

Facing Identity: The Magical Lure of Masks

Sermon delivered to Olympic UU Fellowship on Halloween 2021 by Joseph Bednarik

Good morning... and trick or treat!

Here we are, in the high holy week of Halloween.

For those of you who are above the age of ten or eleven, you may have to think back a bit to the childhood of your children, or your own childhood, to recall how *exciting* Halloween actually *is* for the young among us.

Halloween itself is a rich topic for discussion in a religious setting: It's the time in our culture when identity becomes fluid and we all recognize that the membrane between this world and the next becomes very permeable: ghosts become visible; witches fly; mummies rise; and goblins do whatever goblins do.

What is also permeable during the season of Halloween is *identity*. It is a time when we can dress up as someone profoundly different than ourselves and act the role. And sometimes do more than *act*. For example, I was in a store a few weeks ago—*weeks* ago, mind you—where I overheard a mother telling her young son “Honey, Halloween is over a *month* away. You just have to *wait* a little while.”

Then the young boy's voice: “I can't *wait* to be Spiderman!”

Note the power of that statement: To *be* Spiderman. Not dress up as Spiderman; not play Spiderman... to *be* Spiderman! To be recognized by neighbors and strangers *as* Spiderman.

When I was his age, my go-to superhero was Batman. One of my treasured objects growing up was a Batman costume that included a dark blue-and-black over-the-head full-face plastic helmet-mask that *transformed* me into Batman. I used that helmet throughout my childhood, and as I grew older, that mask survived *every* spring cleaning, spring after spring after spring. In my twenties, when I was informed by my parents that I had to get all my stuff out of their house, I came upon that well-used helmet and stared it down. *Hard*. And I'll tell you a little secret: It still fit over my head!

In the privacy of my boyhood bedroom I put that mask on to determine whether it still had transformative power. I looked in the mirror and saw... a young man wearing a toy, rather than a young boy wearing a magical mask and *being* Batman. It was time to move the plastic toy along to a new home.

We all do that at various points in our life: We dress up, face the mirror, stare at a surface, and try to see *into* ourselves. We try and go *below* the surface of whatever mask we're wearing and *feel* what the mask may be calling forth.

I'd like to believe that during this season when identity can be fluid and at play, we are at liberty to try things on and wonder what we *can* become. Or whether *becoming* is even yet possible. Have we, in fact, arrived at who we are, and the only project remaining is to refine that sense of ourselves.

And knowing who we are—and claiming that identity—is a mature and noble and essential psychological state.

A state of being.

And yes, I acknowledge that there are *profound* differences between putting on a mask and play-acting a role for an evening and knowing—*fundamentally*—who you are.

And yet I sense we're moving into fragile territory—*knowing definitively*—
Who. We. Are.

With my Batman mask fresh in mind, I'd like to describe a piece of art I recently discovered: An artist in New York City has created numerous silverpoint portraits of his elderly parents—these portraits are almost photographic in detail, though they are done by hand—and one of the portraits was of these two elderly people holding hands while dressed in costumes for Halloween—the mother dressed as a bunny and the father dressed as...*Batman*. The costumes are saggy and the expressions on their wrinkled and elderly faces—the parts not hidden by a mask—are sober leaning toward sad. The sad droopiness of the whole ensemble is heightened by the bright plastic trick-or-treat pumpkins they're carrying.

As I stared at the portrait—especially with my history of Batman-mask love—I grew more and more creeped out. And realized, *finally*, it was the expression on their human faces: Stern. Staring. Unsmiling. And creating a huge disconnect between the power of the costume and the expression of the costumes hanging on their bodies. It was, as if their identity swamped any power that the costumes and masks may have held.

They were *beyond* playful transformation.

It was incredibly unsettling, and I thought that maybe at some point we simply arrive at who we are and call it good, Halloween be damned.

And yet I kept returning to look at that portrait to stare into the eyes of those elders.

“If only they would smile,” I thought, “they would transform *everything*.” But they can’t smile; they’re frozen in time. They’re art, telling their particular story, over and over again, every time I revisit the portrait.

[pause]

There is a lovely quote from the famed mythologist Joseph Campbell, in his book *Myths to Live By*:

“To become—in Jung’s terms—individuated, to live as a released individual, one has to know how and when to put on and to put off the masks of one’s various life roles. ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do,’ and when at home, do not keep on the mask of the role you play in the Senate chamber. But this, finally, is not easy, since some of the masks cut deep. They include judgment and moral values. They include one’s pride, ambition, and achievement. They include one’s infatuations. It is a common thing to be overly impressed by and attached to masks...”

Campbell continues:

“The work of individuation, however, demands that one should not be compulsively affected in this way. The aim of individuation requires that one should find and then learn to live out of one’s own center.”

You could spend a couple of weeks unpacking that statement, and I invite you to do so.

Spending time with Joseph Campbell is always deeply rewarding. That said: “To live out of one’s own center.”

That is where true identity is found—in the center—and yet we humans love the idea of masking and disguise, of being fluid, of taking exploratory vacations into other identities. And here, I think, is a major point: To journey *from* the center can help us *find* the center. To wear a mask; to act a part; to acknowledge, express, and release aspects of yourself that perhaps your sober, rational, adult identity keeps screwed down tight.

In short, to *play*.

For example, one of my best friends lives in New York City and is a copyright and trademark attorney.

And do you know those naked troll dolls that stand with their arms straight out and have the bright hair standing straight up? That's his account; the company that makes those trolls are his client. So my friend is, quite literally, the Attorney for the Trolls.

Even a Troll needs a good lawyer.

Anyway, my friend loves to play guitar, and he has this special fondness for musicians who are busking in the subway stations. Before the pandemic, he would text me photos and short videos of these musicians.

