

**“The Veil Between the Worlds- a Hallowe’en Sermon”**  
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Today is Samhain or ‘summer’s end’ in the ancient Gaelic calendar. For the pre-Christian people of Ireland the year was divided in two, the light half and the dark half. Today marks the summer’s end, the beginning of the dark half of the year and the end of harvest. During this three day festival the final crops would be taken in and the animals slaughtered and preserved for the winter. In the Gaelic mind, it is also the start of the new year. It probably says something about my Irish heritage that we celebrate ‘the beginning’ at the time of dying instead of in the time of the return of the sun. No wonder the Irish do such wonderful three day funerals and compose such marvellously sad music!

It is Samhain, new beginnings in the dying season. The ancients would light bonfires to mark the coming of the new year, the first and brightest on the royal hill of Tara. But everywhere new fires would be lit, usually two at a time with a space between them. People would pass between or jump over them for luck in the new year. It was a moment of rebirth. A modern day internet poet going by the name wyrdness offers this:

On Samhain night when witches ride,  
the veil between worlds is thin.  
On this fateful eve, you may perceive  
that a Gateway is opening.  
It's guarded by the Queen of Night.  
Do you dare to enter in?  
Her raven cries, as away it flies.  
The dark time must now begin.  
Between the worlds stands your mortal soul.  
You must now face the fear.  
The Gods of Old will freeze you cold,  
the Lord of Death stands near.  
Could you bravely be so bold  
as to face that Shadow King?  
In this darkest night can you reach the light?  
It's a battle that you must win.  
To conquer Death on this autumn night  
or fail and dearly pay.  
New birth from the womb, or sleep in your tomb,  
there is no other way.  
If you have the might to win the fight  
you can pass through that Gateway.  
On Samhain-morn you will be reborn  
at the Dawning of the Day.?

We in the northern hemisphere understand all too well this season of dying. The leaves are falling, the growing things have turned brown and withered. Even King Sun seems to be dead and vanquished.

Perhaps because of this the ancients believed that at this time of the year, the

veil between the worlds is at its thinnest. The dead can reach back through the veil towards us, hence it is perceived to be the scariest night of the year by those afraid of death and afraid of their past misdeeds. It is All Hallows Eve, the time of All Souls in the Christian world.

At this time of year the Gaels would wear costumes and masks to placate or perhaps fool the spirits who might be coming for them. In Scotland the young men dressed up with blackened faces impersonating the dead. People would hollow out turnips and turn them into lanterns with carved faces designed to scare away the ghosts. People would carry them through the town as protection. In time, children would carry them house to house begging for treats, the donor's generosity standing as a further hedge against the evil that might lurk in the long night.

Of course, those of us of scientific and rational minds think this is all bunk and Hallowe'en is just a chance for a bit of dress up fun. We know why the days are short and the nights long. With modern agrarian techniques we no longer have to depend on winter vegetables and can have fresh meat any time of year. For us, there are no ghosts. Certainly I don't believe in ghosts...

...except for the ones that have apparently visited me. Let me be clear. I have never seen nor felt a ghostly presence in my life. It's all nonsense of course...except...for the people around me who have seen ghosts...

36 years ago I was part of a college theatre company in Montreal. My best friend Norbert and I were building sets for the upcoming production of "No No Nanette". We were doing this in the upstairs warehouse of my family's century old machine shop. If you have ever been in an ancient creaking machine shop at night, you have no need to visit a haunted house. It's a grimy, shadowy place with odd shapes of strange equipment combining in the shadows to create imagined visions of wraiths and demons able to hide in a hundred corners.

On this Saturday night we were working late. Our girlfriends Helene and Heather had come along to get some painting done. It was nearing midnight when we finally locked up. The other three were waiting at the bottom of a long, steep and narrow enclosed staircase while I killed the last of the lights at the upstairs door. As I clumped down to join them and leave I saw the eyes of both women go wide. I thought nothing of it.

We climbed into the beat up old Rambler and drove away. The voices in the rear were hushed, urgent and strained. Eventually Norberts asked what was going on. "Didn't you see it?" asked Helene, a mix of fear and awe in her voice. "Didn't you feel the sudden chill?" added Heather.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. After a long silence Helene whispered. "There was a human looking ghost—a man—bathed in green light following you down the stairs! His face was so clear. He was smiling."

Right. We humoured them, after all they were our girlfriends and we were college aged males. They knew we weren't buying it. The long drive home was frostier than a wintry morning.

A few days later I was chatting with my Very Catholic and former seminary student Dad on the front porch, his favourite place. I told him the story expecting him to laugh, or maybe even have some more dogmatic and dismissive reaction. You could have knocked me over when he leaned closer and said, "They said he looked green?"

They said they could see him? Hmm.”

He went inside and returned with a group photo of about 15 men taken years ago in the “shop” as we called it. I looked at it recognizing most of them. Many still worked there, one was in jail. Only one of the men in the picture was dead.

“Show this to Helene and Heather...See if he’s in this picture.”

Friends, it was as if my father’s head had just swivelled 360 degrees on his shoulders. I was stunned that this very faithful man was taking this ghost story seriously.

