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Our University – Free Thinking

Halloween marks a number of occasions but none more important than the nailing of Luther's 95 Theses on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg -- the birth of a reformation that transformed the modern world on October 31, 1517.

This act changed things: not just the association of Christendom to the church; not just the relationship of Christendom to its namesake, Jesus Christ; not just the bond of a man to an organization; not just the suggestion that individuals are masters of their own fate; not just the impact of the printing press and the translation of the bible into German to make it accessible to all rather than just the few conversant in Latin; not just the concept that money could buy anything from happiness to heaven; not just the notion that a single man with a powerful idea could take on the largest multinational corporation in the world and start a revolution, a reformation; and certainly, not just the belief that concepts are important, even more so than the force of tradition and dogma, but rather that people with passion need to stand and risk.

"Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise", he said. Just a man standing for what he thought right.

The Church was rocked, and the waves created extended well beyond its walls. The power of a thinking person changed the course of humanity. Other potent examples we know from world history.

I hope.

Here are ten individuals who had dramatic impact: Albert Einstein, Johannes Gutenberg, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Cai Lun (said to have invented paper, without which poor Gutenberg would have been hopeless), St. Paul, Marie Curie, Confucius, Buddha, and Isaac Newton. Any historian worth his salt would affirm their inarguable influence.

Life as a lightning rod took its toll on Luther. Obsessions developed, manifested later in his life by anti-Semitism that bordered on hate and madness. His view, before the paranoia-poisoned madness set in, was that each person should discover his own way in the world. That the need for the insertion of any man between a person and the Creator was not only unnecessary and limited, but antithetical to Holy Writ and the exercise of free will. We must stand or not on our own actions and decisions, neither bought nor begged. Rugged individualists were needed, not beholden to a social or ecclesiastical organization contaminated by greed, avarice, or the collection of power. Even associations with the best intentions should not compel membership or ideas against individual free will.

Luther was a powerful free thinker who, by example, encouraged others to do likewise - to think freely - to make their own way guided by their own understanding of their place in the world, not by infringement of any kind.

This powerful thinking has little to do with candy corn and jack-o-lanterns, but much to do with the purpose of the university. Luther's boldness when he nailed his Theses to the church door that day in Wittenberg changed the western concept of social order.

His idea -- squeezed out of his faith and insight -- to create an appropriate sense of self-determination was more basic than had been previously known.

This is without qualification the work of the university - allowing lives to be defined by aspiration and passion rather than acquiescence and passivity.

At a university, the power of free thought, and engaging it through scholarship and learning, faith and experience, is so central that I can say with confidence that institutions neglecting it do not fulfill their mission to their students.

I wish he had nailed his 95 Theses to the door on July 4, rather than October 31.