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Mystery, Menace, Meaning.....Fall on the Eastside of Minneapolis

By: Cain Pence

The cool wind blows the many colored leaves. The Vikings become the topic of conversation and the cold season ahead starts to enter the subconscious Minnesota mind. The fall in Minnesota, the brief beauty after the muggy summer and before the brutal chill of winter, brings the bounty of the harvest and the sweatshirts of football weather.

Fall on the Eastside of Minneapolis is a special time. The many trails along the Mississippi are colored with bright trees, the numerous churches all seem to have festivals and the spirit, or should I say spirits, of Halloween haunt the streets and alleys of a historic immigrant neighborhood now bursting with new condos and microbrews.

In old Europe, especially in Ireland, natives celebrated the departed and their souls. All Hallows' Eve, shortened to Halloween, was a remnant of local pagan traditions that the Catholic Church incorporated with the religious holidays of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. Trick or treating became a way for local children to dress and honor the restless souls said to wander the earth the night of Hallows' Eve. The ancient Gaelic festival of Samhain marked the end of the harvest and the start of the dark season with great bonfires. The early founders of America, the Puritans in New England, frowned upon these traditions and believed the honoring of spirits was the work of the Devil and the handiwork of witches. Ensuing groups of immigrants, especially the Irish and Catholics from Southern Europe, brought popularity to the holiday when they arrived in great numbers later in American history. Today, the billions spent on costumes, parties and candy attest to the lasting popularity of the seasonal decor and holiday.

I myself have always loved Halloween and the fall, especially in my native Eastside of Minneapolis. The weather, football, the harvest festivals and farmers' markets, the Churches and their celebrations, the cool night air along the Mississippi. The past couple months my companion, Amanda, and I attended the famous fall festival at Holy Cross Church, the amazing Lebanese Festival at St. Maron's, the Ukrainian Festival at the Ukrainian Cultural Center near the Mississippi, our beloved German Dinner and Polka Mass at our home parish of St. Boniface and farmers' market events on University Avenue. The list is endless, the food delicious and the people festive. All the numerous immigrant groups that have come through Northeast Minneapolis brought their language, their religion, their customs, their food and their hopes and dreams for a better life. They also brought their spirits.

I am not sure I believe in what people popularly call ghosts. I am sure I believe in the reality of what scientists define as energy and what people sometimes call spirits. There is something in between what

we consider the living and the dead. Restless, wandering, sometimes hostile. I also believe certain places, due to their history and meaning, their occupants and geography, contain more restless immaterial essences, more unexplained energy than other places. There is a difference to the aura of Gettysburg Battlefield as opposed to the Mall of America. There is a difference to an old ethnic church than a shiny new Starbucks. There are a lot of old ethnic churches in Northeast Minneapolis. There are also a lot of unexplained forces.

Ethnic immigrants, still speaking the tongues of their native lands, wanted churches with priests who spoke their language. The Polish at Holy Cross had a Polish priest, the sons of Germany at St. Boniface had a German priest, next door at St. Maron's the Lebanese had their own Maronite priest and across the street at St. Constantine Ukrainian Church the immigrants from Ukraine had their own Eastern Rite prelates. I live right by all these churches. It is a very unique and historic place....I also believe the neighborhood quite filled with some guardian angels and a few ill-intentioned demons.

I am a firm believer in science. I believe most phenomenon has a rational explanation. I love a good debate and often feel the skeptics' present better arguments than believers when it comes to the paranormal. I believe in science and reason. I also believe in God and religion. My worldview encompasses the electrons and neutrons of the atom and the angels and demons of Scripture. Science itself often attempts to understand the universe through equations that explain energy. The E in Einstein's famous equation, E equals Mc Squared, is of course Energy. We also know energy is transferred and transformed, not destroyed. The famous First Law of Thermodynamics teaches us this very fact...that energy is neither created nor destroyed but only transferred. The energy encompassed in human souls I believe lives on, but not always in peaceful forms.

The world I see is one where evil exists with good. There is a darkness to the world. This darkness becomes more pronounced as the days grow shorter and the supernatural find portals and often pernicious porters to interact in our lives. Not all is happy around Halloween. Some spirits are restless, some are wicked. Neighborhoods with many churches had many funerals, many tales of baptisms and weddings as well as deaths. Battlefields, mortuaries, hospitals and cemeteries are of course natural places where spirits and restless energy congregate. As science progresses, more and more physicists speak in terms of the multiverse, parallel universes, String Theory and multiple dimensions. The more we learn, as the great scientific paradox teaches us, the more we realize we have yet to understand.

What we are learning is that there exists another plane of reality, other forms of energy we have yet to fully understand. Just as a radio allows for the transfer of invisible voices, music and information so too are certain individuals able to receive what some term as ESP or Extra Sensory Perception through the transmission of unexplained forms of energy. Certain neighborhoods by their history, geography and people contain more restless energy than others. I would argue that Northeast Minneapolis with its immigrant history, the many churches and bars and its proximity to the Mississippi River is one of these neighborhoods.

Why is the fall a perfect time to honor and experience unexplained phenomena? Just as many believe restless souls exist in a realm in between, so to do the months of autumn exist between the living season of summer and the dying season of winter. The leaves are not green but they are not totally

dead either. As the seasons change, the air itself seems to invite the unsettled, the mysterious, the sometimes menacing. A great Halloween neighborhood needs a real change in season. Southern California and Miami are great places, they are not great locales for the fall and autumn chill that welcomes the entrance of winter with a final burst of light and color. The change of seasons itself creates a natural phenomenon ripe for mystery.

