

The Beautiful Masks of Fellowship
October 30, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Will there be peace in the heart? Will there be groundedness? O, let there be brave peace...so our gentle spirits can rest.

Scatter beneath our feet, Beloved, the beauty of life's blessing. Scatter beauty like rose petals, like autumn leaves descending. Winds, fill the sails of our spirit with the power to push us on...with the might to lift us higher...and when we fall, may we fall in grace...like the leaves have fallen all around us.

So many leaves have fallen. Dear ones, there have been three deaths in my extended, social family. A dear friend and colleague of mine from out west lost his beloved mother. By grace, she died in peace. A second dear friend (and the loving wife of the first) lost her father...and this took place within only hours of the first loss. A third dear friend who is now living in New Zealand decided to take what resources she could muster and fly herself, her husband and their young son to the States to support these two dear ones in their grief, having known them both for so many years.

And after these world-crossing plans were all set, another person who is dear to us, someone close within our collective circle of Unitarian Universalist youth group friends and family...another who was dear to all of us passed on. He was only in his fifties. He left his life-partner behind, a love that he had known, a love that they had shared since our teenage years. She's beautiful...even in her grief, she shines...fully aware of how precious and lucky she has already been in life and even as moving forward without him is utterly unimaginable. She's working on it. It will take time.

Healing takes time but it's what we do. Our bodies, our souls know how to heal. We know this like water knows down...but how do we know this? How do we love bravely into the darkness? An artist writes,

Death took the husband of a neighbor of mine
On a highway with a drunk at the wheel
She told me keep your clean hands off the laundry he left
And don't tell me you know how I feel
She had a tape that he'd sent her from a Holiday Inn
That she never played much in the day
But when I heard him say I love you through the window at night
I just stayed the hell away

There's a hole in the middle in the middle of the prettiest life
So the lawyers and the prophets say
Not your father nor your mother nor your lover
is ever gonna make it go away
Now there's too much darkness in an endless night

To be afraid of the way we feel
So, let's be kind to each other

Kindness is real.

My friend and her family from New Zealand stayed with me for a lovely night in East Barnard and we celebrated life together...by slurping down some potato-leek soup next to an open fire outside and by eating up all of the fried chicken and salad that I prepared and could offer to them. When we were just about done, the young one—my friend's son of fourteen years—swiped the last remnants of salad dressing, salt and oily spices off of the bottom of the plate with his forefinger. He was eating the very shadow of the meal, much to his mother's disgust. She chastised him...and she was right. It was a little bit disgusting. I could not possibly have been happier or more proud...to have fed her beautiful boy something that he enjoyed.

We all met when we were all his age, when we were all about fourteen years old...and when we were that young, we did far more than our share of disgusting things. So, making fun of the mama bear for taking a stand for proper manners with her son was particularly delightful. It was satisfying for the young man's father and me. We all laughed together in the face of great sorrow. It made it easier for the tears to follow on.

Scatter beneath our feet, Beloved, the rose petals of your grace. Winds, fill the sails of our spirits with the power to push us on...with the will to lift us higher...and when we fall, may we fall in grace.

Good morning and good Sunday, I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, October 30th. It's one day before Halloween or All Hallows Eve or All Saints Day, the masking holiday when the veil between this world and the sweet hereafter grows thin enough to cross. Restlessly returning to us from the spirit realm beyond are the ghosts and the goblins of those who came before us. And they walk with us for a while and they talk with us, shocking us into the reality of living with tricks and treats.

Shocking us... You know, seasoned UU ministers have this dorky trick the pull on the younger ministers out in the Midwest. We gathered at a professional assembly—100 of us. It was formal. We sat at tables. We heard from scholars who read academic papers with critical respondents. We all dressed up for the occasion.

On the tables before us were copies of our hymnal and the proceedings started off with the singing of a hymn, For All the Saints. It starts on the upbeat.

[beat] For all the saints who from their labors rest,
who Thee by faith before the world confessed;

Thy name, most holy, be forever blessed.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

It was all so very solemn...and then, those seasoned ministers in the know would prepare the second verse by SLAMMING their hymnals down on the tables, scaring us half to death and shocking us into the reality of living with half-crazed tricksters and pranksters. Then, they just kept singing like nothing had happened. They got

me bad the first year but the next year, I got others...by wearing the mask of solemn dignity.

