

The Thinning Veil

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First Parish in Hingham – Old Ship

October 29, 2023 – Samhain/Halloween

Good morning! Is everyone ready for Halloween? This morning we're going to examine some of the sides of this holiday.

Let us start by going back a month. On Yom Kippur, we talked about the scapegoat, on whose head the priest placed all the sins of the community and then drove out into the wilderness. We talked a bit about the figure of the scapegoat in myth and legend and real life, in social units large and small, wherever a faction of the people concludes that the current problems are the fault of one or more people in the social unit. So God's instructions in the book of Leviticus for laying the priest's hands on the goat's head foreshadowed ages and ages of persecutions, often of people who were innocent of any offense. Now we come around to Halloween, or Samhain, as some call it, and we can meet another variation of the same thing.

Halloween is a contraction of All Hallow's Eve, the day before All Saint's Day in the Christian calendar. All Saint's Day was originally established to honor the Christian martyrs from the time of the Roman persecution in the early centuries of Christianity. These were the Christians who willingly faced the lions and thus gave proof that they believed that their faith would carry them to a serene afterlife in heaven. But there was another motivation for putting the celebration at the end of October, for the Celts had long celebrated that time as a pagan holiday. The end of October in the Celtic pagan calendar was called Samhain (spelled s-a-m-h-a-i-n but pronounced "sow-en"). It was their new year, and was celebrated with bonfires.

There was also a legend associated with Samhain. There was a race of supernatural beings, called As Si in Irish, who lived in their own settlements scattered among human settlements, and once a year, at Samhain, they rode through human villages on horseback and sometimes captured humans and held them in their hills. The ancient Celts considered that there was a veil between the worlds of the fairy folk and ordinary people, but at Samhain, that veil became thinnest. This is a fairly obscure aspect of folklore, and yet the other day on public radio, I heard a reporter reporting from Israel say that the veil between Arab life and Israeli life was thin because of the war.

Frequently when I do a service on a Halloween theme, I will have a reading of a beloved old Scottish ballad called "Tam Lin" which describes a love affair between fair Janet, a nobleman's daughter

and Tam Lin, a knight who is being held prisoner by the fairy folk. These two have been meeting in the woods for a while, and out of this relationship Janet has become pregnant. They hatch a plan to rescue Tam Lin from clutches of the Fairy Queen when the fairy folk ride through town on Halloween. She has to identify him in the crowd of riders, pull him off his horse and hold on to Tam Lin while he changes shapes to various animals and objects. She succeeds in holding him and rescues him from the fairies, to the anger of their queen.

This story is one of the places in folklore and mythology where we get the idea that spiritual encounters often involve shape-shifting – you start fighting something that you think is a bear but it turns into a snake. It echoes a theme in classical Greek mythology involving the god Proteus, one of the gods of the sea who can never be captured by humans because, like the sea itself, it can change shape.

[The Irish traditional pieces that Cameron and I played at the beginning of the service have titles related to the As Si, the fairy hills. The first is called Si Bheag, Si Mor and it was the first tune written by the eighteenth century blind harp master Turlough O'Carolan. The title means "The Little fairy Hill and the Big Fairy Hill" and was inspired by the story of a war between those two sets of the little people. The second was the Haunted House, whose connection to Halloween might be apparent, and the third is called the Banshee, which is a spirit who lives in the Si and gives bloodcurdling howls all night long.]

Let's turn now to the witches. What are we doing talking about witches in a UU church? I have said over and over that Unitarianism and Universalism were products of the period we call The Enlightenment, where reason and logic replaced superstition. Should we be talking about witches three centuries after the Enlightenment?

Let me answer with one of my favorite quotes from one of my favorite ministers in our history, the Rev. Quillen Shinn, who went across the breadth of this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to spread the gospel of Universalism. In the year 1900, he published a sermon which brought into sharp focus the line between science and superstition. Here's what he said about science and evil.

