

The Good And Evil Make Their Spirit Felt During Diwali And Halloween

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Every year on Halloween day, I am reminded of the harrowing experience I had on the first Halloween of my life when I first moved to Canada from India.

I had read about the festival in books and watched some children's movies as a child but had never actually participated in the festivities. And had no intention of doing so after watching the local news where so many children get hurt either by careless people playing with firecrackers or by drivers who fail to see a child or a small group of children walking in the dark, sometimes unescorted by adults or get sick after eating expired candies or chocolates with needles deliberately stuck in them.

As Halloween approached, I saw houses around me being decorated or should I say uglify with colourful cotton wool, scary masks, creepy spiders and spider webs, hanging death ghosts with twinkling lights, tombstone or stand ups, shaking coffins, skeletons with or without skulls, headless wonder (why is it called so), zombies, witches with dancing brooms or hanging porcelain dolls. Just passing by those houses during the day would freak me out.

I seriously was not excited about it all but since our festival of lights Diwali, always falls around that time, I had to enthuse some enthusiasm in me. What contrasts I wonder – Halloween is celebrated by welcoming ghosts and spirits into your homes and if they don't come to you, you go out looking for them. Diwali on the other hand, is celebrated by welcoming Goddess of Wealth Lakshmi and with prayers to Ganeshji. However, both these festivals are celebrated with firecrackers, lighting even the dark places (to decorate or to uglify) and of course partying. Halloween would mean partying all night with fictitious ghosts & eating candies while during Diwali too, we party all night with playing cards and eating sweets.

While Diwali celebrates victory of good over evil, Halloween is supposed to bring out the evil. So is Diwali the Hindu way of celebrating Halloween or is Halloween the Christian way of celebrating Diwali? Some also believe that Kali Puja, celebrated in the eastern part of India on the same day as Diwali, is very similar to Halloween. The Puja ceremony is held at night during the darkness of the new moon and it is believed that is the time when evil forces rise.

I am sure a psychic would bring out some reasoning to do with the moon and the sun. But for me, it was more about keeping my little ones safe, away from the spirits of the dead and I started telling them stories about why Diwali is celebrated and why we should be ignoring Halloween for Diwali. "Make sure you don't go out during Halloween night. It could be dangerous," I warned them. "But all my friends go out trick and treating on that night. I want to go too," my 7-year old argued. "We are Hindus. We don't celebrate Halloween," I tried again

with an argument I don't believe myself in. "So why do you celebrate Christmas? Why does Mamu become a Santa Claus and give us gifts every year on Christmas," my 10-year insisted.

I wasn't getting anywhere because of my own beliefs and what I had already engraved in their minds that all religions are the same and we should celebrate and participate in each other's festivals. Since I could see myself failing, I stopped reasoning but made them watch the news to scare them somewhat. No such luck! In fact, tables turned on me.

Of course, I couldn't find a panacea to my problems and decided to give them some exemption (not that I had a choice). I bought them costumes from Walmart, the cheapest I could find, a witch costume for my baby doll and a batman costume for my little superman. And of course, bags of chocolate on the promise that they will not go eat the candies given to them by strangers and that they will not go out trick or treating or whatever it is called. I tried to imbibe in them the pleasure of giving, especially to their little friends if they come to the door. I also tried to bribe them with another bag of chocolates if they were good. I certainly did not want to raise rebels.

Come day of Halloween and I am 2 trains and 2 buses away from home since I did not drive back then. In fact, by then I had not even attempted my first driving test after coming to Canada and had grabbed the first opportunity of work I got. It was a Friday night or a freaky night. By the time I got home, it was 7:30pm and the door of my townhome was ajar. All the lights were on, there was wrappers of candies strewn everywhere from the driveway to the living room. A friend who would take my kids in, suddenly had got called to work and had dropped the kids off at my place knowing that I should be home in an hour or so.

My little witch was crouched in the corner of the couch, looking like she had seen a ghost. She was all pale and had turned white. All the ghosts and goblins that had come to the door had scared her but where is the batman, I asked. "Mom, he ate the whole bag of chocolates along with the first group of kids who had come to the door. And then he went with them."

Both of us ran out the door calling him. What a festive atmosphere it was with streams of people everywhere, children dressed up as little fairies, barbi dolls and butterflies (so it was ok to dress up cute, I realized), parents watching their children walking a couple of steps behind them, chattering away. What a bad parent I was – I had opted to work than to take time off and watch my kids! And now I couldn't find my son.

The townhome complex though was busy, but not well lighted. There were scattering of street lights and it was difficult to recognize your own child amidst all the ones with face paint and masks. I was desperately calling my son but couldn't see him in the swarm of children. Many parents assured me saying "he was just here". How you recognize him, I thought. I don't know you and we have been here just 3 months. How could they possibly know who I am looking for?

Instead of talking to them, not even a courtesy hello, my eyes were scanning each and every child but I was looking for the batman, the costume I had bought and was sure he would be

wearing that. I was now irritating everyone around me with my screeches of panic. Now I was screaming at the top of my voice and praying. "Stop screaming mom," my doll said. "It's embarrassing".

All kinds of weird thoughts were coming to me. It was so dark and I was so miserable to the point of crying. I was feeling guilty, my heart wrenching I was suddenly thinking of the worse. What if he had been kidnapped? What if he had already been sold? What if the kidnapper was now miles away? Of course, there was no parent watching out for him alone. I wasn't there. My heart was pounding, my eyes flowing to the point I couldn't see anything. There was regret, there was panic, there was guilt, and there was grief and self-condemnation. The police, I need to call the police right away.

"Mom, can you help me," a little voice squeaked nearby. Wiping away tears, I looked down and there was my little one dragging a pillow case full of candy, his little frame of barely 3 ft something could carry. He definitely looked like Santa, not the batman I had expected. No costume, just his favorite red sweatshirt with my makeup smeared on his face. "Can you carry this home? I have another pillow case to fill now," he said running away with the group of children he was with, leaving me stunned, shocked and hugless. "Don't worry. He is with us. I gave him another pillow case," smiled a white woman, supposedly my neighbor I had never met reassuring me as she walked by behind the group of kids he was with. I stared in awe at her without thanking her for her kindness, then realizing that all this while when I was away, it was my neighbors taking care of my child who, unbeknown to me, was a favorite child in the area.

With the pillow case slung over my shoulder I reached home slowly and checked the time. I had been gone just 5 minutes and in those five minutes, I had gone through the emotions of a life time – guilt, self-condemnation, regret, anger, fear, frustration, terror, distress, anxiety, suspense, disbelief, panic, foreboding, frenzy, hysteria, dismay and relief. That was the day when I realized that while Halloween had sucked my evilness to the fore, my neighbor's kindness had brought out the goodness of Diwali! Happy Diwali!!