The next day I showed the picture to the girls – separately. They both pointed without hesitation to the one dead man. This was getting, for want of a better word – spooky.

That evening I returned the picture to my Dad and told him what the women had done. “I thought so.” He said with a small smile. “George (the dead man in the picture) was deeply involved in the start up of the Ascot line in the business. I’m trying to decide whether or not to let it go. It’s been good to us, but I think its day is done. I think George just told me to go ahead and close it down.”

I think my world changed that day. My holy old man, my by-the-good-book Catholic father believed in ghosts - other than Jesus and the Holy Spirit – believed in ghosts sending him messages from beyond the grave.... Wow.

I suppose I could dismiss it as a one of event, but some years ago this Remembrance Day night it happened again. Once again I was with a lady friend. An hour before I had learned of my mother’s peaceful death in Montreal. I was thinking about the coming trip home and starting to grieve. I was being quietly held with my eyes closed when I felt my rational and well-educated friend go rigid for a long moment, then I felt her gently relax.

“What was that about?” I asked. She replied – quite calmly but a bit shaken, “Your mother was just here, standing over by the window.”

Recalling the frosty effects the last time I didn’t believe a lady friend’s ghostly encounter, I went along. “How was she?” I asked with my best degree of sincerity.

“She looked calm and peaceful. I think she was saying goodbye and that everything was all right now and not to worry about her.”

“That sounds like Mom,” I said, “She would worry that I would be worrying about not having seen her before she died.”

So I don’t believe in ghosts...except that I do. I have never seen one... but I seem to attract them for those who can.

How does a rational being explain this? Well, I can’t. And because of that over the last 16 years, I have come to honour my non-rational side more and more. I have grown comfortable with not being able to explain everything, with not having the answer.

I suppose Hamlet said it best when he had his own ghostly encounter with his Dad, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Right now about 20 of us are joining in a course on personal spirituality. In the first week we struggled with defining what spirituality is. It is hard to find the right words to describe something so wordless as a moment of spiritual connection, a thing utterly intangible and unprovable. Never do we come so hard up against the failure of words,

those merely human tools of communication.

As one of the course quotes describes it:

“Spirituality is a hazy, nebulous dimension of life that means many things to different people and at different times, and that they explain with many different vocabularies.”

Are ghosts ‘real’ in any scientific sense? Or are they part of that ‘hazy dimension’ of unprovable perception conjured by feverous imagination and not ethereal magic? No one can say for sure. We can have opinions that we hold with an absolute sense of certainty, but that’s all they are, opinions, statements of faith, beliefs. Beliefs are many wonderful things, but one thing they are not: beliefs are not facts

The Celts divided the year into light and dark. Far across the ocean, the first nations people of Turtle Island’s west coast (Canada) did much the same thing. The sunny part of the year was a time for reaping the wealth of the natural world, for fishing and hunting and gathering and trading. But the winter months were different. They were the spirit time. During the winter even the nature of clans changed. People left their blood relatives and entered houses governed by spirit clans where they studied, learned and performed the sacred dances, donned the sacred costumes and masks, and told sacred stories. Unlike us, the ancients spent much conscious and physical time in the realm of the spirit – something we have lost. Too many of us cling unyieldingly to the provable and dismiss the unseen as impossible.

Tonight, as you look over the sea of three foot fairies and avatars and Ironmen charging to your door in search of very earthly treats, tonight as the evening falls just a few minutes earlier than yesterday and the damp cold seems just a touch chillier than yesterday, tonight I invite you to look above their heads and scan the night for the ghosts that might just be a flicker in the corner of your eye.

Perhaps the veil is thinner now, perhaps not. But those who have gone before us through that veil are with us still whether or not you believe their ghosts walk the earth. Those who have gone before are in us and of us. They are our teachers still, willing to help us be who we truly are. I think my nervous Celtic ancestors got one part of this festival wrong. The dead reaching through the veil to us are not to be feared. They aren’t coming to kill us or steal away our souls. They aren’t demons. If anything they are reaching back to show us things we know but won’t admit, or as in the case of my Dad, to help us come to terms with hard decisions. At the same time, they also remind us that we are all connected in ways science and logic cannot always explain. One last story: Ever since Mom died 16 years ago, I have religiously attended Christmas midnight Mass, always at the Basilica here once I moved to Edmonton. I go early. If there is one left I light a candle for my parents, just in case the Catholics got the afterlife thing right and they need my help. Otherwise I sit quietly listening to the organ watching the church fill up. And I have a chat with Mom and Dad. I talk about the year passing, about what I have done and failed to do. I think of how much they would have loved Teilya and my children had they met them and vow again to make sure my daughters know who their paternal grandparents were. Rationally, I don’t know if Mom and Dad are listening or not and frankly, I don’t care. I’m not really doing this check in for them now, am I?

No, I don’t know if they are spirits or if they listen, but given the ghostly encounters of my past, neither do I discount the possibility. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio than are dreamt of in your philosophy”.

Blessed Samhain and Happy Hallowe’en.