

MASKS: WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Our Spiritual Theme for the month of January is Mystery. And I immediately thought about masks...and the mystery of our own identity.

It seems a given that we all have experience with mask wearing. How are you? That is a question that evokes one particular mask...the mask named "Fine"...I'm fine...how are you? And another "Fine" mask suddenly appears...two masks talking, two people hiding. "We're both "Fine".

Isn't lovely when you get beyond the mask called "Fine"?

Masks have a long history in human culture. They serve many purposes.

To hide our true identity, our true nature – to shield our fear of the shadow - masks can come in handy.

At times we hide for fun...like Halloween, or Renaissance Festivals...at times we hide out of fear ...or to scare another bank robbers wear masks both because they are afraid and in order to heightened fear in those they wish to intimidate.

In many cultures, masks have been used in ritual, to call upon the power of spirit animals, ancestors, or the protection of the gods and goddesses.

In these days of social media, there are whole new ways of masking, of hiding or presenting yourself with mystery. Instagram's Fake Accounts...Finsta...U Tube Videos allowing anonymity – and FACEBOOK -well we won't go there.

What's real, Who are you , Really?

One of the earliest games we play with toddlers, is "Peek-a-Boo". We cover our face with our hands...or with a blanket...and the child seems to forget who we really are, then we reveal ourselves...there is raucous laughter every time...for both child and adult. First the mystery....the the surprise. Over and over. Masking and unmasking...so much to learn from both.

I thought of the Masquerade Ball...which originated in 15th century Venice among the upper classes. It was a public costumed dance. Masks gave revelers the protection of anonymity...and a scandalous night was had by all.

At times the Ball moved indoors...and was known as the Dance of the Red Death (the Plague) Dancers in masks spun wildly until the clock chimed the hour...and then the dancing paused for the chimes...and then resumed, until the stroke of midnight, when all dancing stopped, participants fell to the floor as if taken by Death. And all masks were finally removed, and those present returned to their former selves.

The dance symbolized Life...and the masks allowed one to hide from death and from each other. At midnight, death is vanquished...and we can be ourselves again.

Earlier versions during the Middle Ages, were Pagan Spring Festivals...often called the Feast of Fools...and took place between Twelfth Night (Dec. 6th) and Ash Wednesday...The Mardi Gras' celebrations of today are a modern version of Carnival.

Masked Balls moved into Parisian theaters and dance halls and in the 18th century they became politicized attacks on the Monarchy...with masks and costumes portraying reversals of power. The rich dressed as beggars, peasants and fish-mongers, and the poor as bishops, lawyers, and aristocrats. A famous 1873 painting by Edouard Manet's titled "Le Bal Masque De l' Opera" drew inspiration from the Revolution of the Paris Commune in 1848.

I also thought about warrior masks of Africa and other native peoples...actual crafted and decorated masks have quite a history in human social life.

So who are you, Really? How are you? Fine...yes, but who else lives behind our polite everyday masks. Why do we chose to hide?

I think we hide because we are afraid of being alone, and yet our masks isolate us from deep and real relationships with ourselves and with one another.

Poet and Scholar, Adriane Rich, was a profound thinker and writer, Here is one quote to remember:
“Until we find each other- we are alone.”

Isn't that way we are here...to find each other. “Until we find each other, we are alone.”

Early 20th century Theologian, Rudolph Otto, published a seminal book titled: “The Idea of the Holy”. His intent was to close the gap between science and religion. Between the rational and the emotional. Religion, he posited, rests on emotion: it deals in and evokes...the uncanny, rapture, awe, exultation, reverence and dependence.

Mystics of all faiths, explore the tremulous, the awful, The mysterious...The powers of good and evil.

Aren't these the emotions we touch on when we embark on our spiritual and religious journeys?

Isn't it these emotions that make our journeys both profound and perilous?

These emotions are universally human- they come into play in our most intimate relationships.

Such power in the ultimate and the intimate...of course we need to hide behind our masks.

Isn't that how we survive...through fight, flight or freeze...which is hiding?

There are so many reasons to hide. I don't recommend being vulnerable and intimate 24/7 in all of our human encounters. But being conscious of our masking can probably improve our relationships...by making us more present.

How are you? Fine. But How are you really?

Do you know what code-switching is? It's a term for an old behavior. It's an adaptation we make when we feel we are different, that we don't belong. If you are the minority person in the room...adapting in speech or dress or manner...is a smart survival skill to have. Sometimes we do it automatically, without intention...when I visit my former congregation in Tennessee, I can slip into some Appalachian speech patterns...or phrases...

When I first entered seminary in 1986, women were at a numerical disadvantage. And we women had to mimic some male traits in order to be included and taken seriously. We had to be highly competitive, we had to quote from famous authors and philosophers, we had to drink beer. We had to pretend to know more than we did...we had to hide behind a mask of "Fine" even though we were scared and out of our element.

I remember feeling like an imposter as I sat in the historic rooms of arched windows and old chandeliers – around the huge oak tables and in chairs...where my feet didn't touch the floor.

I had to adapt, code switch, from the culture of my working class neighborhood to the guilded and sacred halls of the University of Chicago Divinity School. Wow! Who was I to be in Divinity School! Who am I, really?

We wear many masks throughout our lives. Some for hiding our fear, some for fun and ritual, some for survival, some to simply fit in”

And so we come to Carl Jung. Human wholeness requires integration, acceptance and awareness of own complexities. In various stages of life we are capable of different levels of self-understanding. We learn through living to recognize our masks, our adaptations, our strengths and our flaws...and as we deepen our exploration of our interior self...of our own soul...we encounter, finally our shadow self. And we begin to know who we really are.

I've heard people in their 70's say that it is only now in this late decade that I can let go of my limited self-understanding and begin to let other parts of myself emerge.

“I am still discovering who I am.”

According to Jung, our Shadow is hidden from us and yet has great power over us. This shadow side is merely a part of our whole self...it may be the faults and destructive tendencies that were repressed...part of our unconscious.

Our life experiences, our genetics, our gifts and limitations created our shadow...and it is part of us. The work of our lives is to integrate these hidden parts into the complex whole of who we are.

Hidden things have great power.
The hidden face of God
The Holy hidden in the ordinary.
The anger, pain, fear of our hidden inner-self.
Hidden Figures

Teilhard de Chardin, French philosopher, priest and scientist...breaking down false barriers of self and other - lifted up the idea of Mankind....Humankind....
Because we are all included in the Collective Humankind...we journey together for the knowledge of who we are, really.
We journey together for greater consciousness, for deeper integration of the shadow, for the shared power of the holy.

We are not separate....we are Humankind, a collective of souls.
"Until we find each other, We are Alone"
Let us set aside our masks as often as we can...
And rejoice in Belonging to the Human Collective.

