

Halloween Etiquette

As children shed their identities and become SpongeBob or Dora for the day, make sure they don't shed their manners, too.

By Thomas P. Farley



CANDY MANUFACTURERS hype the day for months in advance. Dentists rue the day for months afterward. Every autumn, our children and grandchildren dress up as characters frightening and famous, insipid and inspiring. Traveling in packs, and with parents close behind, they ring doorbells and yell a short phrase—"Trick or treat!"—that is more a demand than a request. We oblige by marveling over their costumes and loading them down with candy.

You couldn't devise a stranger holiday if you tried. Yet there is more to this pagan-Christian hybrid than hyperglycemia and haunted hayrides. Though it doesn't occur to most grown-ups or children, Halloween is a veritable proving ground for manners. Parents have a chocolate-covered, Pavlovian opportunity to see to it that their children demonstrate their best behavior. And though the day comes but once a year, the lessons taught on October 31 can be long-lasting ones.

I didn't realize it then, but during my own years as a trick-or-treater, dressed as everything from a wooden soldier to *Miami Vice's* Sonny Crockett (don't ask), I was learning the manners that would help me become a considerate adult. Of course, times have changed some. Nowadays, children can send text messages while they roam door-to-door. To wit: "Grate candy @ Smith house. C.U. there!" And they can swap war stories on MySpace when they get home. It seems, too, that lots of adults perceive the world to be less safe than it was when they were kids. In some cities, for example, the once-harmless mischief carried out the night before Halloween occasionally turns violent. Mindful of this, many parents restrict trick-or-treating to daylight hours and even then only to the homes of familiar neighbors.

By and large, however, Halloween is still about fun and, yes, learning. Thinking back on my own experiences of wallowing in that day's sea of sucrose, I've put together seven lessons that are worth heeding on the last day of October and beyond.

Homemade Is Better Halloween was a festive occasion in the Farley household. Watched over by a mom with a knack for all things creative and a public-relations-exec dad who enjoyed getting into the spirit, my three siblings and I were assured that our costumes would be unique and clever, and almost always homemade. The likenesses might not have been perfect, but these lovingly designed outfits drew more oohs and aahs than anything that came from a store. I have a huge regard for homemade items even today and particularly admire handcrafted greeting cards. Of course, it's far easier to buy a salutation than it is to sit down and create one. But which kind will be treasured long after the occasion has passed? Homemade or Hallmark?

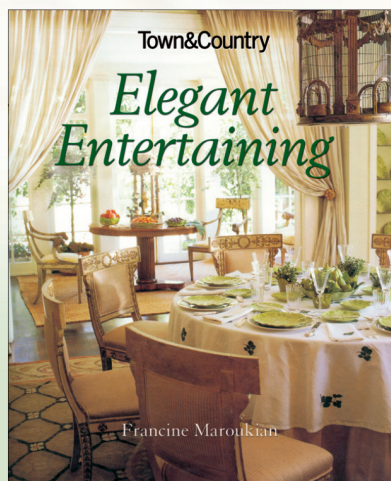
Do Unto Others Even as a youngster, I couldn't fathom that some of my peers saw no hypocrisy in wreaking suburban mischief on the night before Halloween only to show up at the same houses the following day, wide-eyed and seeking goodies. If we were going to accept our neighbors' hospitality, the least we owed them (and their property) was a modicum of respect.

I'm sure that a few of the kids who threw eggs at the houses next door and turned up for Devil Dogs twenty-four hours later got hired by Enron. Or maybe they went to work in Washington. As for the ruffians of today, a lot of whom make yesteryear's soaping of car windows or tossing of toilet paper look quaint, it should go without saying that any act of violence is far worse than bad manners. It's criminal.

Illustration by Edwin Fotheringham

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Don't Eat and Run Then, as now, it would have been easy to receive a goody and dash off to the next house without uttering the words *thank you*, yet propriety dictated that we politely accept the candy and remember to express our gratitude.

How many times in the course of a day are we adults handed something (such as our change at the grocery store or our boarding pass at the airport) and we neglect to say thank you? More times, I'll bet, than most of us realize.

Don't Take More Than Your Share During some Halloween outings, my compatriots and I would encounter the mother lode: a note affixed to the door that read something along the lines of “We've had to step out, but please help yourself to one treat from the pumpkin on the back porch.”

Restricting ourselves to a single sweet when no adult would have been the wiser if we'd taken a handful (or, indeed, emptied the entire pumpkin into our bags) required a certain amount of self-control. I'm reminded of this scene any time I attend a fancy soiree with an unsupervised table of goody bags by the exit. The feeding frenzy that often occurs as well-dressed patrons grab as many bags as they can carry is one of the most glaring displays of greed in so-called polite society. The trick-or-treaters are simply being kids. But the adults?

Respect Your Elders Every now and then, often toward the end of a goody-gathering excursion, I'd ring a doorbell and, after what seemed an interminable amount of time, hear a senior citizen's voice cry out, “Just a minute...I'm coming.” As every kid knows, time is of the essence when you're on the candy clock. Every minute spent standing on a doorstep is a minute that could have been spent galloping to the next destination instead. As I'd ponder this, a homebound senior would finally pry open her door and exclaim with delight at my disguise.

I never took umbrage that my Pac-Man costume was mistaken for a large yellow

gumball. Or that my “treat” was a piece of hard candy that probably predated the Eisenhower administration. In such cases, I simply learned to be gracious. Getting old was obviously not much fun. The least I could do was be considerate.

In All Things, Moderation Once night had fallen and our Halloween quest was through, my sister, brothers and I would gather in our living room, where we'd dump our spoils into individual piles. My parents would sniff out unwrapped items and summarily discard them. (That included apples, which I never minded forgoing.) We'd then each pick out a small handful of candies that would be ours to keep and consume at will (usually right then and there). The remainder went into a large salad bowl that was placed on top of the refrigerator, high out of reach. From that communal supply, my mother would drop a snack into our lunch bags each day. If all went according to plan, we'd have mid-day desserts well into November. Long before the film *Super Size Me* and the book *Fast Food Nation* (now a motion picture) underscored America's insatiable appetite and ballooning weight problem, we learned that being a glutton was pretty distasteful.

Know When to Quit It's true that all good things must come to an end. With no set rules, youngsters must decide for themselves when the time has come to hang up the costumes and take a place on the other side of the door, giving out candies rather than collecting them. My last foray was the aforementioned *Miami Vice* year (so much for going out on a high note). But the lessons I had learned—during numerous door-to-door encounters and over more Charleston Chews than I care to recall—were enduring ones. And the good news, as I discovered when I arrived at *Town & Country*, an establishment that has been known to stage a costume parade or two right in the office, is that it's okay for adults to act like kids every now and then. Especially on Halloween. ❖