

# Candy Corn Sucks

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Long before a sea of drag queens poured into the streets of West Hollywood on the last day in October, or the pen of J. K. Rowling sent a precocious, bespectacled boy witch through an invisible train station portal, an onslaught of American kids were dressing up annually to extort dulcet booty from anyone with a porch.

Well ahead of both of these phenomena Celtic pagans were commemorating their New Year known as Samhain (SOW-en). Samhain, meaning summer's end, is one of eight holidays on the Wiccan Wheel of the Year. Four of these Sabbats precede a new month quarterly, and the remaining four correspond to the turn of each season.

The Roman Catholic Church successfully hijacked one of these holy days by moving All Saints' Day (Allhallows) to November first, immediately followed by All Souls' Day. This tactical move explains the etymology of our modern holiday: The evening before the Christian feast Allhallows is readily corrupted into All Hallows Even, Hallows E'en, or Halloween.

Early in its history Catholicism had ceremonially honored its dead, but in the seventh century, Pope Boniface IV officially established All Saints' Day, originally observed on May 13. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III moved this feast to November 1 to coincide with the pagan harvest feast. Similar strategic moves were accomplished for Christmas (Yule), Easter (Ostara), and St. Valentine's Day (Lupercalia), in order to assimilate pagan tradition into the Christian calendar.

Wouldn't Samantha and Endora be proud if they knew how warmly we gays have embraced their celebration of harvest, death and rebirth, and reverence for Earth itself? Surely Uncle Arthur and at least one of the two Darrins would be thrilled to be the grand marshal for a parade honoring the day when the realms of the living and dead make their closest pass. Lavender eye shadow, and green and purple chiffon for everyone!

In medieval times, one popular All Souls' Day practice was to make "soul cakes," simple bread desserts topped with currants. Children would go door-to-door seeking these cakes. For every cake a child collected, he or she would say a prayer for the dead relatives of the cake giver. The Celts believed in fairies and other mischievous creatures, and their Samhain was likely a time when people let go of their inhibitions, drank heavily, and played tricks on one another.

After the revelry subsided Celts would bring home embers from the communal bonfire in hollowed-out turnips, creating a lantern. In 18th century Ireland it is said that Stingy Jack, a character in Irish folk tales, avoided damnation by tricking the devil. When Jack died, he was turned away from both heaven and hell, and was cursed to wander the earth with his turnip lantern. Later it was found that pumpkins were easier to carve into these jack-o'-lanterns. This was clearly before the invention of the Fendi man bag.

The inner structure of apples has the shape of a pentagram, a Celtic goddess symbol associated with fertility. Often young, unmarried people would try to bite into an apple floating in water or hanging from a string. The first person to bite into the apple would be the next one to marry. Apples remain a big part of Halloween, as they are in season at the time of the holiday. Many drink apple cider, eat caramel apples, or make a nice pomade to nourish the hair.

The only day of the year one can pull off an orange and black ensemble is Halloween. Orange and black were sacred colors to the Celts, representing harvest and death, respectively. Bonfires were lit, and rituals were performed to honor deceased loved ones. The wearing of scary costumes was originally used to frighten malevolent souls that may intend harm. This practice still works for many drag queens today.

Who doesn't like fire and brimstone? Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, that's who. They claim the attacks against our country were due to pagans, feminists, gays, and the ACLU. In truth pagans hold no belief in demons, Satan, or hell. Sorry, guys. You still have Tinky Winky's purse to revile. Many reactionary Christians condemn Halloween and all its trappings. They mistakenly believe it is meant to honor a devil-like god of the dead called Samhain. This is untrue.

Nighttime in general is scary: bats, cats, spiders, broomsticks, skeletons, ghosts, and goblins. Add in some bogus information or superstition about a supposedly mysterious religion, and you've got the makings of one terrifying night. The truth is that Americans love to be scared. Just look at the Anna Nicole Show.

Indeed, Neopagans are fairly ordinary folk. They take their kids trick-or-treating, and hand out commercially packaged candy to those who visit. Some honor their ancestors. Some build bonfires, engage in ritual celebration, play games, and meditate on their own mortality. Honey wine or mead is imbibed, and extra places and food are set at the table for those who have died in the past year.



When I was a child my church and others actually sponsored haunted houses and Halloween parties. Unfortunately due to the rise of neo-conservatism and ignorance these same churches now host Hell Houses intended to scare kids into bowing to homophobia and bigotry. Still, I'll never forget the year I went as a papier-mâché peanut during the Carter Administration.

