

THE MASKS THAT WE WEAR
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“If you bring forth that which is within you,
what you bring forth will save you.
If you do not bring forth that which is within you,
what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”
- The Gospel of Thomas

As we come upon the Halloween season, I've been thinking about masks. Masks are used by people for everything from religious ritual to costume parties, from dramatic performances to protective devices in sports. They acknowledge the unseen within us. We use masks both to shield our identity and also to manifest the identity of another being. For whatever reason, masks seem to have some archetypal fascination for us humans.

Some years ago during seminary, I took a course on rites of passage and initiation. And in one of the classes, we made plaster masks. We got a partner and, one at a time, covered the other's face, first with Vaseline and then with wet, plastered strips of cloth. We eventually took off the drying masks, cleaned ourselves up, and, at the next class, painted the masks.

I found the whole experience fascinating and loved the mask I made. But quite honestly, I never quite understood its importance. I felt intrigued but had no reason I could articulate for those feelings. And the instructor, in his Zen sort of way, never really explained to us what the masks meant either.

For years, I returned to the mask, wondering at its meaning. And then some months ago I awakened to an insight around its importance. I had been stuck in my attempts to figure out the mask because I had assumed that the mask represented something within my own depths. But my ah-ha moment came when I realized the

mask was not a symbol of something within me, but of what I use to conceal things within me. The mask symbolized my own way of shielding the world from my most honest self. The mask was my protector and my disguise.

I want to show you my mask. [Show mask]

This is the identity, the mask that I put out to the world... the split, fractured halves represent the mask of personal struggle... the word ambivalent – literally two sides – is often understood as not caring, but in fact a better understanding of it is to be torn... two sides pulling in opposite directions... this mask reveals the personal value I feel when I experience myself as being torn in two, as struggling. The green lips represent the mask of speech that I use, in theory at least, to make the world a better place. And the lavender spiral on the forehead in the place of the third eye represents the mask of spiritual wisdom.

I don't condemn these symbols. I honor this mask as a holy object... a holy object that reveals at least part of the way that I seek to represent myself to the world. And in recognizing that outer garment that I place upon myself, this mask serves as a tool for me to recognize the sacred wholeness within...

Buddhist teacher, Joanna Macy, has an exercise called the Dance to Dismember the Ego. In the exercise, the participants in ritual fashion create a doll, which represents their external identity. After shaping it and dressing it up and decorating it, they then present their ego doll to the other participants and bid the doll farewell. Sometimes, they then destroy the doll, releasing themselves from the prison of their incomplete identity. Through personifying their egos in the form of a doll, the participants in the exercise are able to observe something that often remains unconscious. Making such self-observation conscious gives one the power needed to release the hold that the

unconscious can have on us, granting the power to change.

Creating a mask has similar power.

I want to wear my mask for you for a moment.

[Put on and then remove mask]

We're asked by our culture to wear many masks... we are asked to wear the mask of competence. We are asked to wear the mask of sanity. We are asked to wear the mask of happiness. We are asked to wear the mask of being financially well off.

What are some other masks we are asked to wear? [solicit responses]

[Aluminum Foil Mask Exercise – Using aluminum foil, invite congregation to make their own masks, then quietly observe them & name them]

So, the name of my mask is The Awakened Teacher. What are the names of some of your masks? [Solicit responses]

Our masks have value... they serve us as subconscious defenders, protecting our inner integrity... but they also lead us to put the less sociably acceptable parts of ourselves into the shadow.

Jesus' words from the Gospel of Thomas remind us, "If you bring forth that which is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth that which is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

And exemplar, Henry David Thoreau affirms that, "What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen"

There's an old Hindu story... Shiva says to another lesser God that he is going to hide himself on the earth so that the most dedicated can search and find him.

This lesser God asks, “Well, where will you hide yourself? Will it be on top of a mountain?”

“No,” Shiva responds. “That would be too easy.”

“Well, then, at the bottom of the sea?”

“No,” Shiva responds again. “That would also be too easy.”

“Well, where then?”

“I will hide myself in the one place that few will dare to look... inside the human heart.”

There is a sacred wholeness within each of us... and that wholeness is not always welcomed by our families, friends, co-workers, and other relations.

This lack of welcoming begins when we are very young and leads to the formation of our very first masks... our first, intentional choices to conceal parts of ourselves so as not to be criticized or abandoned by those we love. In time, we internalize that rejection of our integrity as we experience shame for our humanness. We hide away what is inside of us, repressing it, isolating, trying to forget it.

That word, shame, is such a small word, but it has so much power.

I’ve been working a lot with shame lately. I’ve been exploring parts of myself that I didn’t know existed... areas of great embarrassment, very primal, primarily having to do with feelings around sexuality and also violence... both aspects of my nature that I’ve often repressed. I’ve worn masks of being both asexual and nonviolent in my life, protecting myself from the shame of how I really feel. These energies of sex and violence are perhaps the most powerful energies on earth... they are the universal forces of attraction and repulsion.

And my repression of them has led me to feelings of depression, a fear of people

and an avoidance of closeness... always afraid that some day my true nature would be discovered. Yet now, I am better able to be present to these forces within myself... not embracing them as much as witnessing them and honoring them as a part of who I am. It hasn't been easy, but it is paying off for me in stronger feelings of safety, joy and love.

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I am wondering whether we can be a community for each other that is loving enough to allow us to set aside some of our masks. And I am wondering whether we can take the strength and foundation of this community out into our lives, so we can set aside some of our masks out in the world, and provide a circle of love for others, so that they can set aside their masks, too.

I've been here just a year and I've already seen some of you let down some of these self-protective garments. And to be fully honest, I have let down some of mine, too. I can only think of where we can go in the future... this is our sacred mission... to honor the Oneness within us and throughout all of reality... Step by step, in this holy mission, we are making a better world.

And with that, I wish to all of you a Happy Halloween.

Bringing in the mask, putting it on, taking it off... telling the story of its creation...

Didn't understand it then... I understand it now...

The mask is a symbol of the masks that we wear in our lives, makes our mental masks tangible... so we then can wear it and when we remove it, the physical mask and the inner masks are gone... I am naked, I am bare... this mask is the representation of my split personality, a personality torn between anger and emptiness, a mask fragmenting as my inner psyche fragments, a mask with some hope, the purple spiral of life in the mythical place of the third eye, the green lips of life, the spirit of vitality and wholeness that emerges for me in the spoken word...

What masks am I hiding behind right now?

Well, this pulpit for one (stepping away from it)

Can I risk being other than separated from you? Can I risk being close to you?
Can I risk being open with you? Can I risk intimacy with you?

Can we be a community that even for a moment loves each other without the mask?
Can we? Are we right now, in this moment, a place where we can be with each other without the mask?

Happy Halloween.

The Sacred Wholeness within

Personal philosophy of integration

Facing the demons within

Our sexual nature

Our violent nature

Shame

Consumerism, materialism, self worth... worth thru other's eyes...

Do you actually believe that your worth is inherent? Below the masks we place upon ourselves, below the mask of competence and efficiency, below the masks

You see, I know all the awful things that you think and feel beneath the surface... and I know that because I know them in myself... I know that I hate and at times want to kill... I know that I lust and want to fuck...