You can't have a great historic neighborhood without churches and bars and immigrant groups.....you certainly cannot have one without a lovely and somewhat haunting Cemetery.

Past the Walgreens on the main business corridor of Central Avenue, near 27th, lies St. Anthony Catholic Cemetery. Many who drive past hurriedly on Central Avenue do not even notice its gates or well-maintained lawns. Its boundaries encompass many old graves, many beautiful monuments, and many mysterious markers. I have often walked there, usually having the entire plot of land all to my own moody musings. The monuments, especially the very old ones with angels depicted in stone and covered with green growth always impress and somewhat haunt me. Who were these people? What were their stories? Why did some, by the dates on their graves, die so young? My mind starts to imagine, the possibilities are endless.

A young Polish woman fleeing a war torn country comes to stay with her cousins in a faraway place called Minneapolis. She gets a job as a house cleaner and marries a construction worker. They have six kids and build a sturdy house off Broadway Avenue. Is it her grandchildren who sell me sausage at the Holy Cross Fall Festival? A Ukrainian man with no money scraps together passage fare and takes a steamer from England to New York. He hears about milling jobs in Minneapolis and ventures west. Was it his Grandma's special recipe for the pierogies they serve each Friday during the fall at St. Constantine? A young couple outside of Beirut who lost their family land to sectarian violence and fled to America. Relatives in the cold but growing Twin Cities took them in decades ago. They made a fortune in real estate and left some to their church. Is it their picture one sees on the stained glass windows at St. Maron's Church one can visit when they open the church each fall for the Lebanese festival?

And this middle aged man walking this Cemetery? What was his story? As a boy I explored the rail yards and abandoned buildings of my native Eastside of Minneapolis and as a young man I wandered through every state of my country only to return in my thirties to a very different but still fascinating Minneapolis. I know when I wander cemeteries I am still haunted by the tragic suicide of my mother nearly two decades ago. I still feel her presence at times and struggle with the sad paradox of understanding the meaning of the life of a woman who gave me life yet took her own. Somehow, the stone markers bring some small meaning and mystery to all who seek answers to such questions. These graves and stones can bring comfort and meaning, they can also bring menace.

Years ago, when I used to live close to St. Anthony's Cemetery I used to frequent the 1029 Bar in lower Northeast. One fall night, after my self-imposed limit of two Coors Lights, unable to convince a loose looking blonde to drive me to a late night burger joint, I took the very long walk home to where I was renting a room in Upper Northeast. At about 3 AM I decided to visit the Cemetery. I wasn't drunk and I wasn't delusional. I hopped the fence and went roaming right around the infamous Witching Hour.

Maybe it was the psychological effect of wandering a lonesome graveyard in the middle of night, maybe it was the strange interplay of light from a bright moon and the large rail yard on the other side of the Cemetery, maybe it was the restless spirits of Northeast Minneapolis playing tricks on me, but I can assure you the graveyard shift that night was very much alive. Physicists, ghost hunters, scientists, priests and skeptics all believe in energy....well the energy that night was very real. Go walk that graveyard at 3 AM and see for yourself what unexplained forces you encounter.

It is hard to define fear. A definition from Webster Dictionary or Wikipedia doesn't always suffice. Yet, it is real. A biological reality that triggers the flight or fight response, an evolutionary necessity we developed long ago to guard us from predators, a psychological condition brought on from troubled youths....who knows? All are probably real causes of fear. I would also argue that the realization of the existence of other creatures and forces that want to harm us also creates fear. The knowledge that other forms of energy exist that are not all benevolent can scare you.....especially when all alone in the middle of a late fall evening in a place full of dead bodies yet very alive supernatural forces.

The fact that we cannot exactly explain the nature and reason for these immaterial presences is what makes them scary. Yet, they are real. Something lurking. Something primordial, sometimes menacing. As a Christian I would argue these entities can be demonic, but not always. I believe in the existence of the Devil as well as God, yet I tend to believe that while some of these unexplained entities are evil, many are wandering and restless. Perhaps the Catholic in me would argue these creatures are the souls in Purgatory, stuck in a sad limbo until finally free to ascend into Heaven. I do not know for sure what they are, but certain places embody these entities more than others. St. Anthony's Cemetery in Northeast Minneapolis at 3 AM is one of these hot spots.

Am I a gullible fool? Am I a hopeless romantic who wants to believe something different than the visual world exists? Is my belief in an afterlife a psychological defense mechanism to explain tragic death here on earth? Maybe. I also believe hard science is teaching us more and more that different forms of energy and different dimensions are entirely probable and real. The Mississippi brought early settlers to its banks and the great Falls of St. Anthony brought lumber and flour milling to a bursting Minneapolis. The Eastside grew with strong immigrant workers and they brewed beer at places like the Grain Belt Brewery and Glueks. These workers, from many different countries, built churches to honor their God and they built sturdy houses to raise their families. When they died they were almost all buried, not cremated. Their spirits, their energy, their paranormal trans substantiation I believe lives on in Eastside Minneapolis bars and churches, streets and alleys, and especially local cemeteries.

Take a moment each fall, as the seasons change and the air cools to walk the streets of Northeast Minneapolis. Put down the smartphones and the tablets. Visit a local brewery and stop in for a church service, there are many to choose from. Let the day pass and walk the banks of the mighty Mississippi. If you have the interest, go visit St. Anthony's Cemetery on Central Avenue late at night and see for yourself what happens. Fall on the Eastside of Minneapolis is beautiful and festive, but if you keep your senses open and your mind alert you will find you are not alone in your adventures....the long gone generations of countless immigrants live on in the buildings they built, the bars they made merry, the churches they prayed in and the graves some of their spirits still roam.