A few years ago, when I was visiting him, he said—on a whim—“we should go down and play in the subway.”

“Let's go!” I said.

He sensed that I was serious, and he got energized by the possibility. We made up a sign; I borrowed his harmonica; we grabbed folding chairs, sunglasses and hats; and off we went. We found a nook inside a subway station near Lincoln Center and set up shop. The Attorney for the Trolls informed the UU Guest Speaker that we didn't have a license to do this, so we might get hassled by the cops and told to move on. And then he added, gleefully, “I have *always* wanted to do this!” And we started to play.

The first dollar we earned launched us into a new identity: Successful buskers. The *second* dollar we earned simply confirmed that we were, in fact, professional musicians. There was no third dollar...

We asked a passerby to take a snapshot to prove to family and friends that we actually *did* busk in the subways of New York. And here is the beauty part: My friend, the partner in a fancy law firm who worked in a corner office, was *beaming*.

He was in jeans and tee-shirt and sunglasses, and *looked* the part of a busker. And right after we climbed up from the subway—on the busy streets of Manhattan—with my friend carrying his guitar case—he happened to meet another attorney from his large firm.

He rarely sees people from his office on the streets, and the other attorney gave us the once over and asked: “Whateryah doin'?”

“My friend here and I just played the subway.”

“You *what*?”

My friend, as I said, was *beaming*. He had slipped out of one identity and into another. Which speaks to the fact that there are multiple identities within each of us—as Joseph Campbell alluded to earlier—those multiple roles that we play throughout our lives at various times:

- parent, spouse, lover,
- professional, volunteer,
- sibling, citizen, elected official,
- club member, congregant,
- et cetera, et cetera, et cetera...

Each role requires certain behaviors, and each role presents a “face” to the world.

And I got to wondering: What would it look like to dress up like a Unitarian Universalist for Halloween? How would our seven principles translate into costumes and masks?

I gave this problem some pretty deep thought and came up with this: Our Unitarian Universalist for Halloween would wear loose fitting clothes to provide a wide range of movement; embroidered over their heart would be a blood-red question mark; and they would carry on their person—dangling from their neck; stored in pockets; and carried in a satchel, a variety of lenses:

- reading glasses to explore texts;
- a magnifying glass to look at small details of the world;
- binoculars to scan the horizon;
- and a telescope to explore the visible universe.

They would also carry a small sketchbook to capture observations and details in both words and drawings.

Essentially, a superhero who is known throughout the world as “Lens DUUde,” with “Dude” being both gender neutral and containing two Us: Lens DUUde.

Lens DUUde is always looking; always exploring; always searching for insight—insight aided by tools to sharpen, deepen, and broaden the acts of seeing and observing.

In this season of Halloween, it’s fun to note that one of our religion’s pre-eminent Lens DUUdes—someone who literally stood before the lens of a TV camera—was the creator, host, and main writer for the television show *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling.

Yes, Rod Serling was a Unitarian Universalist.

What a *perfect* Halloween-season UU factoid.

Truth be told, when I'm talking with my friends about being a UU, I will *always* lead with Rod Serling and the *Twilight Zone*, with all due respect to Ralph Waldo Emerson. And once you know that the brain and heart that inspired the *Twilight Zone* is a Unitarian, it is easy to see many of the episodes as explorations that could easily take place within a UU congregation.

In the fifth and final season of *The Twilight Zone*, Serling wrote a provocative script called "The Masks," where a wealthy man, who is quite ill and near death, insists that his heirs come visit him at his mansion for a Mardi Gras ritual. A Cajun shaman has fashioned grotesque masks, specially designed for each of the heirs—masks that reflect the true nature of the person: vain, cruel, greedy, self-pitying. They must wear the masks or be cut from the will and their inheritance.

Of *course* they wear the grotesque masks, think its all very stupid and childish, and are incredibly relieved when the old man dies at midnight. And then the heirs—now fabulously wealthy—take off their masks, only to discover that their actual face has taken on the hideous features of the mask.

The quick lesson here is fairly obvious: Make certain your rich uncle never befriends a Cajun shaman.

More sublimely is the idea that we should be aware that what is inside us can sculpt our face.

To close, during the composition of this sermon, I came upon a compelling quote that got me reeling with questions of identity. This from a young Mike Tyson, one of the most feared—and wealthiest—boxers of all time. Quote: "Sometimes I put on a ski mask and dress in old clothes, go out on the streets and beg for quarters."

Consider: The World Heavy Weight Champion, who earned 60 million dollars the year he turned 21, pulling on a ski mask and bumming loose change from strangers.

Young millionaires compelled to beg for quarters proves this world can be an odd and confusing place...That and the fact that this same person later tattooed tiger stripes on his face—a mask he could *not* take off.

And so here we are at the end of this teeming parade of masks:

- Spiderman;
- Batman; buskers;
- boxers; beggars;

- trolls; Cajun shaman;
- Lens DUUde; ski mask
- tiger-striped tattoo'd face;
- Joseph Campbell;
- Rod Serling;
- the droopy-costumed parents of an artist...

What this Halloween parade highlights is the fluidity of identity, the fun and even *necessity* of trying on masks to feel and explore what an identity may be like, with each and all searching for identity; each and all living in a world with a welter of masks; each and all—*hopefully*—willing to play well with others when the goblins and witches and buskers come knocking.

Trick or treat... Amen.

Sources:

Website of the artist Jason Bard Yarmosky: www.jasonyarmosky.com

“Tyson the Timid, Tyson the Terrible,” from *Beyond the Game: Collected Sports Writing of Gary Smith*. Grove Press (2001)

The Myths We Live By, by Joseph Campbell. Penguin (1993).

The Twilight Zone Companion, by Marc Scott Zicree. Bantam Books (1989).