

Maggie's Tale
Fr. Edward W. Schmidt SJ
Xavier University

Halloween wasn't always fun. To the ancient Gaels, who seem to have originated it, Halloween was deadly serious. By October's end, the dark came early, the cold never left and death dwelt nearby. Surviving the coming winter demanded attention.

These Gaels of ancient Ireland knew of thin places - sacred wells, haunted groves - where the veil between our world of stone and wood and another world of spirit and imagination was flimsy. And at Halloween, they felt, these worlds were very close indeed. So they dressed up to confront and confuse the demons of the other side, powers they did not understand but had to face. They were saying to these forces, "We are just strong as you. We can match your power for evil with our power for good. You can haunt us and harm us, but in the end you are no match for us."

I read of this in October 2010, when I was in Dublin. And while the revelry in Temple Bar on Halloween –not so many ghosts and demons as St. Patrick's and nuns and punks- and flappers and healthy draughts of Guinness- would hardly scare away the forces of evil, it sent my mind back.

A year earlier, a friend invited me to share Halloween with his family and neighbors. My friend and his wife were splitting their time between some house guests, a neighbor's party, and their kids making trick-or-treat rounds. A warm October evening with friends in the suburbs - why not!

Turning onto their side street, I encountered images of the other world the Gaels knew of, and I saw in the kids' imagination a new defiance. The 5-year-old ghost declares that ghosts do not scare her! The 7-year-old in his pumped-up Bears uniforms telling the world that he will be that fearsome Bear some day. The 8-year-old fairy is as regal as any bride in Westminster Abbey. I parked and joined the party.

My friend reintroduced me to his wife's sister and to two guests she had brought along. One was Dave, who worked with her. She had invited Dave because he had just been

granted custody of his nephew, Sammy, and he hoped that Sammy, shy and new to town, would meet new friends and have some fun. With Dave was Mike, who turned out to be his partner. We made polite small talk, ate and drank, and faced threats of tricks with treats passed out to monsters at the door.

My friend left to escort his kids through the neighborhood. Their older son was a fearless Spiderman at five, a match for any Green Goblin. Their four-year-old daughter (I'll call her Maggie) was a stunning ladybug, glowing in her red and black wings, fearless in flight, quick to share her beauty with the world. Their youngest, a two year old, simply took it all in, amused and wise and building his agendas for next year.

Eventually, my friend returned. Maggie had lost a wing but hardly noticed as she surveyed her Halloween loot. It was growing late, and the guests said good-bye. Mom and dad would have to cope with sugar highs, but the night had been a lot of fun.

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Soon after, my friend told me some days later, when the kids were in bed and mostly quiet, he heard Maggie finishing the day with her usual bedtime prayers. From the bedroom came her gentle, grateful voice: "God bless mommy and daddy, and my brothers too. God bless our grandpas and grandmas, aunts, uncles, and cousins. And God bless my new friend, Sammy, and his daddy and ... " - a brief hesitation as reality adjusted after an evening spent confronting witches and ghosts- "and his other daddy."

Every day a four-year-old has a lot to learn. And every day she has a lot to teach. God bless Maggie!