The title of this morning's reflection is *The Beautiful Masks of Fellowship*. It's about the disguises we wear (and those we choose not to wear). It's about the masks that help us to know more deeply who we really are.

You know, it strikes me in this season of change is that summer is the really mask of autumn. Our seasons are not three months long but actually twice that. Our seasons are six months in length...and they overlap, like shingles on a roof. So, true autumn actually starts in early summer and it hides for three months behind a mask of a beach balls and barbeques...unmasking itself only at summer's end, showing its true colors.

If this is true, true winter starts around this time of year and it hides for the same length of time behind a mask of apples and fallen leaves.

This happens for every season—winter, spring, summer and fall. Carol and James used to sing about it—Carol King and James Taylor. They sang a wonderful song called *You've Got a Friend*. You may know it...

When you're down and troubled and you need a helping hand
And nothing is going right
Close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night
You just call out my name and you know, wherever I am,
I'll come running to see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you've got to do is call and I'll be there...

I find this to be like scripture, like a beautiful lesson in theology, a lesson in empathy, compassion and in deeply pastoral care. There are pastoral care teams here at North Chapel. We will be learning more about these teams in November, as we enter our time of gratitude and resilience. Caring for ourselves and for one another is so important.

You know, not everyone feels this way but I truly and deeply believe that the spirit's healing journey begins within, that is begins with asking for what we need. It's so very hard to do sometimes but, dear beloveds, it's so important. This is a rich subject, worthy of open and public conversation. Perhaps, we can think about scheduling something in the future.

It is important to ask for what we need. I know that this is hard in the culture of northern New England life. It's hard to reach out and yet, it is still so very important. There is a song in our teal hymnal—#1021, I believe. It's *Lean on Me* by Bill Withers and the passage that captures my heart appears in the second verse.

Please, swallow your pride if I have things you need to borrow
For no one can fill those of your needs that you won't let show

Some say, "The Lord helps those who help themselves" and reaching out, I believe, is part of the process.

Scatter beneath our feet the bravest flowers of grace and fill the sails of the soul with the power enough to push us on, to lift us higher, to let us blossom fully and completely into this world.

It's so hard—this hero's journey—and not everyone wants to walk the path but doing so makes the shared work of ministry so powerful and so healthy. Not everyone believes that they can ask for what they need but it's so good when we do, so good when we enter our journeys of spiritual growth and well being together. We are stronger when we remove the masks of separation. Pride is often the mask of a deeper faith. What faith is this?

Some of us believe that we are supposed to get all of our ducks in a row, that we are supposed to have our lives ordered and all put together before we get ourselves to church. My mom is this way. She believes this...and she and I go back and forth about this issue. We fight about it, playfully, and she wins all of the time...because she's my mother and not because she's right. She wins because she makes all of the rules and she wins every time because she chooses to win. That's the way it is and I'm clear on that. And she's definitely clear on it...but I don't believe that winning is good for her.

My mother is a painter. She's been painting African masks for many years. My mom is a beautiful, deeply wise and lovely woman. She's very proud and fiercely protective of her husband—my dad who is gone now. She is proud and protective of her two children, me and Lisa. I just don't know if her pride serves her well. I wonder if it's a mask that covers something deeper that lay beneath, something that overlaps in her spiritual life, like shingles on a roof.

As my parents got older, they grew less able to keep everything tidy at home. They hired someone to come in and help with the housework from time to time but here's the thing. My mom would run around cleaning up the house before the housekeeper arrived. That's my mom. I don't why she's that way but she is.

I love that woman to tears, to my very bones and to my soul. I love her unconditionally and forever...but that doesn't mean that our relationship is free of conflict. It means the opposite. It means we learn to deal with and we learn to grow from conflict that we discover.

Conflict is so challenging. Sometimes, we may wonder why this is the case. Is it because we don't understand the values and the intentions of other people? Is it because we don't understand ourselves? Sometimes, it's hard to talk to people who see the world differently.

I felt this acutely a month ago, during the TEDx HartlandHill weekend. I met a fellow presenter, a man named Tony McAleer. Tony wrote a book entitled The Cure for Hate: A Former White Supremacist's Journey from Violent Extremism to Radical Compassion. Over the course of that weekend, he and I spent many hours together.

Sometimes, it's hard to talk to people whose paths in life are different from ours...or to those who think so much differently than we do. How does one deal with this? How do we see beyond the mask, beyond the outer surfaces of things? How do we find a way to move forward together?

