

Faces of Me by Verne Becker

I am not really myself. I am someone else.

When others see me, to talk to me, they are talking to a stranger, not me.

I am kept hidden away, safe from discovery or attack, behind the cover of my masks.

Each day, sometimes knowingly sometimes not, as I sift through my closet choosing which clothes to wear, I also search my mask collection, carefully selecting the image I want to project.

Like an actor, I have learned to portray many roles, many faces, and many moods.

I use a different mask for each. Each mask represents something about me, the me I would like to be.

I put on a mask of happiness because I sincerely want to be happy.

I wear my social mask because I want friends to have fun with.

The self-sufficiency mask because I truly want to take charge of my life.

I know these goals are worthwhile and I view the masks as a way to help me reach those goals by putting my best foot forward. I want to be judged on an equal plane.

Something peculiar happens, however, as I continue wearing these masks.

They begin to feel too comfortable, natural and necessary.

I can go for weeks without removing them, as if they were extended-wear contact lenses that only require an occasional cleaning. Is that fair to myself?

As I get used to my masks, I begin to believe they might really be me.

Yet, my true self lies dormant with me, isolated and forgotten.

So rather than bringing me closer to my goals, the masks alienate me from them.

Like a brick wall, the masks confine me. Isolate me. Hide me from other people and before long I realize I'm not what my mask says I am, it's not fair.

When I put on the mask of conformity identifying me with a certain group, I'm really broadcasting my own lack of identity, my own uncertainty of who I am, my own misunderstanding of equality.

Or when I wear the mask of confidence refusing to admit weakness, mistakes or hurt, I'm telegraphing my own insecurity.

I have other masks that I maintain for use at the proper time:

– The mask of superiority to stare down inferior feelings I detect in others and in myself

- The mask of appearance to enhance my attractiveness to others so I'll forget how ugly I think I am.
- The clown or the rowdy masks to gain the attention I can't obtain otherwise
- The "totally together" mask to hide all my rough edges
- The mask of love to disguise an overly selfish relationship
- Even the mask of spirituality to silence all questions about my faith.

What should I do with all these masks?

I realize they have insulated me not only from other people but also from myself.

If indeed I want to be myself rather than someone else.

I must remove the masks, peel them off accepting the way I am now and honestly admitting I'm still working on my problems.

Ultimately, I won't need masks; fair, equal or not. Instead, I'll show others the living person behind them:

- Not a stranger, but
- A special, unique, authentic human being
- Someone who's not perfect, but who wants to grow.

Only when I open myself to other people

Will I see myself clearly.

And only when I take off the masks

Will I be truly free.