

endpiece

A Hedgewitch's Thoughts on Halloween: A Conversation with Misti Delaney-Smith

By Mary Runser

Halloween is just around the corner and since it's a holiday commonly associated with witches, warlocks and wizardry, I thought it would be best to get some thoughts on the subject from a practicing witch. Misti Delaney-Smith, a practicing Hedgewitch, has been living in the Ann Arbor area since 1982. Five years ago, she moved with her husband Rod and their eight-year-old son Jack to the East Ypsilanti area because they could afford a wooded acre there. In her 'normal' job, Misti is a technical writer for a major components manufacturer in the automotive industry. Rod, originally from Australia, is an astrologer and also homeschools Jack. I was grateful that Misti was willing to sit down and talk candidly with me about her background and feelings concerning Halloween.

Your first question might be, what is a Hedgewitch? Admittedly, it was my first question, so I went to digging around. I learned that a Hedgewitch is one who practices solitary magic focused on nature and its aspects. Hedgecraft (the magic and practice of a Hedgewitch) seems to be loosely based on the ancient practices of folk healing, herbalism, wise men and women, and shamanism. There are some similarities between the Wiccan and Hedgecraft traditions, particularly their focus on nature and healing, but Hedgecraft is more solitary and less rigidly structured than Wicca. One possible history behind the name Hedgewitch is that in earlier times a hedge was a physical barrier between a village and the wild forest beyond that represented the boundary between worlds. A Hedgewitch then was believed to be one who rode the line between one world and the next.

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Misti agrees with the above as a "loose" definition of who she is and what she does. "Being a Hedgewitch really means that I make it up as I go along," she said. "If something works, I keep doing it, and if it doesn't work, I try something else." Hedgecraft is not a religion and Hedgewitches do not worship any particular deity, though some believe they worship the Triple Goddess and Horned God as the Wiccans do. "I think of Wicca as the Roman Catholic Church of Paganism because it is a highly organized tradition. Hedgecraft is more a do-it-yourself practice," Misti said. "It can be either good or bad, depending upon who is using or performing it."

Misti started out as a Hedgewitch but studied Wicca for a number of years. "I find it difficult to pinpoint exactly how I came to be a witch. I just feel like I always was, but over time I discovered it had a name. I came across my first 'teacher' in South Carolina in the late 1970s, but we didn't use those words and I didn't realize it until many years later." And, yes, they share all their magical activities with Jack. "Astrology and herbalism are a part of his curriculum along with math and botany," she explained. "Hedgewitchery is not so much a practice or a belief system as it is a way of life."

Asked her opinion of Halloween, Misti replied she hates it because it frightened her as a child. "My mother thought I would enjoy seeing the kids coming to the door in their costumes, so she put me in my highchair and set me in front of the door. I was terrified of the images in front of me and I had no way of escaping." Misti doesn't believe there is anything inherently bad about the holiday or its celebration, but there are certain aspects that have come to be associated with Halloween that she doesn't agree with and so chooses not to participate.

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In a historical context, Halloween is believed to derive from the Roman feast of Pomona, the goddess of fruits and seeds, as well as the festival of the dead called Parentalia, and is most commonly associated with the Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced Sow-an or Sow-in, the name means "summer's end" and represents the final harvest). Samhain was considered a time to celebrate the lives of those who have passed on and often involves paying respect to ancestors, family members, elders of the faith, friends, pets, and other loved ones who have died. In some rituals, the spirit of the departed are invited to attend the festivities.

Another similar tradition is Día de Los Muertos, when family and friends gather to pray for and remember those who have died. Día de Los Muertos is a celebration connected to the Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. During this celebration, family members and friends go to the graves of their loved ones to picnic with favorite foods of the departed. It is a celebration of both life and death.



Many of the images and traditions of Halloween are derived from all of these festivals and celebrations of old. The carving of the jack-o-lantern has its roots in the Celtic tradition of carving turnips to remember the souls held in purgatory. Trick-or-Treat hails back to "souling," when the poor would go from house to house and receive food in return for prayers for the dead. The images of Halloween – pumpkins, cornhusks, and scarecrows, with which many homes are decorated during the holiday – are all elements of the autumn season. The costumes worn by kids during Trick-or-Treat are traditionally modeled after supernatural figures such as monsters, ghosts, skeletons, witches and devils. In modern times, satire and commercialism have altered what's popular, with more people dressing up as characters from fiction, celebrities and generic archetypes, such as ninjas and princesses. Just as costumes have modernized, traditional Halloween attractions such as haunted houses, corn mazes and hayrides are reinterpreting tradition for profit, bringing in \$300 to \$500 million every year.

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These changes have informed Misti's opinion of Halloween. "Halloween has become much too commercialized," she said, noting costumes aren't cheap and purchasing them limits the creativity of the child wearing them more so than making a costume would. "And why should there be only one day out of an entire year that's reserved for dressing in costume? Many kids enjoy dressing in costume, so it's a pity that this is the only day when it's acceptable to do so." She added that haunted houses and houses of horror rake in an incredible amount of money in a single month, not to mention the money made by the film industry, which generally has more than one movie slated to come out during this time of year.

"I'm also not a fan of the violence, celebration of gore, and the desecration of death that has come to be associated with Halloween. There are basically two sacred moments in life: birth and death. Why would we celebrate the desecration of one of them?" The celebration of Samhain is the celebration of spiritual and physical ancestors, a celebration of the continuity of life. "We celebrate our ancestors for all they've given us and for all they've meant to us, in both their lives and the memories they left us with."

Halloween and witchcraft are often seen as one and the same, but they aren't and never really have been. "Halloween is its own thing, it takes place the same time as Samhain and both nod to death, but really that's the end of the relationship as I see it. Using my husband's words, because he's much more eloquent than I am, 'As the mantle of death descends over our world, the green life disappears from plants and the vital radiance of the green god is silenced for a season. In this season, as the life of the god has gone to the underworld, so we travel with it and contemplate those who have gone before us.' For us as a family, Samhain is a time to honor our beloved dead and it's also the harbinger of the final harvest from our garden. We harvest the last autumn crops, clean the garden and ready ourselves for winter."

While Misti does not celebrate Halloween, she also doesn't think others should avoid or not recognize the holiday. "I know many friends (witches) who do celebrate Halloween and have a good time doing so." During the October season of hayrides and haunted houses, whether you think Halloween is a perfect time to honor tradition and ritual, a commercial folly, or a fine mixture of both, I wish you a happy season of commemoration and celebration.

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