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On Fear, Fall, and Pagan Holidays

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On Fear, Fall, and Pagan Holidays

Fall is my favorite season, but I couldn’t tell you why. Certainly, the color-changing of the leaves in the woods by my house, the crisp chill in the air—a much-needed respite from the dog days of summer—and the fresh apple cider all have something to do with it. And of course I’m always down for some insects biting the dust. But for me fall has always been more than just those things, the things that almost everyone who loves the season lists off when asked why they love it so much. I mean, I also enjoy the lulling calm of mid-summer, the pristine stillness of winter’s snow, and the vibrancy of spring, but for me there was always something that set fall apart from the others. A feeling.

There’s no feeling like the one I get from simply standing out amid the gusts and swirling leaves, staring out at the grey cloud banks rolling in over the horizon, and knowing that each day is getting a little bit darker than the last. I feel as though I should be standing there, soaking the season in, but at the same time, I want to go inside, pour myself a nice cup of coffee, and read a book, as far away from the outdoors as possible. It’s the strangest thing. Almost like fear.

Even saying that, it doesn’t make any sense. Surely, I’m not afraid of a season. Still, deep within me there lurks some inexplicable looming thing whenever I go outside on a fall evening. It’s there in the urgency of the breeze, no matter how soft. The rustling of the dry leaves. The moon peeking out from behind the clouds. It’s moments like those that I feel like I’m Jon Snow in the HBO series Game of Thrones, standing on the edge of a massive wall, looking out over a vast wilderness below. In autumn, the wilderness seems only inches away, brooding, waiting to devour what’s left of happy-go-lucky summer with hungry teeth.
Of course, a television show allegory can’t possibly convey I’m trying to convey. But it’s the closest I can come to describing for you what that moment is. It is a sense of urgency, foreboding, one that I absolutely cannot get enough of.

I’ve mentioned this feeling to others before, and was usually met with the same response: “Oh, it’s because Halloween is around the corner. That’s why fall feels spooky”. But I disagree. It is my theory that people decided to put the “spooky” holiday in October precisely because fall already felt scary to them.

Halloween, a corruption of “All Hallows Eve” has its roots as a Christian holiday that is supposed to be for remembering those who have departed this world, including saints and martyrs. Today, it’s obviously more commonly associated with dressing up in silly costumes and trying to get more free candy from neighbors than your friends. A lot of people don’t even know about All Hallows Eve. Though it does have to do with death, it’s not in an especially spooky way. Spookier, though, is the October holiday that precedes even All Hallows Eve. I speak, of course, of the Celtic festival of Samhain.

Samhain—pronounced Sow-an—is an ancient pagan harvest festival. Yeah, sounds kind of tame, I know. But it gets scarier. You see, the Celts believed that during autumn, when the days grew steadily darker and darker, that the Otherworld—where dwelled all manner of ghastly spirits and otherworldly creatures—also grew closer to our world. They believed that during this time spirits from the Otherworld could pass over and enter the mortal realm, making mischief, seeking vengeance, and even snatching unwatched children to bring back with them into their dark abode (“Samhain.”). For this reason, Celts would board up their houses during the festival just to stop the little devils from getting in.
Still, what intrigues me the most about Samhain is that it was a *celebration*. Aside from the house-boarding, people ran around getting drunk off their asses and playing games for the duration of the festival. They loved being outside during a time they considered to be potentially dangerous. And it makes me wonder whether they experienced the same feelings about fall that I do. Perhaps that was even why they created Samhain in the first place.

I’ve seen people try to explain this feeling before. One person online even suggested that it might be because those humans who developed a sense of urgency about fall would be more likely to gather the requisite supplies for the coming winter, and thus be more likely to survive and pass on their genes to further generations. It could be true, but I’d hate to take the mystic quality away from the spirit of fall. I’d hate for it just to be a simple matter of natural selection when it could be spirits crossing over to our world from an alternate dimension. I like my fear of fall too much to risk losing it to science.

But, why? Why do I enjoy that welling sensation in my chest that tells me it’s time to leave? Why do I enjoy being afraid? Why does anyone, for that matter? Many people—myself included—enjoy going to see horror movies at the theater and having the piss scared out of them. And though I don’t mean conflate the subtle shudder of being outside on a chill autumn’s day with the harsh jolt of having a monster pop out at you with the full force of two massive surround-sound speakers, there is certainly something shared between them.

There are the obvious connections. Horror movies are often released in fall. This year, we’ve got the new *Halloween*, sequel to the original 1978 John Carpenter film of the same name. I haven’t seen it yet, but I’m excited to do so, even if the film doesn’t’ live up to the hype. It’s a strange proposition. I’m excited to see something that I hope scares me. In fact, I’ll be disappointed if it doesn’t.
Cathy Cassata of Healthline suggests that neurotransmitters in the brain release positive stimulants when we’re afraid, and the energy boost we receive from adrenaline makes us feel alive. She suggests that people who enjoy being afraid are more likely to be extroverts and open to new experiences, while those that don’t are often introverts and set in a particular routine (Cassata). I don’t entirely agree with this, seeing as I don’t really subscribe myself to being an introvert or extrovert. And I’m definitely not open to all experiences, especially terrifying ones. I hate roller coasters and I’ve no desire to ever go skydiving.

So, I enjoy fear, but only certain types. I’d rather sit back and watch a good scary movie than jump out of a plane. I may be a chicken in that regard. Fair enough. Someday I may learn to like those things. Maybe I’ll become a thrill seeker once horror movies and haunted houses have lost all their effect on me.

My cousin, on the other hand, loves all these things and more. He likes walking around the city in the dead of night, exploring abandoned buildings for the hell of it, and sneaking into restricted areas just “because.” Once he urged me deep into a forested park well past midnight. When I asked him why he wanted to go back there, where we might stumble across any number of foul things, he said, “Because it’s fun to be scared, right? I mean, what are the odds we stumble across a murderer tonight?” Five minutes later, a strange shape on the edge of the trail sent us bolting back the way we’d come, hearts hammering in our chests. Once we’d finally escaped the woods, we fell forward and began to laugh uncontrollably, because we both knew that the thing that had startled us so bad was probably just a tree itself, and not a serial killer.

I’m not sure the Celts actually believed in spirits or the Otherworld, but I’m sure they loved Samhain. They loved to be afraid, to be on the edge of their seats. To stand against the coming wind, the end of another year, the death of the comfort of summer. Maybe it’s just that--
the end of a year--which causes my feelings toward fall. It’s the harbinger of death. The death of living things, the death of another year. Another reason to marvel at the swift passage of time.

I remember falls as a child, falls as a young adult. Sitting in leaf piles, raking leaf piles, using a leaf-blower on leaf piles. I remember bumping up and down in the backseat of my parents’ Ford F150 on the way to my grandma’s for Thanksgiving dinner and thinking that each new Thanksgiving is just a reminder that one more Thanksgiving has passed, and that it’s one less Thanksgiving to live through. One less year to live through. One less rotation of the earth around the sun until I forget what both of those are, until I forget everything.

I don’t know that I would call that fear so much as I would existential dread, a feeling of powerlessness. A feeling that nothing I do matters, that nothing can stop the passage of time from one season of life to another. But maybe that’s what makes each fall feel so exciting, the fact that the number of falls I’ll experience is finite, and each one is different. My own personal Samhain. Much like my midnight run through the woods, I have no idea what each new fall might bring, and all I can do is live through them, grinning broadly against the cold.
Works Cited and Consulted