"Science, penetrating to the heart of nature and unsealing its hidden laws, teaches [us] that there is but one force, with different manifestations. It manifests itself in magnetism, in electricity, in heat and motion, in chemical affinity, etc.; but there is but one great central force, and that is good. Way back in the benighted past, [humans], lacking foresight to see how the discords and conflicts of nature would result in harmony, came to ascribe things [they] called evil to evil beings; hence the world's belief in devils, ghosts, hobgoblins, and witches. All these are perishing; the light of science is killing them. "¹

Or so we would like to hope. Of course we celebrate here the Puritan regime which our forebears set up in Massachusetts, and there was the little matter of witch trials, though the persecutions were confined to the North Shore as far as I know.

The phrase "Witch hunt" has been much bandied about in American politics in the last ten years, but it originally referred to a specific time, the 1690s and place, Salem and its environs.

A very readable article in Smithsonian magazine provides a good overview of the Salem persecutions, and I will quote liberally. The historical context is that the new English King, William, had started wars in Canada and upstate New York, generating a stream of refugees to the New England coast; community tensions rose as a result of this influx. Hmm, does that sound familiar?

Salem was two towns; what was called Salem Village in that day is present-day Danvers; what was called Salem Town is today just called Salem. Most of the action of the witch persecution took place in Salem Village, now Danvers.

It all started with a minister named John Parris, who arrived in Salem Village to become minister of the church there while King William's war was going on, and took a strong stance against letting more refugees settle there. At some time before settling in Salem, John had traveled through the West Indies, where he "bought" an enslaved woman named Tituba. Some sources describe her as indigenous and others as African. She had care of Parris' children.

In January 1692, Parris' daughter Betty, age 9 and niece Abigail, age 12, began having fits, uttering strange sounds and contorting their bodies into strange shapes. Another girl who was friends with them, Ann Putnam, age 12, also began behaving oddly. A doctor called in could not find any reason for this behavior.

A couple of local magistrates commenced an investigation. Under pressure from these officials, the girls named three women for afflicting them: Tituba, the West Indian enslaved person, Sarah Good, a homeless beggar, and Sarah Osborn, an elderly impoverished woman.

In the initial appearance in March of 1692, as the article put it "All three women were brought before the local magistrates and interrogated for several days, starting on March 1, 1692. Osborne claimed innocence, as did Good. But Tituba confessed, 'The devil came to me and bid me serve him.' She described elaborate images of black dogs, red cats, yellow birds and a "tall man with white hair" who wanted her to sign his book. She admitted that she'd signed the book and claimed there were several other witches looking to destroy the Puritans."

It should be noted that when Tituba's name had first been uttered by the afflicted girls, John Parris expressed an intention to beat her until she told the truth. It seems to this former lawyer that Tituba

had every motive to give the interrogators what they were looking for to avoid harm to herself. She was in the position to be the scapegoat. As it turned out, in later tellings of her story, key details changed. Tituba spent most of the witch trials in jail, but at the end she was pardoned and allowed to go free.

With the seeds of paranoia planted, a stream of accusations followed over the next few months. The number of accusations multiplied and a representative of the Governor arrived to sit in on the hearings.

The Massachusetts Bay colony had a new royal governor at the time, Sir William Phips. Phips responded to the growing number of witchcraft allegations by signing an order creating a new court to try the cases. It was called a court of oyer and terminer, for its functions were to hear (oyer in Latin) and determine (terminer) the cases.

Governor Phips himself did not get directly involved in the witchcraft allegations for several months, because he had to go to attend military defenses in Maine and further northward.

As the prosecutions commenced in the new court, the question arose as to one category of evidence: spectral evidence. Spectral evidence was testimony by a witness that the accused witch had appeared to her in a dream or vision – the type of evidence that cannot be corroborated or disputed by the testimony of anyone else.

Cotton Mather was the well-known minister of Second Church in Boston, and he became an observer for some of the trials. At one point, he wrote a letter to the judges of the court which asked them to be careful in admitting spectral evidence:

“... I must humbly beg you that in the management of the affair in your most worthy hands, you do not lay more stress upon pure specter testimony than it will bear. When you are satisfied or have good, plain, legal evidence that the demons which molest our poor neighbors do indeed represent such and such people to the sufferers, tho this be a presumption, yet I suppose you will not reckon it a conviction that the people so represented are witches to be immediately exterminated.”

