a way to remind ourselves that we are not alone. We are part of what has come before and what will come after.

You can remember and honor your ancestors who have died.

These are a few possibilities. Whatever you decide, I encourage you to enjoy yourself. That is the religious message of Halloween that our ancestors have passed down to us. As the light grows shorter and the nights grow long, find ways to have fun. If you long to dress up as in a Green Lantern, or as Michele Bachmann or a Wall Street Protester, I say, go for it. As long as you do not hurt anyone, explore your fantasies. Live your life fully. Enjoy. Play. Have fun. It's that time of year.