

MASKING TAPE

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It's that time again. Time to figure out a costume for Halloween. Time to dust off the masks. Which one to wear? Fortunately, we all have a whole closetful of masks to choose from, if we can only recognize what each one is saying to the world. We're going to pick up a few masks from that collection today and look at them more closely.

Masks cover our faces. A mask covers all the muscles of the face that twist and contort and convey expression. That expression is the key here. We look to each other's faces to communicate. I look at your face to find out how you feel about me. How do you feel about what I've just said? Did you get the joke? Did you feel my pain? Are you afraid of me? Are you laughing at me? Are you bored? Whatever the emotion your face is expressing, it is the vital link between us.

A few years ago, my sister gave me a doll she had made. It was small—maybe ten inches tall. The doll had on a slinky shiny silver dress and she wore a hat kind of cocked jauntily over one eye. The hat had a veil that totally covered her face. And the doll was holding a mask in one hand—the mask had a face drawn on it. I loved the doll. I lifted up the veil to see her face and there wasn't any. It was just a blank flesh colored piece of fabric with no eyes or nose or mouth. Nothing. When I lifted up that veil, I actually screamed and threw the doll as far from me as I could. It was so scary because it didn't have a face. If I had lifted her dress and there was no belly button, I could have gone happily on with no reaction. Or pulled up her skirt and there were no legs. No problem. But no face? It was appalling. Faces are vital on a doll. (I have since painted a face on the doll so I can stand to look at it.)

If you cover your face with almost anything, the transformation can be disconcerting, horrifying, even hilarious. Even the simplest of masks can powerfully alter the face. Suddenly, the wearer becomes a different person or even anonymous—who was that masked man, anyway? We are denied access to all the muscle changes, the facial signals that we are accustomed to seeing cross the face.

We tend to love our dogs or even monkeys that appear to express emotions, even if we're reading emotions that aren't really there into their faces.

Writers like to tell the reader about how expressive the eyes are.

Poppycock! Outside of the pupils contracting or expanding with changing light, the eyes are just windows. It's the muscles around the eyes that give the expression. When the Lone Ranger puts on his simple mask covering those few muscles, Tonto doesn't have a clue what the Ranger's feeling. Which is probably why Tonto wears a mask as well!

I have a small collection of masks that we've gathered in our travels. They aren't fancy, but I like them. They hang on our walls and, as art, are very nice to look at. But, they're dead. They come to life once someone takes them off the wall and puts them on. I've brought my masks and I'm going to volunteer some of you to model the masks—to bring them to life. I'm going to pass out these bags—a mask in each one—and the bag has a number on it. Please, don't open the bag until I call your number, then once your number is called, put the mask on—stand up and show everyone. Then Tom will hang your mask on the wall here.

So—let's begin.

I've said that a mask comes to life once it is put on. Tom, hold up your mask. [nylon stocking] Just a piece of fabric. Now, put it on. All Tom would have to do is put on this mask, walk into any public building, and everyone would be terrified. We know there's a human face under there, but no expression is possible. Is he trying to make us laugh or scare us?

A clown wears a mask of grease paint. It covers his whole face, but he applies it, stressing the muscles around the mouth and forehead and eyes. So all emotions are emphasized. A clown mask is friendly because we can clearly see what emotion the clown is expressing—and, of course, the clown's smile is usually the largest feature.

This power of masks to become alive and influence people has been known and used for centuries. The ancient Greeks used masks to isolate particular characteristics, such as lust, greed, despair and virtue.

The main reason for carving and wearing masks in African and American Indian tribal cultures was the desire to give a real and tangible form to the

spirit world. Man could gain some control over the forces that created and controlled his universe.

The Indians and African primitives used various masks in rituals and that gave life and importance to what was happening. In initiation ceremonies, celebration of harvest, judgment of criminals, exorcism of evil spirits, the masks brought strength and wisdom and otherworldliness to the wearers. It wasn't the old man in the hut next door saying those words—it was the god of the whatever. Everyone knew it was still that old man from the hut next door, but when he wore the mask, it became the mask wearing the man. There was power. There was authority. There was God.
 [African mask]—This mask is from the Ivory Coast of Africa.
 [New Zealand mask] Here's a tribal mask from New Zealand.

The African masks tended to be true to a tribal facial type, but stylized. So then each area was known by and also divided by the look of their masks. In some African societies, for example, a forward gazing posture, combined with slit eyes and a frozen facial expression, might be used to show a state of spiritual possession. That same spiritual possession in another tribal area might be shown by the use of boldly protruding features, especially the eyes, combined with a backward inclination of the head.

