



Oct. 19, 2017

Autumn. The hillsides light up gloriously in yellows, oranges and reds. They glow and simmer like a million fires. Nature, with eloquence and beauty, salutes summer and says goodbye.

And then the darkness comes. Months of it, and cold, too.

Halloween falls squarely between the seasons and that's no accident. In Gaelic lands at that liminal time they once built roaring fires on hilltops like Tara and said prayers against the night and all it held. They saw that the sun itself was slipping away and prayed for its return.

Today? We dress up as killer clowns and naughty nurses, sip zombie martinis and do the Monster Mash. It's a time to cut loose and pretend we're somebody — or some *thing* —else.

It's a curious holiday that's lost its roots and morphs into whatever our society needs at the moment. For most, it's not a religious holiday, it's not just for kids and, since so few of us farm anymore, it has nothing to do with wiping the sweat from our brow and celebrating the harvest. Pumpkins, witches and candy corn, it's just an odd cultural mish mash. But, hey, it's *party* time!

And now we're dragging our dogs into it, too.

Last year in the U.S., 20 million consumers spent \$350 million on costumes for their dogs and cats. But, if *we're* a little muddled on why we're doing all this, think what your dog must feel.

Trick Or Eat

They're at the window or backyard fence savoring the cool air and the sunset and the doorbell starts ringing. A creature in a garish

rubber mask wearing a bed sheet is shuffling up to the door yelling "*trickortreat!*" You, their trusted guardian, smile and dump candy into the thing's sack. This weird ritual is repeated over and over for hours.

Dogs aren't big symbolic thinkers. You know it's the Jones kid from next door. He's wearing a werewolf mask. Because, you know, werewolves come out on Halloween. He's having a good time "threatening" to soap your windows or egg your house if you don't give him something good to eat, preferably something chocolate. Your dog knows the Thing In The Sheet may *smell* like the Jones kid but the adrenaline is raging and all he wants to do is run in circles and bark, "Danger! Danger! Danger!"

He probably noticed there's a lot of chocolate lying around, too. He may have already helped himself while you weren't looking. And the Poison Center hotlines start lighting up. Chocolate can hurt a dog, but Xylitol, a sugar substitute now found in many candies and gums, can kill him.

The Uncanny Valley

Maybe you have no trick-or-treaters. A bunch of friends comes over in costume on Halloween night to party. Your dog still freaks out. Why? He knows your friends. What's the deal?

Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori came up with the expression "uncanny valley" in 1970 to describe people's reactions to robots which, to various degrees, resembled humans. The more a robot looked human, the more the viewer empathized with the machine. It looked friendly and trustworthy. When the resemblance crossed a line and looked nearly human, but not *quite*, revulsion and unease set in. Then the viewer just wanted to get away from the thing.

Dogs experience the uncanny valley reaction, too. Here's someone who smells like someone they know, walks like them and talks like them, but...they're wearing a Mad Scientist mask. It gives them the heebie jeebies. Something here is just not right. Some dogs will flee, some will run in circles and warn their owners of the weird intruder, and some may even bite.

Again, dogs are not symbolic thinkers. They don't know your friend Bill is *pretending* to be Dr. Frankenstein. They've never seen the movie. Who *is* this weird creature and why is he dancing in your dog's living room?

I Just Feel So Ashamed

And there's this matter of costumes...

Some dogs seem to truly enjoy dressing up. When it rains and we towel ours down, they prance around proudly in their "capas." The fact that we coo and tell them how smashing they look just reinforces it. But I tried strapping a raincoat on Oona once and she squirmed and wiggled her way out of it in a flash. Hats or any other kind of clothing she just looks at with contempt. So much for that Princess Ballerina costume this year.

For one thing, they're restraining. Being restrained reminds your dog of being a puppy and being punished and kept out of trouble by their mother, say behaviorists. It's a deep-rooted thing and explaining to your dog that being dressed as Wonder Woman is just *cool* is lost breath. They've not seen the movie. Dogs don't read comics. They just think that shiny red bodice cramps their style.

Yet again, dogs are not symbolic thinkers. There's no difference to them between Hans Solo and Darth Vader. They just think this whole costume thing is peculiar and they wonder why you stuck one on them. If they're a dachshund, say, and you stick them between

two costume “buns,” you and your friends may be highly amused. Your dog is not only uncomfortable, he’s suspicious. Now he wonders why everyone is pointing at him and laughing.

Can dogs be shamed? The experts go back and forth on that one. It takes self-awareness to realize when someone is making fun of you. An Irish wolfhound owner can handily answer that one. Of course our hounds are self-aware. They’re sensitive and highly tuned to our reactions toward them. The question is, why would you *want* to laugh at your wolfhound? We love our dogs. We wouldn’t laugh *at* them no more than we’d mock one of our own children. But we think when they wear a costume that they don’t care what they’re portraying. I think they do if it makes people snicker at them.

And I think it affects *us*, too. Using our dog for our own amusement, thinking they’re unaware of what we’re doing, lessens our respect for them. And our bond is based on mutual respect. It’s a step down a slippery slope. Just for a quick chuckle? No, thank you.

That’s not to say that some dogs are not natural hams and enjoy being the center of attention. In that case, you’re laughing *with* them. You know your dog. If they obviously enjoy clowning around with you, by all means, slap them in that pirate costume and let them strut in the Halloween parade. That kind of laughter brings you both together. And that’s the point of any festivities, isn’t it?