I brought Tony McAleer to North Chapel that Sunday. He wanted to be here with us. I lit a candle of joy and concern. I used that part of our liturgy to share that I had begun to make a friend. Then, I asked Tony to introduce himself. He shared his

name and he shared about his journey. He shared that he used to participate in violent extremism. He gave me a copy of his book and I thanked him for it. He inscribed it. The inscription reads:

To Leon,
Pleasure to meet you at TEDx Woodstock!
Curiosity!
Courage!
Compassion!

These were the three words that he lives by, the three words that pierced through his mask of hatred, fear and violence. He begins his book in this way:

BEFORE THE SHAVED HEAD and the Doc Martens; before the anger and street violence; before the anti-immigrant rhetoric, the Holocaust denial, the white supremacist phone line; before the pain and loneliness—there was little Tony. Who was that little boy? That core essence deep down inside? Little Tony was an open, bright, sensitive, curious, shy, stubborn, mischievous, and funny little fellow who was open to the wonder of the world around him.

I'm conflicted about reading this book. My library is already straining, already heavy with the physical weight and with the metaphysical weight of the subject of racism and its discontents. I'll have to pray on that.

I don't like conflict. It's a real-life pain in the neck...but it can also be so insightful...if you handle it artfully. Handled artfully, conflict can reveal something far more beautiful that is in disguise. Maybe conflict is a mask.

The Book of Proverbs says, "Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart..." [Proverbs 26:24-28 ESV] What happens when we take off the mask of hate? The Gospel of Matthew says, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." [Matthew 7:15 ESV] What happens when the sheep costume is removed? The Gospel of Luke says, "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known." [Luke 12:2 ESV] And of boastful men, Second Corinthians says that...

...such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles...

It says that...

...even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. (11:13-15)

Not everyone loves the Bible but I find this fascinating and so helpful, helpful in my life. I like this passage from Corinthians and regardless of one's feelings about the Bible, Corinthians is familiar to many of us...because of the famous passage about love.

Although I speak in tongues of men and angels
I'm just sounding brass and tinkling cymbals without love...

If I had the gift of prophecy and all the knowledge
And the faith to move the mountains
And even if I understood all of the mysteries
If I didn't have love, I'd be nothing

This is a familiar passage but we don't really understand its context. The meaning of the passage is not obvious. Most often, when we encounter this passage, its shorn from its roots. It's always lovely but can't be truly understood when its quoted out of context...and the context of this lovely passage is conflict.

Few of us, if any, find the experience of conflict comfortable. Yet, as Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd reminds us,
For as long as two or more have gathered in the name of the spirit, [they have found themselves in conflict]. You remember, perhaps, that classical chestnut of a wedding reading from Corinthians which says, in part,
If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels and do not have love I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbals. If I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

Nancy further explained (and quite insightfully, I think),
That letter from the Apostle Paul to the Christian community in Corinth has nothing whatsoever to do with the ushy-gushy, romantic sentiment that it is so often associated with at weddings. That is a letter from an over-extended pastor with occasionally dubious judgment to a congregation whose leaders are in a constant state of fierce and unremitting conflict.

They were shouting at each other, gubernatorial candidates in Florida. They were shouting prayers like clanging cymbals. They were beating one another with the word of God. They were in conflict.

How does one bring peace to a moment like this? Lao-tse, the ancient Chinese philosopher once said,

If there is to be peace in the world,
there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
there must be peace in the heart.

As these are all intertwined and so, deeply interconnected, how is it that there can truly be peace in the heart?

Martin Buber, the Austrian, Jewish and Israeli philosopher of the mid-20th century, is often misquoted as having proclaimed that "we are a promise making, promise keeping people." And that is part of what he said but he said more than this.

Martin Buber said that “we are a promise making, promise keeping, promise breaking and promise renewing people.” We cannot leave out the part that let us heal.

We live together and we love together. We grieve together and we grow together. We break sometimes—we shatter—but we come back to the well to find forgiveness. We find true community and fellowship, beloved fellowship.

Sometimes, conflict is the mask of something far more beautiful. Sometimes, masks conceal us and sometimes masks reveal us. When we are wise, they lead us on to fellowship and to love.

Scatter beneath our feet, Beloved, the beauty of life’s blessing. Scatter beauty like rose petals, like autumn leaves descending. Winds, fill the sails of our spirit with the power to push us on...with the might to lift us high. May it be so, Blessed be and amen.