

Looking for a purpose in Hallowe'en

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Sitting around the dinner table last night, my children were asking my wife and me if we could host a Hallowe'en party. We responded in emphatically unified denial. Our children were, needless to say, disappointed. They were equally saddened to discover how unwilling we were to permit them to do trick-or-treating. I saw an opportunity and began to prepare my thoughts, anticipating to launch into a cautionary lecture about the historical background behind Hallowe'en and how its meaning has been influenced by a number of factors over time. I was beaten to the line, however, by my wife. Her wise approach involved asking our children what they already knew about the festival. Their initial answer, about celebrating vampires, werewolves, ghosts and such spooky things, was anticipated. But their following comments, teased out by my wife's gentle quizzing, surprised me:



To provide a little background information, I must explain that my wife has an iPad which is dedicated to apps relevant to our children's education. One of these apps is called BrainPop, an incredible source of highly informative animations. My children can surf through vast banks of knowledge, watching bite-size films teaching about all kinds of subjects, and learn while being entertained. Recently, my children had watched the film about Hallowe'en and, with my wife's prompting, they were able to recall some of the things they had picked up from the animation.

They referred to the Celtic harvest festivals, such as Samhain, and explained how ancestors were worshipped as part of the thanksgiving. They were also able to explain the origins trick-or-treating: poor beggars used to visit families, house by house, asking for food. In the abundance of the recent harvest, families would be more likely than at any other time of the year to give generously. Their gifts, however, were accompanied by a conditional request, that the beggars pray for the ancestors of the donor family. I was surprised and moved to learn about this beautiful tradition.



What began as a mutually beneficial act – feeding the starving and interceding for the dead – has however morphed into something with the potential for mutual harm. Children will intoxicate themselves with unhealthy volumes of sugary confectionery and families across the country will suffer the nuisance of unwelcome visitors who solicit said confectionery through blackmail. While I believe that most trick-or-treaters in this country are well-behaved folks simply trying to have a fun evening, there will be a handful of troublemakers keen on pelting front doors with eggs and flour, or keen on other creatively unimaginable acts of terrorism.

I'm not going to apologize for throwing cold water on some of the burning desires of my children. I might be accused of being a spoilsport or for having no sense of fun. I might be pressured into lightening up and allowing my children to simply enjoy a fun part of childhood. There might be something to say about all those things. But I strongly believe in living a purposeful life. Whatever one does, there must be a clear and meaningful purpose for it. Our ultimate purpose is to return joy to God, and I want my children to live a life of joy that can be offered to their heavenly parent.

So how do I synthesize my children's desire to participate in popular activities with my desire for purpose? I suppose my wife and I are continuing our journey in figuring that out, especially in the context of raising our children. I'm not trying to say I've got it figured out. But after some give-and-take with my children, having learnt something from them, I feel inspired to prepare a purposeful tradition this Hallowe'en: I'd like to prepare a bowl of fruit (a healthy yet tasty option) at my front door this 31st October and offer them to any trick-or-treaters who may pay us a visit. I would also request that the visitors pray for my ancestors. The encounter would thus become an opportunity to reflect on spiritual beings, the reality of the good and evil aspects of the spiritual world, and could bring higher meaning and value to the Hallowe'en evening.

Of course, I might freak out some folks who might think I'm a weirdo for talking about spirits and ancestors. But I don't think it would be any more weird than what the trick-or-treaters are doing.

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