" ... IT WAS A COLD AND STORMY NIGHT"

John Hale of First Parish .when The Rev 1692I suppose it probably was in UnitarianUniversalist ;Ma ,in Beverly a church which I served in the early 90’s, watched his parishionerof a Bridget Bishop dangle off of the end , hung in Salem and there were "witch"She was the first .s noose'hangman .Rev .to be many more accused and tortured before the trials ended Samuel .s ordeal began when the daughter and niece of The Rev'Hale ering from an unknownsuff ,Parris of Salem began to act strangely disease that their perplexed doctors. It wasie "the evil hand" ,labeled ,ba-u-The girls blamed Tit .for the lack of a better explanation ,witchcraft -Tit .Indian slave for filling their heads with demonic poisoning 'the Parris which were ,old them of her customs and the beliefs of her peopleba t-u She told .strange and an abomination to a civilized Christian ,foreign ,rites of passage ,them of the elders chants and moonlight ceremonies .the animals and nature the magic of the women healers and the spirits of s'No one knows really what happened to those girls or why Tituba if that ,stories manifested such a dramatic change in their personalities John Hale understood the power of belief and .was indeed the cause He saved .with counseling and prayer "ssedposse"chose to calm the Hale also recognized the symptoms of mental illness .1692many lives in When his own wife .years before the medical profession gave it a name wasaccused by a woman whose charges against her were neither .he finally understood ,or remotely believablefounded n The first minister called to ,Hale .Revthe Beverly ,1667church in agonized over the hangings and witch trials at a time when the celebrations of Christmas as we know them today were outlawed and .a pagan heresy considered
The early American Christians were indeed a dangerous lot! I wonder how many in this time will suffer from the same arrogance and ignorance we thought was such a tragedy of the past. There are so many more today who believe that liberal religion is demonic heresy to be destroyed, just like the “witches of 1692.” On Halloween night of this year many little ghouls and ghosts will wander the streets of Salem, MA to chant in the moonlight and to evoke the spirits of the night. All in good fun, the early revelation preserved in “A Modern Inquiry Into Witchcraft” is a book his words are thoughtful and truthful.

We have cause to be humbled for the mistakes and errors of the past. It is not the witches with their witch dolls and incantation who were the root cause of all the mischief; it was simply the centuries of Puritan implicit faith in witchcraft, their victims’ beliefs that caused the tragedy.

How sad how much damage that misplaced faith can do! How much a mis

SERMON: Things That Go Bump in The Night

“Witches and goblins and jack-o-lanterns bright. Creep through the town on a cold October night…” A third grade class hunched down in their seats conjuring the chill of Halloween, their eyes sparkling, each word sung with renewed anticipation of what is to come. Their teacher stealthily slinks down the aisle to pop up in the back of the room and yells, “BOOOOO… The kids jump right out of their seats shrieking with delight and terror, for when the sun disappears behind old
the bell tower, they will be the stalkers, the creatures of the evening. The bell rings, the air is electric with excitement. Only 3 more hours until dark, until the shadows of the unknown return and the spirits arise. There is an ominous chill in the air.

The moon is high and full, the clouds weave images of unspeakable things. In the mouth of the deep woods the gnarled branches of ancient trees creak and sway, the wind howls, a dense stringy fog wafts meanders up from the soil. The veil between the living and the dead begins to lift. What is out there... Something extraordinary is going to happen... tonight... (Theme from “PSYCHO”)

There is something physically shattering about that piece of music from Hitchcock’s “Psycho”, which instills a sense of dread and impending doom through every bone in all who have seen the movie and know what is to follow. It is the ultimate in sensory genius, conjuring a spine tingling fear that has seldom been surpassed by filmmakers since. Even when the outcome is known it has the same effect every time.

Hitchcock’s talent was extraordinary in that he never visually showed what happened, just suggested and the music did the rest. Imagination was Hitchcock’s best storyteller.

As terrifying as that movie was, we did know in the end what happened, and it is a frightening today, as was when it first came out in 1960.

Human imagination is an amazing force. It is even more powerful than reality itself for our perceptions of what we see, and hear and conjure, can change from the norm to the horrifying. Before the play writes and cinematographers, brought our fears of the unknown into focus, and gave them visual images, humankind could only imagine what lay behind the bumps in the night... those unexplained visions of ghostly forms streaming through the cemeteries on a dark and foggy night or the fate of loved ones whom they could not bear to believe had left them forever. So we created places for them to go and wished to be a part of protecting them in their journey to the next life.
Halloween has a rich, widespread and very long history and the intention of each tradition is strangely similar.

Regardless of the differing rituals for communicating with the dead, we found ways of explaining their absence and methods of assisting them on their journey while protecting the living from demons and evil spirits that we believed could cause harm or impede the progress of the soul of the deceased.

All Hallows Eve, All Saints and All Souls Day, Samhein (Sow-an), The Festivals of The Dead, were once celebrated in serious earnest by adults in one form or another all over the world. In ancient times there was nothing more frightening than the dark, the place where spirits played on our fears, where the supernatural took advantage of our night blindness and our imaginations took on a more graphic portrayal of the unknown.

