

# Halloween, A Time for Spirits

By Patrick Dey

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It is officially autumn! At least in the northern hemisphere.

Furthermore, we are quickly approaching Samhain (pronounced "souw-in") , an old Gaelic holiday akin to Halloween. It is one of the four Gaelic holidays that are observed halfway between the celebrations of the equinoxes and solstices.

Some scholars, such as James Frazer, proposed that the Church, having long endeavored to end the pagan practice of ancestor worship amongst the Gaels and Celts, first tried to replace Samhain with All Saints' Day, then All Souls' Day, and finally relented and adopted All Hallows' Eve, where one may render honor to their deceased friends and relatives.

Other scholars, such Ronald Hutton, believe it is the other way around: that the proximity of All Saints' and All Souls' Days gave rise to the idea that Samhain was anything more than just a harvest festival.

Why this time of year is particularly spiritual and spooky is a matter of debate. Samhain is observed halfway between the Autumnal Equinox and the Winter Solstice. This is harvest season, when crops will be cut down and livestock slaughtered; a time that is ruled over by the chthonic deity of Saturn, the god of time and the harvest. Hence, the end of the harvest season was celebrated by the ancient Romans as Saturnalia.

The nights are longer than the day as the sun continues its descent towards the nadir. In Hermetic traditions the Winter Solstice – in the constellation of Capricorn-was believed to be the celestial gate by which the soul exited the terrestrial world. All these things together make this a very mystical time for spirits to engage the material world, and so for thousands of years humans have endeavored to appease these spirits during this time. Hence, this is a time of the year that has long been associated with ghosts and spirits.

Samhain is a special season in which the ancient Gaels believed the veil separating the mortal and the spirit worlds was at its thinnest. As a result, the Aos Sí or "spirits" could more easily pass into our world and we can better interact with them. Hence, it is why the celebrations centered around this time involve a lot of ancestor veneration, necromancy (literally, magic and divination with the souls of the dead), and other spiritual practices involving spirits of those who were once mortal.

Death is a thing we in the Western world have a problem talking about. We find it difficult to discuss with our loved ones about our wishes for end-of-life care, how we want our final remains handled, et cetera.

But we as Masons are all too aware of death. In every Master Mason Degree we are introduced to (if you are a candidate) or reminded of (if you are observing or assisting) the mysteries of death."We are born to die, "as the saying goes.

Some people are convinced there is nothing after death; no place, no consciousness, no being, nothing. Some people fear that it is little more than a black, empty void one wanders through aimlessly.

Others believe the soul travels to the great Paradise beyond, or down into a fiery abyss of pain and torment. Some traditions believe the soul sheds off the sins of the material world as it ascends through the heavenly spheres and is reabsorbed into the All. Other still believe the soul in reincarnated in new flesh. Whatever you believe, the fact is this: one day the body will fail and cease to be animate...everyone will one day die.

We honor those who have passed away. Many of these forms of commemorating the dead are pared down forms of ancient necromancy. Saying prayers for or to the dead, leaving flowers on graves (i.e. offerings), burial rites, memorial celebrations, and so forth are all some excerpted form of necromancy that has been modified from ancient times. We honor the dead so that they may favor us while we still enjoy this life.

And then we have ghosts. I myself live in a haunted house. It really is not so bad. We do not have a poltergeist (literally "noisy spirit") r anything severe, but sometimes things get weird. It is a bit like having an extra roommate that you never see, but who occasionally makes a mess, and never pays rent. I have lived in several haunted places. While I was in college, I lived in a haunted dorm. On at least five occasions I heard high-heel footsteps walk up and down the balcony and then into my room, through the wall, and through my neighbor's room. I once lived in an old apartment building in which I was awoken in the middle of the night by my bed sheets being lifted in the air and dropped down upon me. I have been out on a haunted road in South Carolina where I saw a shade walking about fifty feet away from me, and it was one of the most existentially mortifying experiences of my life.

What are ghosts is still a mystery to us.

Some people believe they are real, while others do not, and others hesitate to give an opinion. In 1991 the New York Supreme Court ruled caveat emptor ("buyer beware") on a case dealing with a haunted house, in which the seller did not disclose the paranormal activity in the home to the buyer. The Court would not rule in favor of the buyer simply because it would provide a legal precedent for hauntings.

Whether ghosts exist or not, the mysteries of death are nonetheless profound. It is the only veil for mortals that once it is crossed, you can never go back. However, this is the time of the year in which it has traditionally been believed that interaction between the mortal and the divine, between humans and spirits is most potent. If you live in a haunted house, things get weirder than usual. Prayers and petitions to the martyrs and saints are better received and answered. The purpose of these celebrations is to provide a spiritual connection, by praying to the saints or the righteous dead in heaven we living mortals are given communion with the divine and can grow closer to God. For other cultures, this season is ripe for communing with those who are no longer with us.

As Masons we profess a belief in the immortality of the soul. What happens to that immortal part which survives the grave is anyone's guess. Yet, for millennia humans have held a conviction that the souls of the depart may be honored and communicated with, and this was the most potent time of the year to do it.

Happy Halloween!