A wide range of tribes scattered over large areas use a high domed forehead to show wisdom and spirituality. If the mask has white pigmentation, the wearer is a ghost or a spirit of the dead.

Tribal leaders wore buffalo masks or the masks of other horned animals when they wanted to exorcise spirits or honor their ancestors.

Because the mask, when it's worn, becomes the vessel of divine power, it must be made as beautiful or as terrifying as possible in order for the spirit to choose to enter the mask. When the leader or dancer put on that mask, he assumed the nature of that spirit. He carried himself as if he were possessed and often would speak in an altered voice.

The Indians of America's Northwest sometimes used dual masks that were hinged. A drawstring operated by the dancer snapped open the outside hinged animal mask to reveal another human mask inside. Sometimes the eyelids and the jaws were also animated.

The men of Eskimo tribes used face masks and the Eskimo women danced wearing intricate finger masks.

Masks were important in the Orient and still are used theatrically today. In early Korea, masks were used in religious rites, to get rid of evil spirits, to cure illness, and to promote a good harvest. The color as well as the shape of the features shows the character represented—black means evil, red is power. [Korean masks]

The Chinese opera originally used masks, but gradually elaborate face painting has replaced masks. Both in masks and in face paints, colors came to represent particular attributes—red meant royalty. White indicated treachery. Gold and silver showed the wearer was a supernatural being. If the features on the mask were uneven, then the wearer was cunning. If the mask used straight across eyebrows, that was an honest upright person.

Noh masks in Japan are used for the traditional Noh theater. These masks are carved from cypress, which is a lightweight wood with a fine grain. The masks are smaller than the wearer's face and have small eye openings. Once the actor (always a man) puts on the mask, it comes to life by the nuances of movement or subtle changes in the tilt of the head.

In Kabuki theater in Japan, the actor generally does not wear a mask, but uses elaborate painted on features.

In Europe in the 1500's, noblewomen wore masks to the theater to avoid recognition and they even wore masks outdoors to protect their complexions. Later, in the 1600's and 1700's, masks were used in society to disguise or to flirt. They were held in place with a handle, or with a string tied in back of the head. There were even silk masks that covered the whole face and were held in place by a button that was clenched between the teeth.

And, in all societies, I suppose, the perfect mask for a lady or even not such a lady, is the fan. [fan]

In modern times, masks have shaped us all. What would the Lone Ranger and Tonto be without their masks? Just a couple of guys smelling of horses and sagebrush.

Let's talk about a disguised fellow-- the man of steel—Superman. Here is the oddity. Superman wore a mask most of the time and he looked like Clark Kent. What was his mask? [glasses] He took off his mask to disguise himself. And, apparently, everyone fell for it—even Lois Lane. The guy whips off his glasses and suddenly no one knows who he is. Of course, they may be distracted by a grown man walking around town in tights and a cape and jumping off tall buildings.

Many of these masked these characters in comics are good guys. Putting on their mask, and usually a matching cape, gave them strength and courage and goodness beyond normal men. There is the famous do-gooder who curiously chose to resemble a rodent to do his superhuman tasks—Batman. And, of course, Robin and Bat Girl. When Michael Keaton—the best Batman of all—was interviewed about his role, he said that he was continually amazed by the feeling that came over him when he put on the Batman mask. He put on the padded chest piece and the tights and the boots and the cape and he was still Michael Keaton. But when he put that mask on, he was no longer Michael Keaton, he was a man of invincible strength come to conquer evil.

The Flash, or Wally West, is the Fastest Man Alive. Spiderman has won the hearts of today's kids.

Not all masked marvels are men. Don't forget Wonder Woman. Here again, she wore a mask of glasses. Whisk off the glasses, whirl around a few times, and suddenly you're someone altogether different.

I suppose the bad guys realized that the masked heroes were winning in all the comic strips, so they figured they needed to wear masks as well—which they rarely if ever took off—and they gained super powers as well. The Joker, who painted a mask on; Two-Face, this was Gotham City's district attorney Harvey Kent who turned from crime fighter into one of Batman's greatest adversaries when a criminal hurled a vial of acid at him, disfiguring the left side of his face; Darkseid, who lived on the distant tormented world of Apokolips. Darkseid's name strikes universal fear in the Universe—he is nearly invulnerable; (I know, you're thinking, who was this guy's father and what was his mother thinking about?) and Doomsday, from the planet Krypton, where scientists engineered an indestructible and endlessly adaptable humanoid being. Ravaging the galaxy, he found Earth and on it

another Kryptonian—Superman. I wonder what subliminal message we are giving our kids who watch these cartoons? You can't be just yourself and be a hero—you must wear a false face? Be duplicitous.