At the beginning of this sermon I had mentioned the idea of shape-shifting in the legend of Tam Lin, and here Mather is pointing out that the devil is perfectly capable of shifting shape so as to represent anyone. Yet, the Smithsonian analysis notes,

“The court largely ignored this request, sentencing the hangings of five people in July, five more in August and eight in September. On October 3, following in his son Cotton’s footsteps, Increase Mather, then-president of Harvard, denounced the use of spectral evidence: “It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person be condemned.”

That is a quote that every criminal defense lawyer ought to know by heart, if we are a freedom-loving people, there is a greater injustice in locking up someone who is innocent than exonerating someone who is guilty.

The persecutions did not abate until someone leveled an accusation against the wife of Sir William Phips, the Royal Governor. That was the last straw. He abolished the court of Oyer and Terminer and sent the cases back to the regular court. That court decided that spectral evidence should not be admitted, and the rate of convictions dropped precipitously. Governor Phips eventually pardoned all the remaining defendants.

Nineteen men and women had been hanged on Gallows Hill. One man was pressed to death with heavy stones after refusing to submit himself to a trial. All were scapegoats for the stresses that were wracking the colony due to the influx of refugees from Canada and Northern New England.

Both Increase and Cotton Mather were public advocates with respect to the persecutions, but most of their advocacy was aimed at making the prosecutions more effective. They honestly believed they were doing the right thing.

Were they? The controversy has raged right down to the present day. In 1953 Arthur Miller wrote "The Crucible," a lightly fictionalized account of the witch trials which analogized them to the McCarthy hearings which was all about Communist influence in America. Miller's play won a Tony award and was later turned into two films, the last one of which was produced in 1996 on location in the North Shore.

Now what have we learned from this episode in our nation's history? That zeal for the good guys to win often isn't enough to amount to justice? That any legal system with the power over the bodies of citizens must be at least as reluctant to convict as to acquit.

So much of this depends on whether you believe that some people can use supernatural means to harm other people. Remember that even back in the sixteenth century, there were no witch prosecutions in those countries where the ruling inquisition did not think that witchcraft actually worked.

You may recall that I said the Christian church deliberately placed All Saints' Day at the beginning of November because the pagan holiday of Samhain was already there. Some Christians were not enthusiastic about All Saints' Day because they honored people who had died long before. So the church came up with a different holiday, All Souls Day, to allow ordinary people to honor their ancestors who had died.

But this has Universalist implications. If you look around the US, one of the most popular names for a UU congregation today is Church of All Souls. I went to law school in Washington, DC, and some of our classes and our graduation ceremony were held in the DC All Souls church, which had been founded

by a very odd couple in the nineteenth century: John Quincy Adams, former president, from Boston, and John C. Calhoun, from South Carolina. If those two could get along well enough to found a Unitarian church, maybe there is some hope for a reconciliation of all souls in the hereafter. There are old and substantial churches of All Souls in New York and Philadelphia.

What is important about those names could be summarized if we drew on a more modern wording: "all souls matter." Universalism's insistence that all souls shall be saved is less radical and less useful than it used to be because many of us today are not sure there is any life in the hereafter or any God to whom the soul is to be reconciled, and without these, we don't know what it would mean to be saved. But we do know what it is like to feel excluded from a charmed circle. Groucho Marx said that he wouldn't belong to any club that would have him as a member; that was a bitter comment on the fact that many social clubs of his day, and some still today, refused to admit Jews.

Around the time of the consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalists into this denomination we have now, people were fond of quoting a short poem by Edward Markham which said

"He drew a circle that shut me out-

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle and took him In!"

It is all based, in the end, on love. In closing let me return to my Universalist inspiration, Quillen Shinn. After pointing out that the witches and devils of the medieval imagination were dying because the light of science was killing them, he said this:

"The force behind all forces and all worlds is love; if God is love, should one soul get beyond the reach of this Almighty force of love so that it is unable to draw it back, win it back, then there would be two forces in the universe, eternal discord."

Amen

¹“Affirmations of Universalism” by Quillen Shinn <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/afmuniv.html>