



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Tricking Evil Spirits”

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Centering Thoughts

From ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties, and things that go bump in the night, Good Lord, deliver us! Traditional Scottish Prayer

Hell is empty and all the devils are here. William Shakespeare

*There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger.
The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid.* L. Frank Baum

Homily

Less than one week til Halloween. It better hurry or I'll have eaten all my candy and have none to give away.

I remember going out to trick or treat when I was about 5 years old. I lived in Westport, Connecticut, and I can still picture trekking around on Halloween with my 9-year-old sister. No parents walked around with us or our friends. We were on our own, along with what seemed like hundreds of other neighborhood baby-boomer witches, pirates, ghosts, hobos, and black cats, my frequent go-to costume.

In the late 50s, early 60s, Halloween hadn't become quite the commercial enterprise it now is. Costumes were mostly homemade from bed sheets, ballet outfits, and our parents' closet. And until we became smart enough to use pillow cases to carry our candy haul, we used paper grocery bags we sometimes decorated. I remember one awful Halloween night when the bottom of my bag made contact too many times with the dew on the evening grass. Sadly, the moisture allowed the weight of the candy to burst a hole in the bag. Without noticing it, I'd left a trail of candy down the block.

When I realized my bag seemed lighter and discovered I'd lost my night's haul, I ran home in tears, my useless bag flapping by my side. When my sister arrived home later, bag intact, my mom forced her to share some of her candy with me. That put her in tears. Not our happiest of Halloweens.

Although I never did that again, each year my sister and I repeatedly faced one particular fear. Maybe every neighborhood has one, but there was one house that required extra courage to visit. The house predated the rest in our subdivision and it was very different in style. If you read fairy tales, you can imagine this perfect-for-witches house.

It sat at the end of a lane off the main street, rather than after a short driveway like the rest. The isolated property backed up to woods and fields that we explored during the daytime. But walking down the dark, tree-shrouded lane at night was something else. We could hear the wind moving through the trees, making leaves crackle and skitter around us while the tree's limbs creaked eerily and swayed like giant arms above us. If we dared, we'd manage to reach the stone porch and climb a few steps to the front door. An old lady, a witch a thousand years old we were sure, would open it. We'd barely mumble a feeble, "Trick or Treat." Even so, her gnarled hand would toss a shiny apple into our gaping bags, then we'd run for our lives back to the main street, safe until next year's adventure.

Halloween offers all of us a time to face our fears. When we encounter dark, scary characters like monsters and ghouls, we try to bravely face them, knowing they aren't real. Haunted houses and scary movies may frighten us, but we find that entertaining because it's safe. Even if we scream, we know we'll live to tell the tale. Experiences like this can foster strength and resiliency in facing bigger fears, bigger evils – of which the world has too many. School shootings and random acts of terror belong only in nightmares, not nightly news stories.

The word Halloween comes from All Hallows' Eve, meaning Holy or Saints' Evening. Like Christmas Eve, it's the night that precedes Hallows Day when, in the Roman Catholic tradition, saints are remembered. But the traditions we think of most on Halloween come from the ancient pagan celebration of Samhain, meaning Summer's End.

For ancient Celtic people in northern Europe, particularly in the British Isles, Samhain marked the end of the growing season and the start of a new year. The night of October 31st was thought to be a time when the veil or separation between the living and dead was extremely thin. This weakness made it easy for any dead spirit with evil intent to enter the land of the living. It also made it easy for the living to be taken into the land of the dead.

No one truly knows what happens after we die. We're no different from the ancients on that. To the Celtic people of northern Europe, death was not necessarily an end. When someone died, they couldn't be sure if that person left this world happy or not. People feared that unhappy spirits might come back to haunt the living. That encouraged their tricking or treating evil spirits.

If you wore a mask or hid in a costume, the evil spirit might not recognize you, keeping you safe from any evil intent they might have. If you gave out sweets to the evil spirits, their attitude towards you might be sweetened so no harm will come to you. Once the hallowed time passed, people would be safe again. Mostly. One can never be sure with spirits.

When you and I put on masks and costumes we may not intend to trick evil spirits of the dead, but we do trick spirits of the living. Costume parties allow us to become someone else for awhile. Masks and costumes give us permission to act in ways we might not otherwise. A shy

librarian might be a vamping vampire. A hulking football player might be an ingeniously mad scientist. Even if our costumes don't express alter-egos, they allow us to be freer, more 'out there', or just different from our usual selves.

Of course, not everyone needs a mask or costume to act differently from their true selves. Some of us hide behind masks created by the role we take on. I'm basically an introvert who is quite happy to be alone with a good book or walking through the woods, whether dark and creepy or bright and sunny. But when I became President at a previous UU congregation, I learned to put on my proverbial President's hat, an invisible costume. It enabled me to become a more outgoing person who could confidently walk up to a stranger, greet them, and risk the awkwardness of what to say. Even as a Minister my role allows me to be more outgoing than I might otherwise be.

Masks also offer you and me a chance to try out a new role, and give us practice in becoming the person we might hope to become. I know I'm not alone in wearing a mask of one sort or another.

As Halloween approaches, enjoy the masks you wear that have no evil purpose. May they keep you safe from witches and monsters, ghosts and ghouls. But be aware of masks that may hide who you really are. May you feel safe enough here to put them away and reveal your true self. It is good to know one another. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share a time you were afraid. What made you feel scared and how did the fear end?
2. What do you believe about ghosts, devils, and witches? Are they evil?
3. How does evil show up in your life? How do you resist or vanquish it?