

An Open Letter to Those Who “Tricked” Us on Halloween

Sometimes, outside the classroom and in moments we least expect, we are put to the test as teachers. A faculty member at a large research university in the Midwest tells the tale of one such “teaching moment” — a potentially terrifying moment — on the doorstep of her home.

**By
S. Holly Stocking**

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My husband and I teach at a large research university in the Midwest. He runs rats in mazes; I teach science writing. On a recent Halloween night, just after putting our youngest to bed, more than a dozen masked adults showed up on our doorstep. The animal rights protest that unfolded over the next hour and a half challenged us in deeply emotional ways, and tested our aspirations for ourselves as teachers and human beings. In the aftermath of the incident, I worked in the best way I know — through writing — to make sense of what we had done, and why. These efforts resulted in an open letter to the protesters, which was distributed over the Internet by an

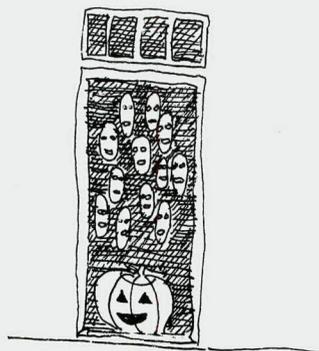
interested student journalist. That open letter led, in turn, to a surprising email response from one of the tricksters. I share this correspondence in the hopes that it will provoke other teachers and students, in similar challenging moments, to search for much needed understanding.

An Open Letter to Those Who “Tricked” Us on Halloween [As sent over the Internet]

You know who you are. Late Halloween night, as one child slept and the other was readying for bed, more than a dozen of you, disguised as trick-or-treaters in ski masks, with a few goblins sprinkled in, planted yourselves at our front door.

“We know where you live,” your blunt-voiced leader intoned, eyeing us ominously. “Murder slavery....greed....” hissed others. One of you, a short woman, dark, with the hint of a New York accent, alternately pelted us with outrage and wept. A taller woman, slim and blue eyed, chanted over and over that this butchery had to stop.

Realizing that you were animal rights activists come to protest my husband’s research with rats, we had to make an instant calculation, and we reacted, instinctively, as teachers.



We did not order you off our property or slam the door in your faces. We did not raise our voices. Instead, guessing that most of you were students, and struggling within ourselves for patience, we listened.

In the days since, friends and acquaintances have expressed their outrage at your tactics and their incredulity that we would treat you with any patience at all. We have been lectured by friends and students alike: What you did, they charge, was deceptive, invasive and cowardly, pure and simple — a tactic no different from those of bigoted hate groups and thugs. If you had been interested in anything other than intimidation and harassment, you would have removed your masks and come in when we invited you, or you would have talked with my husband at his office. Most of the well-meaning people to whom we have told this tale are certain they personally would have slammed the door in your faces! So why didn't we?

It is a question we have thought about more than once since this happened. Were we naive? Did you succeed in intimidating us? Or was something else going on?

Pondering these questions, and thinking about those of you who stood before us, we can never be certain. But we do believe that we assessed the situation accurately. Despite the angry eyes and slogans, we sensed you did not pose any immediate threat to us, and in these circumstances at least, listening and talking, and struggling to see you as human beings under your masks, seemed preferable to invec-

tive.

More importantly, both my husband and I remember our own protests during another era, and aspire to be the kind of teachers we would have wanted as we were working to find and express our values. Both of us believe that universities are or ought to be places where people can engage in robust discussion and debate. We believe we have a responsibility to listen to what others have to say, and try to understand it. And we each believe that as university teachers, we have a responsibility to stand up calmly and openly for what we believe to be the truth, even if occasionally those we find ourselves teaching can't or won't.

Clearly, it is not our responsibility to offer ourselves to be harassed, particularly at home, where we feel most vulnerable. But as one friend who sympathizes with our actions pointed out to me, this encounter outside our house — though unpleasant and ethically dubious — had the potential to be what some of us in the teaching profession like to call a "teaching moment," one of those uncommon moments, often outside the classroom, in life, when the potential for real learning suddenly presents itself. And in an instant's calculation, that is what we decided it was.

Hearing you out during the hour or so that you stood before us in the chilly night air, we were astonished by the extent of the need for learning. None of you knew what my husband does in his research; you knew he had brought research dollars into the university, but you had never read a paper describing his work; you assumed, wrongly, that the rats he uses in his research are in pain; you believed,

wrongly again, that his work has no useful implications, or if it does that it would be possible to substitute computer models for the rats' behavior; you seemed to believe, too, that animals never make good models for people. And so both of us, teachers who have trained ourselves to listen to peoples' arguments and opinions, worked gingerly but diligently to counter the errors, the partial knowledge, and ignorance built into so many of the questions and accusations.

Did you actually learn some things from us in this "moment"? Probably not. But who can say? And what would you have learned if we had not engaged our teaching selves, if we had called you names, and slammed the doors on you instead?

As for ourselves, teachers are not the only ones who teach (and will teach) during such moments. Those we try to teach always are *our* teachers too. And in this case those of you who appeared on our doorstep taught us several things:

You taught us the immensity of the gap in knowledge and values between scientists who work with animals and the subset of animal rights activists, including yourselves, who are willing to resort to bullying tactics. You taught us that all animal researchers, but particularly those who fail to appreciate and address the size of this gap, and the implications, are vulnerable. You taught us that continuing openness in the face of such vulnerability requires courage because we can not always know for certain if impassioned individuals among you will hurl more than slurs and accusations. But most tellingly, in ways you surely never intended,

you reminded us of the importance — and emotional challenges — of striving for respect and compassion for *all* of God's creatures, including one another.

—S. Holly Stocking
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I learned a valuable lesson that somehow in my exuberance to save and respect animals I had forgotten my core belief to treat *all* living things with compassion and respect. My humblest apologies.

—Name withheld at the author's request

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A Response from One of the "Tricksters"

[Received via email the day after the open letter was sent]

I would like to apologize for my own actions in the intrusive visit to your home. I like to think of myself as a Buddhist and I strive for compassion towards all living things. I was embarrassed and humbled by the way you and your husband courageously confronted a group of angry, young masked activists and turned the confrontation into an open, civil debate.

I have expressed my feelings about this to the other activists and we are all committed to non-violence; unfortunately, some of us do not consider intimidation to be a form of violence. The students in our group have a great love for animals and they tend to distrust those in authority, so at times they are misguided, but they mean well. They are just frustrated at a system that seems oblivious to change. They are impatient and impetuous but they live by their ideals; they just have problems accepting the fact that others can't see what they see. They think that things will change overnight and that all creatures will be free of man's inhumanity to man and our fellow inhabitants of earth. I thank you for being patient with us...

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