

November 1, 2005

What the Halloween Hullabaloo Says About Our Culture

by Douglas A. Sylva

Have you noticed that the average suburban Halloween decoration has evolved from a jack-o-lantern or two, perhaps an autumnal wreath, into a front yard festooned as if by Freddy Kruger? It is clear that both the macabre elements of Halloween, as well as the sheer size of its mark on the American consciousness, have increased substantially over the past years. And so, as you walk your perfect little princesses or pirates around the neighborhood tonight, understand that you are celebrating not only Halloween, but the start of the annual American war over the evolution of our national holidays, a season that begins on October 31 and does not truly end until Presidents' Day in late February.

Conservatives have long suspected that something great is at stake in all of the seemingly insignificant skirmishes along the way, like "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays" replacing "Merry Christmas" as the generic late-December salutation, perhaps knowing, instinctively, that there is a civic corollary to the religious axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

Take, for instance, the sacrifice of Lincoln and Washington's Birthdays (and their combination into Presidents' Day), in order to make room for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Whatever the merits of MLK Day, a civic lesson of sorts is taught by the demotion of the presidents, and by the loss of their names. (This year, notice how many people misplace the apostrophe. Would they dare to be as sloppy with Martin Luther King Day?)

So what is to explain Halloween's explosive growth? A community must have communal values, as well as communal celebrations that reinforce those values, or it is not a community. Although the United States has no established religion, Christmas has always served as the country's most important holiday, a holiday that reinforced the bedrock morality of American civilization. But in an aggressively secularist age, this cannot stand, and an alternative must be sought.

In this regard, Halloween is a potent rival, and it has a number of immediately obvious advantages: it is tied to neither familial nor religious ritual, so neither hearth nor church can make any claims upon it.

Digging deeper, Halloween is the perfect post-modern celebration. Halloween is about disguise, shifting meaning, self-invention or reinvention. No wonder Halloween is the favorite holiday of the homosexual community, in many regards the vanguard of modern American culture. New York City's Village Halloween parade, notorious for its lewd and homoerotic content, is the holiday's major event, and people all over the world now watch it on television like Catholics the world over watch midnight Mass at Saint Peter's.

According to the parade's website, the official theme for last year's parade was "Sweet. Not just candy, though it is ubiquitous on Halloween, but Sweet in the Philosophical sense — Bliss! Joy! Easefulness of body, mind and spirit. It's when you are dancing in your costume right there in the present moment, loving it... feeling the feeling, laughing, playing the crowd, opening your mind and heart to the sweetness of life."

All this talk of "sweet" brings to mind the current animating philosophy of the Supreme Court, what Justice Scalia has derided as the "sweet-mystery-of-life passage." It is this principle — "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and the mystery of human life" — that has been used to justify abortion on demand (if you can define the mystery of human life, you can define who doesn't qualify as human life). It will be used, sometime soon, in a judicial decision in favor of homosexual marriage. And it is this principle, at core, that tastes so sweet on Halloween: self-creation above all else, self-creation

beyond consequences ("right there in the present moment").

This is a "universe" with the individual as its sun, an individual who is free to shine light on others or cast them into oblivion at his whim. Compare this to the universe that the Star of Bethlehem illuminated, and it will be clear why these two holidays are in conflict. On Christmas, we celebrate, in part, a man and a woman who most definitely did not define their own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and the mystery of human life. On the contrary, they were asked to accept the greatest mystery of human history, at the cost of all of the dreams they may have had about how their own lives would play out. (Have you ever imagined what St. Joseph must have been thinking?) And they did so. This is the battle between the holiday of self-sacrifice (both human and divine) in the name of the greater good versus the holiday of self-creation in the name of individual fulfillment. We see the one slipping and the other ascending. We see the one under siege and the other fully animating the most powerful branch of our government, so that law now promulgates and reinforces its animating principle.

That is why even fully-secularized Christmas messages are now being expunged, not because they have explicit Christian content — they don't — but because they contradict the increasingly triumphant ethos of unlimited autonomy at the core of Halloween. Even Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, long derided as an illustration of the commercial corruption of Christmas (he was, after all, an invention of the Montgomery Ward department store), is a casualty in this war, and his memorable little anthem has been deemed inappropriate at some public schools.

For even Rudolph, lowly Rudolph, eventually triumphs only through taking on an onerous task for the good of others, not through prancing down the street, shining his nose to draw attention to himself. And we would never want our children to learn that lesson.