

Facing Fears – Halloween’s Best Lessons

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As if moms and dads of America didn’t have enough on their minds – Halloween-wise and other wise – many of their kids are demanding that this year they dress up like Osama bin Laden.

Parents are understandably baffled by their children’s Osama costume plans. To quote a mom determined to plan a safe and thoughtful excursion on Halloween night, “Being courageous doesn’t mean you’re not scared. Yet, in spite of it all, you carefully move forward and keep on with your life.” But she continued, “I never expected to have my son ask to masquerade as a young version of Osama bin Laden!”

The parents I work with, in support of police, fireman, and armed service attire, are united in telling their kids that Osama is out. But they ask, “What is going on? Halloween is supposed to be fun. We don’t get it!”

Because there is enormous psychological benefit to Halloween, a holiday more serious for kids than most realize, dressing as one whom you fear makes more sense than is first apparent. For Halloween is a time when kids can dress up as what scares them the most – and by doing so, face their fears, laugh at them, and see them diminish.

As children grow, no matter how secure their home, they will have fears about the constancy of love surrounding them, their place in the family, their rivalries, their angers, their future. To handle these inner “demons”, they project them onto the outside world, a la witches, vampires, goblins, and a whole gamut of bogeymen. On Halloween children can dress to express their dreams of beauty, love, and power, as well as their fears of failure and destruction. Because their parents assure them that demons do not exist in the real world, they feel safe and protected.

With this in mind, it is understandable that children may either encourage others to pretend they are Osama, or take on the task themselves. Here lies an opportunity for effective and calm parenting, as well as an appreciation that the tyrant Osama is not a true representative of his history, his people or his faith.

While we can’t tell our kids that Osama does not exist, we can assure, discuss, and explain. Sharing in this way provides helpful perspective and diminishes fears and

anxieties, yours as well as theirs. Encourage your children to tell you what they are afraid of. They may not be able to express their fears, but by asking, by caring and not judging, the communication door is open. Assure your children that you will do all in your power to always protect them and keep them safe.

Discuss the privilege of an education where we can question any ideas we wish, without punishment. Explain that when hopelessly impoverished and uneducated people are taught to hate, without access to free thought and education, the only choice they know is to follow a leader like Osama bin Laden, who tells them that he speaks for Allah, their God. This can lead to a discussion of how bin Laden could have chosen to use his vast wealth to care for his sick and impoverished people and educate their children.

This is also a great time to go *together* to a library or online. There you will be able to read of enlightened days in the Islamic world when Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived side by side in peace. This religious tolerance continued for centuries after Muhammad's death in 632. And you can learn about the hunk Westerners call Saladin (his given name is Salah-ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub), a brave, compassionate, and fair Muslim warrior and leader. During battle with the English when their king, Richard the Lion Hearted became ill, Saladin ordered ice brought to him to aid his healing.

Tell your children that our country has made mistakes and that we have many problems that must be faced – but that with hard work there is nothing we can't or won't be able to solve. Tell them we believe that people should build their own homes, not destroy the homes of others, and that healthy societies do not tolerate this type of behavior. Explain that the survival of our nation, based on our committed beliefs, freedoms and opportunities, is our trick as well as our treat. For no one has ever done it better. Happy Halloween!