

OUR DAILY MASKS

J.B. Drori

The common response to a greeting, “Hi, how are you?” is “Okay,” or “Fine.”

When it is accompanied by a frown, a false chuckle, or a painful limp I have, on occasion asked, “Really?”

After hesitating a moment, the person inhales deeply and reveals a recent discomfort, a long held distress, or an on-going worry. We talk briefly and we part, each feeling better. The balm was in the sharing.

It seems that we parade around this world wearing masks: each one suitable for the occasion. But why must we always have a mask on? Is it hazardous to reveal our true thoughts and feelings? Don't we always preach that every person is unique and therefore valuable? Then why proceed to conceal it?

In Act II of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare, the sage of England, wrote –

*All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players,
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.*

We accumulate disguises as we graduate from one stage to the next. Along the way we learn new postures, different styles, acquire various skills in how to present ourselves as we are not. Are we that fearful that we feel we must defend ourselves against self-recrimination? Does it then also spawn the psychological mechanisms of denial, projection and introjection? How can then honest discourse ever take place?

In *Hamlet* the Bard of Avon also wrote –

*This above all :
To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false
To any man.*

So which is it – to be honest with oneself and therefore with others or to wear masks?

This is the stuff writers of fiction must deal with.

I think we do both.

From early on in life we acquire skills of interpreting the demeanor of those we encounter. Along the way, not only do we learn how to mimic this behavior but we soon find ways to refine it, thus extending the repertoire.

The integrity of a society depends on this faculty. It enables civil discourse, courteous interactions, and elegant meetings of individuals of varied temperament and dissimilar opinions. Without such safeguards society would soon slip into barbarity.

This ability to adapt to one's environment and avoid standing out is ubiquitous in nature. A master counterfeiter is the chameleon whose life-saving defense is in blending into its surroundings, assuming the color and the appearance of twigs, leaves, or the soil around it.

As is often the case, such a fundamental attribute of nature is bipolar, possessing both positive and negative effects. For humans, the downside of this remarkable adaptive characteristic is the temptation to believe our own mythology. The praise of the audience may indeed turn the actor's mind to believe he is really the hero he was on the stage, or the lover on the screen, or the politician think he's a statesman instead of the hack he truly is, thus forfeiting the one true safeguard of his ego – humility.

An individual who loses sight of his true self undermines the center of his being. He is prone to bend to words of mendacity, fall prey to false praise, or sell his vote for a fur hat, ending up in the shadows of his beliefs, rotating from one gray place to another, signifying nothing.

Just as with the chameleon, resuming its natural color when the threat passes, we must always return to our sacrosanct core-self because that is where we harbor our most cherished values. That is what Socrates' dictum, "Know thyself," means. Compromise that and we surrender our identity.