

“Behind the Mask”

A sermon presented at the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship on April 1, 2012

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Today, as most of you realize, is April 1st, also known as . . . “April Fools Day!” So I’ve invited you to step outside of the box a bit, and to wear a mask today, if you’d like to do so, and I see that . . . some of you . . . not too many . . . have actually taken me up on that! Congratulations! I’m glad that you have been willing to take that risk, to trust the members of this Fellowship enough to wear something unusual today. I don’t have them on yet, but in a few minutes you’ll see that I have brought a few different costume pieces myself.

April 1st – April Fool’s Day! – is certainly as good a day as any to talk about masks and mask-making, isn’t it? And I want to explore the powers of masks, because mask-making is projected as a central theme in Carbondale’s upcoming “11 Days for Compassion.” Those “11 Days” begin exactly one month from today, on May 1st. The Carbondale Public Library and the Carbondale Human Relations Commission and an open coalition of individuals and organizations called “Nonviolent Carbondale” (NVC) are coordinating this series of events intended to increase our community’s awareness of and appreciation for compassion, and its practice of compassion. Coming soon, we’ll have announcements featuring the NVC website www.nonviolentcarbondale.org . On that website, you can find the ever-expanding series of events that relate to our community’s “11 Days for Compassion.”

But what do masks have to do with compassion? And what does mask-making have to do with compassion?

Creating the Mask of Compassion

Mask-making is a form of expression. The mask embodies not only the craft of the mask-maker, but some sense of a design – a vision or an intention. Suppose that the act of making a mask is a

response to a question like “Within your faith tradition, what does the face of compassion look like?” If we were each to create a mask in response to that question, we might surprise ourselves with what we created.

What do you think the mask of compassion might look like?

What qualities should it include? What kinds of elements or features of a mask might express each of those qualities?

For instance, to express the quality of humanity, we might depict human features on the mask. To express a sense of universal concern, the eyes might be wide open. To encompass both joy and sorrow as touching our compassion, we might try to capture a smile turning to an expression of concern. To show hope, the chin might be uplifted. To give a sense of seeing the other as a child, we might use big, open, aware eyes.

Some of what we might hope to show may be more difficult to express in a mask. How do we express a sense of linkage with and connection to others? How do we show a broad, multicultural embrace of others? How do we express the intention to see the other as she or he really is?

What happens if we take that idea to the next level? What happens if we think about a group like the Carbondale Interfaith Council? Recent interfaith council meetings have included representatives of Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, Islamic, Atheist, Baha’i, Pagan, and other faiths. What if the Interfaith Council representatives – or the Interfaith Youth Council participants – were to spend an hour making masks portraying compassion as it is understood and practiced in their respective traditions? What if their creations were displayed at the Carbondale Civic Center, or at the mall, or at the Jackson County Court House? What impact might a display like that have?

I'm sure that we would see some pretty interesting and pretty different masks. What I'm not sure about is whether I would be able to tell one mask of compassion from another. For instance, is there some way in which our Unitarian Universalist understanding of compassion is unique or distinct from compassion as it is understood in other religions? Or might compassion be, as Karen Armstrong¹ puts it, “. . . the test of true spirituality . . . that . . . brings us into relation with the transcendence [called] God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao.”

If we had these representatives of different faiths create masks depicting their traditions' understandings of compassion, and we put them on display without labeling them, would we be able to distinguish them? Would we be able to tell the Catholic mask of compassion from the Wiccan mask, or the Jewish mask from the Presbyterian mask?

It may well be that we couldn't tell them apart. After all, compassion has a common foundation in so many – in practically every! – religious movement. Compassion is an identification of self with the experiences of others. It's partly expressed in the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” As a common denominator, we'd expect to see that identification with others expressed in each of the masks. True, we might find some denominational signs or symbols on some of the masks – a cross on a Protestant Christian mask, a menorah on a Jewish mask, a flaming chalice on a Unitarian Universalist one. But what do you think would happen if we removed those denominational signs? Would the masks still express the face of compassion? I think that they would!

The exercise that I have suggested – getting people from different faiths together to create masks of compassion – could be extended throughout our community. What does the face of compassion look like to an animal control officer, or a City Manager, or a Mayor? What does it look like to a hospice nurse, or a dentist, or a physical therapist? What does it look like to a firefighter, or a police officer, or a parole officer? What does it look like to a student, or a teacher, or a parent, or a grandparent? What does compassion look like to a newspaper reporter,

¹ Karen Armstrong, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. p. 4

or an Amtrak ticket agent, or an auto mechanic? What does it look like to youth at Rainbow Café, or youth at Murdale Baptist Church? What does it look like to our youth here at the Fellowship? What does the face of compassion look like to a member of the Green Party, or to a member of the Tea Party, or to a Republican, or to a Democrat?

