

The Masks we Wear

Is your Mask holding you hostage?

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Most people are familiar with presenting a certain face to the world. In fact, we all do it to some extent. During the course of any given day, we can use a variety of different masks as a social disguise to help get us through a variety of situations. It's part of human nature.

The reasons for wearing a mask can be both positive and negative and some of the reasons might include:

- To hide fear
- To hide anxiety
- To be liked and accepted
- To hide vulnerability
- To hide sadness/depression
- To hide happiness
- To deceive
- To hide anger
- To show masculinity/femininity
- To manipulate

How many of us live life behind a mask – a mask of self-assuredness, confidence, authority, perfection, efficiency etc, while all the while hiding who we truly are? The problem with masks is when they become the norm and we lose ourselves in the process of trying to please others.

What mask do we show to the outside world - to family, friends, employers, employees, teachers etc? Are we showing things like "I'm confident", "I'm fine", "I'm in charge", "everything's good", "I'm happy"? But, do you smile to hide the pain in your heart? Do you laugh to conceal the tears in your eyes? What is behind your mask? What are you hiding? Could it be that you are actually feeling "I'm not good enough", "I'm useless", "I'm in pain", "I'm feeling really anxious"? Maybe you behave in an outgoing manner at a party with your friends, but you may actually feel somewhat shy. Maybe you are the last person others would say has any problems, but you are actually crippled with anxiety. Maybe you are really struggling in your relationship, but you put on a mask of happiness around others. Have you been wearing the mask for so long that you have actually forgotten who you are underneath?

The Japanese say that you have three faces:

1. The first face, you show to the world.
2. The second face, you show to your close friends and your family.
3. The third face, you never show anyone. It is the truest reflection of who you are.

Why do we do this? Could it be that we have an absolute fear that if others saw us for who we believe we truly are, that they wouldn't like or accept us? How many of us go through life thinking that we are not good enough, bright enough, interesting enough... fearful of the opinions of others if they were to actually see the "Real" you? The 'you' who tries to hide all of this behind a mask. And, there is not just one mask, we have many of them – interchangeable ones, depending on the situation. The 'you' who bows to societal / family pressures and expectations for fear of being judged. But then, whose life are you living? Faking it is tiring. Living a life that is at odds with your authentic self will eventually wear you down.

And all the while, what really are we hiding? We're hiding our vulnerability, fearful that should our vulnerabilities be seen by others, the game would be up and we would be exposed.

And yet, yet, our vulnerability is what connects us all. When we can accept that it is there and not try to hide it and make believe that it is not, we begin to lower the mask and come into our authentic selves.

There is a beautiful children's book called *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams. It tells the story of a rabbit who becomes Real through the love of a little boy. It is a beautiful metaphor for the value of authenticity and vulnerability. It tells that we become Real through our openness. Maybe it's time that we become Real through the love and acceptance of ourselves.

How wonderful would it be to be able to allow our authentic selves to be seen by others – to feel secure, loving and accepting enough of ourselves to allow ourselves be seen without our masks?

There is a saying that "sometimes it's not the people who change, it's the mask that falls off". Therapy can help you identify the masks you are hiding behind and slowly facilitate you towards living from your authentic self.

If this is something that you would be interested in exploring, I would like to encourage you to take the first step towards slowly peeking out from behind your mask to the freedom that awaits through living more authentically.

*"Once you are Real, you can't become unReal again. It lasts for always" – Margery Williams
– The Velveteen Rabbit*

"PLEASE HEAR WHAT I'M NOT SAYING"

– Charles C. Finn (1966)

Don't be fooled by me.
Don't be fooled by the face I wear
for I wear a mask, a thousand masks,
masks that I'm afraid to take off,
and none of them is me.

Pretending is an art that's second nature with me,
but don't be fooled,
for God's sake don't be fooled.
I give you the impression that I'm secure,
that all is sunny and unruffled with me, within as well as without,
that confidence is my name and coolness my game,
that the water's calm and I'm in command
and that I need no one,
but don't believe me.

My surface may seem smooth but my surface is my mask,
ever-varying and ever-concealing.

Beneath lies no complacency.

Beneath lies confusion, and fear, and aloneness.

But I hide this. I don't want anybody to know it.

I panic at the thought of my weakness exposed.

That's why I frantically create a mask to hide behind,

a nonchalant sophisticated facade,

to help me pretend,

to shield me from the glance that knows.

But such a glance is precisely my salvation, my only hope,
and I know it.

That is, if it's followed by acceptance,

if it's followed by love.

It's the only thing that can liberate me from myself,

from my own self-built prison walls,

from the barriers I so painstakingly erect.

It's the only thing that will assure me

of what I can't assure myself,

that I'm really worth something.

But I don't tell you this. I don't dare to, I'm afraid to.

I'm afraid your glance will not be followed by acceptance,

will not be followed by love.

I'm afraid you'll think less of me,

that you'll laugh, and your laugh would kill me.

I'm afraid that deep-down I'm nothing

and that you will see this and reject me.

So I play my game, my desperate pretending game,

with a facade of assurance without

and a trembling child within.

So begins the glittering but empty parade of masks,

and my life becomes a front.

I idly chatter to you in the suave tones of surface talk.

I tell you everything that's really nothing,

and nothing of what's everything,

of what's crying within me.

So when I'm going through my routine

do not be fooled by what I'm saying.

Please listen carefully and try to hear what I'm not saying,

what I'd like to be able to say,

what for survival I need to say,
but what I can't say.

I don't like hiding.
I don't like playing superficial phony games.
I want to stop playing them.
I want to be genuine and spontaneous and me
but you've got to help me.
You've got to hold out your hand
even when that's the last thing I seem to want.
Only you can wipe away from my eyes
the blank stare of the breathing dead.
Only you can call me into aliveness.
Each time you're kind, and gentle, and encouraging,
each time you try to understand because you really care,
my heart begins to grow wings--
very small wings,
very feeble wings,
but wings!

With your power to touch me into feeling
you can breathe life into me.
I want you to know that.
I want you to know how important you are to me,
how you can be a creator--an honest-to-God creator--
of the person that is me
if you choose to.
You alone can break down the wall behind which I tremble,
you alone can remove my mask,
you alone can release me from my shadow-world of panic,
from my lonely prison,
if you choose to.
Please choose to.

Do not pass me by.
It will not be easy for you.
A long conviction of worthlessness builds strong walls.
The nearer you approach to me the blinder I may strike back.
It's irrational, but despite what the books say about man
often I am irrational.
I fight against the very thing I cry out for.
But I am told that love is stronger than strong walls
and in this lies my hope.
Please try to beat down those walls
with firm hands but with gentle hands
for a child is very sensitive.

Who am I, you may wonder?
I am someone you know very well.
For I am every man you meet
and I am every woman you meet.