And, how could I ever forget Batman's sexiest nemesis—CatWoman? I don't mean to imply that only super heroes and primitive people and actors use masks. Far from it. We all wear masks all the time. Let me show you my favorite mask [sunglasses]. Behind these babies I am invisible. Remember the wrap-around mirrored sunglasses of the 60's and 70's? You just had to be cool the instant you put them on.

Here are a few masks I made for fun. The god of the hunt, goddess of the hearth, god of music and laughter, god of small creatures, and god of the sea and god of the harvest and god of the orchard.

This is one we found in Hong Kong, but it was made in Tibet. It's made from a turtle shell. And a frog mask from the Orient, with a moveable mouth.

Let's talk about the masks we wear today. Sometimes women create a mask of makeup to disguise their age or improve on nature. Wearing makeup can make a woman feel beautiful and so what was a shy mouse can become a flirtatious laughing siren.

Poker players wear a mask created by trying to suppress facial muscle changes so that no expression gives away their lousy hand of cards.

I had a lawyer friend who put on his mask whenever he felt helpless and scared—his mask was a scowling red face accompanied by yelling and screaming. And it worked—people avoided him when he wore that mask.

Our masks may be more subtle than that. We might wear the mask of a patient smiling meek spouse to cover up feelings of entrapment and resentment. Or a flamboyant mask of bright makeup and loud laughter and wide grins to cover up a timid soul.

Wearing these masks help us to endure what we find unendurable in ourselves or to cope with what ills the world hands out. So, don't imagine I'm saying that masks are bad. They are an essential part of how we cope

with what the world dishes out. At times, these masks are our own personal masking tape that holds us together when we feel like falling apart.

But, remember the movie with Jim Carey—The Mask? A poor timid soul who needed to wear his mask to turn him into a man of charisma, of power. But eventually, he found he needed to wear the mask all the time and then he couldn't remove it. The mask was wearing him.

This is the great danger of masks—we find we can't take them off, even when they are no longer needed. Masks don't change who we are—they merely give us the courage to show a hidden side of us to the world. But they can make us feel powerless without them. Superman could rescue the victims of evil, even when he was Clark Kent, but his courage needed that extra boost of a taking off his glasses and throwing on tights and a cape. The Hell's Angel biker on his Harley with his helmet and black glasses feels powerful and manly, and that 50+ pounds of fat around his middle just seems to disappear. But he is just as much a man without his disguise—he just doesn't believe it. So, he walks around in a leather jacket and sunglasses even when he's not on his Harley, so his mask never goes away.

But what happens if Superman, in his tights and cape, finally settles down and marries Lois Lane? Does he have to squint the rest of his life because if he puts the glasses back on she'll recognize him as a fraud? What if he wants to be mild-mannered Clark Kent? Mild-mannered is good, too. Would Lois Lane walk away? Is he stuck with that mask for the rest of his life?

And how about the patient smiling meek spouse in her mask? Can she (or he) ever take off the mask and be assertive and bold? Will her children still like her if she does? Has she worn her mask too long?

We really need to be aware of our masks. What are they saying to our friends? Groups of people can wear collective masks—even a Fellowship of UU souls can wear a collective mask. It can wear a smiling warm face on the mask, but underneath lie faces unresponsive to the community's needs. It may wear a mask of welcome and friendship, but underneath that mask exclude anyone who doesn't fit their mold. It can wear a mask that looks proud and above the masses while underneath hides warm caring people, who don't realize they have a mask. Fellowships, too, need to be aware what their masks say to the community.

The word “person” comes from the Latin word “persona”, which can be translated as mask. People wear all kinds of masks that enable them to play all kinds of dramas. But, even if you wear a thousand different masks, there is a face behind that mask. When you take off the mask, you find the true face of who you are.

We are, each of us, lovely to look at. We are, each of us, a piece of that wonderful kaleidoscope of life. Take off your masks and dance in the flame of existence. Let the arc of our individual beauty and eccentricity embrace our moments of time, and let us add our light to that kaleidoscope.