What do we hold in common with respect to compassion? Are any of us somehow unique in our understanding of compassion?

I realize that these are all questions rather than answers, but these questions point at one of the ways that mask-making relates to compassion.

Mask-making is a tangible, physical exercise that allows us to explore these questions, and to do so in a non-confrontational way. We might even call it a “compassionate” exploration. This is, I think, one of the answers to the question “What might mask-making have to do with compassion?” Mask-making can express the meaning of compassion to different people, and help us realize how much agreement we share about what compassion means. Or, if I’m wrong about this, it might show us how little we agree about the nature of compassion.

Putting on the Mask of Compassion

What happens when I put a mask on? Can wearing a mask change me? Some masks perform a functional role. A catcher’s mask protects the catcher’s face from the bat and from errant baseballs, whether batted or thrown. Similarly, a surgical mask protects both patients and medical personnel from airborne germs. Even as these functional masks protect us, they do something else, don’t they? Almost any mask, to some degree, conceals the person who wears it. When I put a mask on, I conceal myself. Wouldn’t you agree?

But paradoxically, at the very same time that a mask conceals me, it can also reveal me. These functional masks say something about training, profession, interest, or perhaps signify a specific

role on a team. The masks of compassion reveal their makers' senses of the nature of compassion, and to wear a particular mask of compassion is to endorse that portrayal of compassion.

Masks both conceal us and reveal us, and they can change us as well. For instance, a mask can change our field of vision. As those of you wearing a mask this morning have probably noticed by now, the eyeholes of the mask reduce what we can see, and may actually filter the light or obscure certain colors or blur objects at a certain distance. The mask has its own frame of reference, and it can change our field of vision. It can influence our perception of the world around us. A mask of compassion should, in theory, help us see the world around us with eyes of compassion, but not every mask is a mask of compassion, unfortunately.

For this next example, I'm going to stretch the concept of "mask" a bit, because what I'm about to put is a "hoodie" sweatshirt. When I put this on, some people might lose sight of the fact that I'm an individual, and a Unitarian Universalist minister, and perceive me as a embodiment of their own fear. We don't know how it happened, but we do know that a month ago, Trayvon Martin, a teen-aged boy in Florida, was killed as he walked to his father's house. We know that his killer was another young man, George Zimmerman, who wore his identity as a Neighborhood Watch captain far too aggressively. Somehow, in the interaction they shouldn't have had, George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin. Was the shooting caused in part by George's "Neighborhood Watch" mask? Did that mask restrict his vision to Trayvon's hoodie and the color of his skin?

From any perspective that I can imagine, this is a tragic story. One young man is dead, and another is likely to face long-term incarceration or even the death penalty for his actions. Not every mask covers our eyes or our entire face; neither the hoodie nor the Neighborhood Watch role did, but they can interfere with our vision and our judgment just the same. Masks can transform us, and they can change how others see us. They do so sometimes for better, or sometimes for worse.

So if the masks that we wear, and the roles that we play, can transform us, we may have discovered another connection between masks and compassion. It may sound strange to say that a mask can “teach us” compassion, but remember: when we put on a mask, we put on a persona. The mask encourages some behaviors, making them feel more natural, and discourages others.

Concluding Meditation

In the context of our community’s “11 Days for Compassion,” masks are a vehicle. They are a means to an end. That end, that purpose, is a greater awareness of the compassion present within ourselves and others, and the encouragement to share that compassion more extensively.

How can a mask help us do that? Let’s see if we can use a guided meditation to connect the masks we wear – the images that we hold of ourselves and present to others – with the compassion within us.

Seat yourself comfortably. Relax yourself. If you are comfortable doing so, close your eyes.

Picture your own face. Picture your own face as the face of compassion.

Examine your features. Perhaps you want to soften some aspect of your features: your eyes, or your smile, or the tilt of your chin.

In that picture in your mind, go ahead and change any aspect that you wish to change.

Hold that picture in your heart, and picture the compassion that you feel flowing outwards from you.

Envision that compassion nourishing you, and those around you, and each other person with

whom you interact today.

Feel your compassion flowing outwards, one day at a time. Picture it beginning to flow out of you today, and continuing tomorrow.

Envision yourself intentionally wearing your face as the face of compassion. Over time, picture yourself becoming more and more intentional in sharing compassion.

In your mind's eye, nurture the outward flow of your compassion, and renew it daily with the compassion that others offer to you.

Notice the compassion of others as they touch your life, and nurture their compassion by receiving it gracefully and gratefully.

Day by day, let your compassion flow outwards to others, and receive the compassion that others offer you.

Continue from this day, through Friday, May 11th, the final day of the "11 Days for Compassion."

Perhaps by then, the face of your compassion will have begun to transform you.

Perhaps by then, the many faces of compassion will have begun to transform us all.