It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like...Halloween!

By Christopher Cussat

I don't know if you've noticed, but there seems to be a lot more people who are really getting into Halloween. There is no longer just the occasional, porch-step jack-o'-lantern or a random, crop-less, front-yard scarecrow. Now, some people transform their homes with an ensemble of strung skeleton and pumpkin lights, life-sized, Disney-like creatures from a multitude of dark and evil worlds, and scary sound effects ranging from ghost shrieks to thunder blared from hidden speakers. All this is in preparation for that free-candy getting' event on October 31...Halloween.

But there must be some greater attraction behind this celebrated day of mischief and cavities. How did this recently re-discovered holiday grow to be so popular again? Or has it always been popular and are people now just more comfortable in expressing their beliefs and superstitions? Between 1-800 Tarot card readings, the New Age crystal fad, and a parade of popular Hollywood movies like The Sixth Sense, the public seems more interested in the occult. A recent example is the brand new talk show on television whose host converses with guests who are dead. No, I am not talking about Meet the Press; I am talking about Crossing Over with John Edward, a self-proclaimed clairvoyant or one who can communicate with the deceased. So we obviously are still very interested in things that go bump in the night...but where did this tradition begin?

Halloween is typically associated with death and the supernatural. Traditionally, it is observed on the evening of October 31, in most areas of North America and some areas of Western Europe. Halloween is on the eve of All Saints' Day or Allhallows, a holy day honoring Saints for Roman Catholics and members of the Anglican Church. The Catholic Church also established All Souls' Day on November 2, which helps purify the spirits of the dead. Both holy days are closely linked to the celebration of Halloween.

But even before Christianity, ancient peoples celebrated a holiday in late autumn, which marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter. The major holiday that later influenced what we now know as Halloween was called Samhain by its observers, the tribal Celts (sometimes called Druids), during the first millennium BC. Samhain was like New Year's Day to the Celts, marking the end of their year and the beginning of the next. This holiday began at sundown on October 31 and extended through the following day. The Celts' pagan religion, Druidism, believed that spirits of those who died the previous year roamed the earth on the evening of Samhain. These ancient peoples would attempt to ward off these spirits with offerings of food and drink. The day also usually culminated in sacrificial fires and rituals in honor of Druid deities. The connection to Christianity came by the end of the 1st Century AD, after the Holy Roman Empire's conquest of the Celtic lands. In order to incorporate the Celts into its empire, the Romans adapted some Druidic traditions and melded them into their own Catholic and pagan observances.

Most modern traditions linked to Halloween are based on folk beliefs dealing with supernatural forces and spirits of the dead. Decorations and costumes are generally representations of supernatural beings or imagery symbolizing bad omens like werewolves, ghosts, vampires, witches, black cats, bats and spiders. Dressing up in costumes and going trick-or-treating is also a popular event during this dark holiday. Traditionally, children would threaten to vandalize homes if no treats were given. Over time, this has evolved into benign joke telling and masquerade parties.

So do you believe in ghosts? I remember a late autumn not too long after my grandfather died, when I was eight-years old. We were inseparable. There is not much I remember of those days, but there is one experience and memory that is still so clear and crisp that there is no doubt in my now more mature mind that it indeed happened. It was an overcast late afternoon and I wanted to bring one of my favorite toys, a large, red tin fire-truck, into my house before it began to rain. I went to the garage, which was separate from the house. I remember looking in the dim storage area and not being able to find the toy in its usual storage box. I also remember glancing at my pap's workshop located in the garage and making a conscious effort of not looking or staying too long. I gave up my search with no idea where my prized plaything could have gone or who would have moved it. As I started back toward the house, something indescribable lured me toward the side of the garage. The side of our garage was in close proximity to a neighbor's garage so it formed a narrow tunnel-like aperture just large enough for my small body to fit. The space was overgrown with high grass and weeds. The rear of that space was blocked off by a jutting extension of the back of the garage, allowing only one way in and one way out. I noticed, even though it was now nearly dark, a reddish hint of color nearly three quarters of the way to the back of the garage's side-space. It was my fire-truck. I cautiously walked towards the toy. When I reached it, I hesitated. Some part of me knew that something was happening or about to happen. Finally, I mustered the courage and reached very slowly toward the fire-truck. That single, brief movement of my hand seemed to slow to a lifetime. The second my hand nearly touched the toy, an unnatural, almost wicked wind whipped the tall grass around me and at that precise moment an invisible, distinct, tangible hand grabbed mine! I remember turning and running to the safety of my house as fast as I could. I do not remember ever going back to reclaim my favorite fire-truck nor do I remember what ever happened to it after that day. Perhaps it is still there, buried beneath the high grass of my youth.

Some may say it was just the wind. You may believe it was a grieving child's overactive imagination. That is the point. We all believe what we want to believe based on our experience, our upbringing, our spirituality and our rational minds. That is why Halloween is so important. It allows us to be open to our own interpretations, because it represents things so strange and inexplicable that we cannot be given proof of them by anyone else but ourselves. Sometimes proof is given by faith alone. Sometimes we just need to believe in something amazing. For example, although it frightened me then, I know now that the hand that touched mine was not malevolent...and I know what I believe...I know that on that bleak, stormy evening, my pap reached out to me from somewhere else and grasped my hand...and said good-bye. ▲