The Romans in 61 AD, outlawed human sacrifice and adopted the Egyptian custom of burying protective effigies with their dead to ward off any evil. The Celts in Ireland in the 5th century BC, extinguished the fires on the hearths to make their homes cold and uninviting to disembodied spirits. They hollowed out and carved turnips with a demon’s face lighted with a candle to frighten away roving souls and marched through the streets and fireless homes dressed as spirits and goblins.

They believed that on October 31st all persons who had died the previous year gathered to choose the body of the person or animal they would inhabit for the next twelve months before they could pass peacefully into the afterlife.

The Irish fleeing the Potato Famine in the 1840’s brought to America the custom of mischievous pranks, sheep tipping and overturning outhouses was a favorite! Since turnips were scarce, pumpkins were suitable substitutes, The Jack O Lantern, meaning Jack’s Lantern, from an Irish folk tale, was born.

The Wiccans celebrate Samhain (Sow-an) as well on October 31 which
was, for the Celts, the first day of the New Year. For Wiccans from the Old English word wicca, meaning to bend or to shape, it belongs to neither the old year or the new. Wiccans believe that the boundaries between spirit and matter are less fixed so they can communicate with the other world at this time.

The Days of the dead, All Saints Day on Nov. 1 and All Souls on Nov. 2 have many adaptations from the Mexican custom of strewing pathways with flowers to pave the way for young spirits to follow them home for a welcoming feast. All Souls Day Nov. 2, is for recently departed adults who are visited in local cemeteries with picnic lunches and an all day celebration well into the night.

Costumes are worn to discourage away any evil spirits who might interfere with the celebrations or bring bad luck to the family or the village.

The Christian custom on All Soul’s Day was to go from village to village begging for square biscuits with currents called Soul cakes. Beggars promised to offer prayers proportional to the donors generosity. It was believed that the quantity of prayers a dead person amassed was intended to shorten the deceased journey from limbo into heaven. (at this time I would be happy to offer prayer indulgences for a fee. You may make your checks out to the church!)

Every culture has a heritage of acknowledging the spirit world at this time of year, of addressing the invisible but assumed powers of the place where the soul resides upon death. Halloween in this country began as a melding of many customs, regional in practice and has evolved into a more fun loving way of addressing the superstitions of yesterday. However there is still a part of us that is wary of what is behind that veil that separates the living from the dead.

From the days when storytelling was our only way of utilizing the imagination by painting pictures in our heads, the movie industry has taken our visions one step further, from the realm of the imagination to the horrors of very graphic representations of the netherworld. It has brought
to life many ideas for how to terrorize thy neighbor contrary to the old
customs of banding together to ward off the uninvited spirits. One need
only to visit our local Haunted Farms, or any number of houses of Horror
that experienced that seasonal entrepreneurs have offered. The fact that
kids and many adults flock to them by the thousands has brought
Halloween into a new and more frightening realm, that barely mimics the
joyful costumed trick-or-treat of my youth and yours.
The power of the imagination is very personal, the images we create from
stories or visual suggestions are very different from one another.
Whereas the realism of those haunted happenings and bloody horror films
each one trying to outdo the other, have encouraged kids to mimic those
characters by purchasing expensive duplicate costumes in the hopes of
having the same terrifying effect on others that the videos and movies had
on them.
On Friday, this week, just count the number of scream face and hockey
masks from the Halloween series, and if there is one you don’t recognize
be assured that it came from the most recent horror flick. The creations of
our own home made costumes were far less visual, bloody and violent than
the ones of today. Halloween has become just one more notch on the belt
of greed.
In a sense we need to re-claim our own traditions, those remembered of
our heritage and customs, aware of what they meant and why they were
used. We also have to be very conscious, this time of year as to what the
kids are watching, as even the cartoons can be pretty frightening for young
children. Our costume have also become a sign of the times...from horror
to “little hotties’, 4 and 5 yeard olds in outfits suitable for a strip joint. This
culture parade has forgotten why we celebrate Halloween, to hinor the
unknown and the mysterious source of life and death.
Over the centuries we still have not solved the great mystery of the
afterlife, of the creatures of the evening, the ghosts and spirits that remain
the shadows of our subconscious minds and on the videos of our mode
We are both thrilled and terrified at the possibilities of what lies beyond and behind the veil that separates the living from the dead, that all cultures recognize. As Unitarian Universalists, taking our beliefs from many traditions, Halloween is the perfect time to examine with our kids what we each believe about life and death.

In our celebrations steeped in the traditions of our ancestors; as we ready ourselves to welcome the season of harvest and Thanksgiving, may our terrors be few, our costumes bright, funny and joyful as were the lives of those whom we have loved and lost and may the mysteries of this life we celebrate, leave us feeling thrilled, contemplative and respectful of all things that go bump in the night.

So be it
Amen

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