



From the Heart

by Shelley A. Harrison

The Masks We Wear



We all act fake sometimes. You know how it feels. When you are the deceiver, if you catch yourself, you feel a bit like cardboard, as though there were a thin wall between you and others. You may feel hyper or drained after the interaction. If you are the receiver and you are not colluding with the masquerader, you feel miffed, bewildered, or put off. You haven't been given real contact or exchange, and you can sense the withholding. Why is it so hard for us to bring forward our authentic selves in our interactions?

We have all developed a veneer that we present to the world in an effort to live up to an image of who we wish to be. We may value appearing to be in control, or want to come across as loving and nice, or prefer to be aloof and above it all, with no needs. These are the three predominant Mask distortions of Power, Love, and Serenity. Which one do you use?

I'd like to share with you a vivid teaching I was given while attending the Barbara Brennan School of Healing. It is a shortcut tour for everything going on in your psyche and soul from A-Z and tracks how we develop the habit of

"giving good face." The teacher came up front with a pile of pillows in different colours. The first pillow she placed on the floor was white. It represented the Higher Self. This is the part of you that is unified with the Divine and the highest within you. It shines through in your life where you are emulating your best and feeling good.

Another pillow went on top. This one was, say a print of rainclouds, or Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. This was the Wound. It is your pain. When we experience a hurt that we cannot process we try not to feel it. We wall it off by withdrawing from physical pain in our body, or by repressing mental and emotional anguish into our unconscious, where it stays unresolved and un-dissolved. It suffocates the creative energy of the Higher Self. Our Wound separates us from the experience of our inner light. We see it re-enacted in the most painful areas of our life.

She added another pillow to the stack. It was black. The Lower Self. This is the evil within us that thrives on negative pleasure. It wants to be separate from Divine and Unity. It is our self-will, which takes great delight in getting its own way, maintaining separation, and not feeling the

pain of the Wound. Most of us never admit this is within us, but project it onto other people, cultures, or nations. If we can release the energy pent up in the negativity, it transforms into positive vibrant life force. Most of us can't do this work on our own, but need to be shown how to release this in a non-harmful way. When we don't do it intentionally, it leaks out when we lash out.

The next pillow was the Image. There were sunglasses printed on this one. This represents the conclusions we make about life based on our Wounds. For example: "If I love, I will be abandoned." "Men are not trustworthy." "Life is difficult and you have to fight to survive." Our Images are usually unconscious. Only after repeating a painful experience many times do we tune into the fact that we have some part in creating it and start to go looking within rather than blaming others and playing the victim.

Now came a pillow with hockey players on it. (Yes, she really did have one like that!) This one represented our Defense. It's the predominant way we distort our energy when we are afraid. We get afraid because we are creating life according to our images, and so there is a lot of "me against the world" experience of separation, rather than the safety and peace we feel in unity.

Then she finished with the pillow on top, your Mask. This is the idealized self-image you present to the world in order to get along, get love, and feel in control. This is the fake. It's the outer layer of our personality that we superficially identify with. When we interact with others from the Mask, it never brings the full exchange of energy and nourishment present when we interact from our Higher Selves. It is like the shade over the lamp, and it doesn't fully allow the light to shine through. The Mask is the self we think we ought to be, or wish we could be based on idealized mental images. The effort to force ourselves to conform to this perfect picture of who we should be, keeps us separated from self-acceptance. The antidote to the Mask is to try to live each moment welcoming rather than rejecting what arises within us, and also to take responsibility for our faults rather than blaming others.

It takes a heck of a commitment to personal process and awareness, with good guidance from a methodology therapist, healer, or teacher to dissolve and release all of these stifling pillows (these concepts are drawn from the Pathwork, and I highly recommend the book *The Undefended Self* by Susan Thessenga). We must learn to recognize our Mask and Defense; make conscious the Images we hold which shape our life experience; have the courage to safely discharge the negativity in the Lower Self; dare to feel the pain in the Wound...until it dissolves back into Divine Unity, thus freeing more of our Higher Self to shine through to the surface.

However, there can also be a positive psychology to mask wearing, like fantasy role-playing as a way of dressing up. Halloween is the time most of us get to do it. We really enjoy the people who get into their character and don't just don the costume, but ham it up. There are also forms of entertainment that allow us the opportunity to try

on different faces such as theater, and fantasy role-playing games.

My brother Jeff, your fine editor of this here magazine, had a blast last New Year's when he got together and dressed up with our family for a murder mystery evening. This kind of play-acting is almost more akin to clowning. It's all about creating broad caricatures. It shakes up normal parameters, allows us to interact outside of our usual norms, especially our habitual exchanges with friends or relatives.

Another way to masquerade is by playing role-playing games. My brother and I have certainly come a long way since our teenage days of playing Dungeons & Dragons. I still remember the original characters we developed. Both revealed aspects of our true natures, and the idealized characteristics we wished we had.

Why is this grown up version of dress-up so compelling? What are we learning by uncovering these archetypal qualities we possess? Our nephew Hayden loves his Fireman outfit. Psychologists say there is a stage in our early development where we act out roles. Between the ages of seven and puberty we are expressing deep idealistic urges, which reveal the soul's longing and most likely relate to the soul's world task. Within the archetypal forms we put on are found our deep spiritual longings, our goals and aspirations, as expressed by the qualities we play out in the backyard or the school playground. What characters in movies, myths and fantasy animate you the most? Wearing different masks allows us to call aspects of ourselves into the foreground. When we highlight certain traits or tendencies like this, we get a closer look at them, bringing old or seldom worn costumes out of the closet so to speak. So our mask can be disempowering or empowering depending on our awareness of it. Self-awareness is the key.

The holiday season can be a great time to catch yourself in a façade. Parties and family gatherings may trigger us to connect from who we think we ought to be, or wish we could be in order to win approval. You can catch yourself by asking "What impression of myself do I want to create and why?" Then try to relax down into contact with your authentic self in the moment. Take a risk and be real.

"When you master the courage to become your real self, even though it would seem so much less than the idealized self, you will find that it is much more." -Pathwork Guide Lecture 83, "The Idealized Self Image"

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