

Halloween; A Great Time to be Somewhere Else

I love interacting with small children. Especially if you can hand them back to their parents when they become wet, smelly, cranky or just plain irritating.

As you can imagine, those restrictions limit my interface with kids to snippets of time that can best be measured by precision Swiss chronometers. But I enjoy every millisecond.

Once each year – on Halloween - the opportunity comes to expand this interaction to several hours if so desired. The children are usually on their best behavior (unless amped up by a premature sugar buzz) because you are holding their bribe in your hands.

Even so, I always find an excuse to be elsewhere that evening. I am physically unable to feign surprise and delight 50 or more consecutive times in such a short time frame. LuAnn, on the other hand, is giddy about Halloween in what is apparently a warmup for the next major holiday, when she becomes giddy about Christmas.

Brian and his family (our next-door-neighbors) also share LuAnn's obsession with October 31, and we have a friendly - I think - competition going. His young son Charlie calls him "The King of Halloween." This year he upped the ante with eerie noises and a smoke machine. "It may or may not be toxic gas," he explained, "but it looks great."

Before I'm allowed to escape for the evening, as LuAnn's indentured Halloween servant I'm required to complete a long list of ghoulish projects. Every year, our house is lit up like a black and orange supernova; kids and parents are attracted like mindless mayflies to our front door. Our older neighborhood (East side near City High) has always been a great trick-or-treat area, and it's not uncommon for minivans from God knows where to pull up and expel all varieties of miniature costumed creatures.

Almost every window in our house has something illuminated in it, and our front porch features dangling spiders and several intricately carved jack-o-lanterns that I seem to be locally famous for producing. LuAnn requires them to be a little more impressive each year, so a few weeks ago we traveled to an orchard and picked up two huge pumpkins that I could barely lift. I had to use a photocopier to increase the size of my stencils 50% to stay in proportion.

LuAnn scraped out the interior of one the best she could, but the walls remained two inches thick – the same length as my electric pumpkin carving blade, which regularly jammed as it attempted to saw through the beast. After two hours of carving (and cursing) I completed one very impressive, oversized jack-o-lantern.

For the other one, LuAnn insisted I attempt surface-carving instead of sawing all the way through – a new skill that I was not mentally prepared for. After two bourbons however, I decided to take up the challenge. Although the whiskey was a great motivational elixir, it apparently had a deleterious effect on my artistic abilities and coordination. Fortunately, I was using a type of safety blade that minimized the bloodletting.

After several miscues involving spectacularly carving outside the lines (LuAnn, another bourbon here!), I discarded the template altogether and performed freehand remedial cosmetic surgery that barely salvaged the end product.

Having completed my servitude, I was allowed to bail during the witching hours. Upon my eventual return later in the evening, LuAnn couldn't help describing each of the more than sixty(!) trick-or-treaters to me, in detail. To which I feigned surprise and delight.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons also cowers in his office on the Coralville Strip with the lights out, hoping nobody will knock on his door.

