

The word person comes from the Ancient Greek and Latin words meaning mask. To be a person is to wear the different masks of our humanity.

And this is the one time of year that those masks appear in a more literal sense. Halloween, or All Hallow's Eve, invites us to perhaps step into our discomfort in a way that is different from the rest of the year.

I love Halloween. For a long time this was my absolute favorite holiday. In case the costume didn't give it away. With children in my life the winter holiday season with Christmas and Channukah and Yule probably tops the list currently but there is something really special about this time of year. The brilliant red and gold of autumn, the sound of the wind through baring branches of the trees, the increasing darkness, the thinning of the veil.

Now comes the time when we feel free to share parts of ourselves that we wouldn't otherwise show. Maybe it's the side of you that feels drawn to the macabre, that feels a fascination with that final unknown. Or maybe it's embracing your inner geek and dressing up like your favorite superhero or inhabiting, for just a little while, the persona of a powerful mystical being. Or trying on the role of a profession that you spent your childhood yearning to become but life took you a different path.

These are all just facets of ourselves. Faces we show to different people in different places and spaces in our lives.

Who are you here, when you come into this space? Who are you at home, at work? What identities do you embrace in some situations and not in others? And what would it look like to exist fully in all of those personas?

I came across a post this month of a sexy goldfish costume. That's right, we have moved beyond sexy nurse or sexy firefighter, or even sexy cat or butterfly, to sexy goldfish. And my first reaction was to laugh and roll my eyes. But then I paused and wondered why these "sexy" costumes are so often met with ridicule and derision? They obviously must sell pretty well if there is a sexy goldfish costume.

And aren't we all sexual beings from our birth until we die? That's why we call the sexual education curriculum created by the Unitarian Universalist Association, Our Whole Lives.

And yet here was this inherent part of us that has somehow turned into a costume. A mask to put on. A part of ourselves that we can only show when hidden away behind the secrecy of closed doors. Or once a year when society deems it is the appropriate time to play dress up. And even then there is an undeniable sense from much of

society of looking down at those individuals who choose to be brave and bare this part of themselves, sometimes literally, for the world to see.

I was feeling a little curious as I considered these immediate reactions that I had and the recognized bias within them so I decided to do a search for “sexy women’s costumes” and then compare it to “sexy mens costumes.”

I was unsurprised to find that for sexy mens costumes there were two pages of possibilities compared to the seven pages for women.

The women's costumes included outfits with names like playboy bunny, sexy french maid, naughty nurse, and locked up prisoner.

Mens included, honestly a lot of costumes that were not overtly sexy in my opinion, outfits labeled sexy firefighter, police officer, Roman gladiator, King of Egypt. The King of Egypt costume stands out as an example of the continued cultural appropriation that plagues this holiday. And beyond that, the differences between these two categories was stark and revealing.

These pages showed, again, these damaging societal messages that to inhabit a male body is to take on the personas of figures of power. Kings, warriors, authority figures. To inhabit a female body is to play the role of servant, caregiver, prisoner, prey. Even in the courageous act of boldly declaring the power of our sexuality, still the inherent power differential of the gender roles continues to be reinforced.

And it is no wonder that the youth of today are embracing different ways of looking at gender. Different ways of being. I imagine sometimes what that might have felt like had my generation known it was an option to choose a path beyond the binary.

It takes a certain level of trust to put on our less used guises. We are comfortable with certain roles. Partner, parent, teacher, artist, employee or employer. These are the parts of ourselves that we are taught to be proud of, to share widely. Roles that show the world that we are worthy. Because beneath our robes of being what we think we should be there is so much more to us.

Why does this holiday resonate so much with some of us and not with others? I hear I love Halloween just as often I hear I hate Halloween. And as one of those individuals who loves Halloween I started to consider why that was. And in doing so I found these words by Steve Garnaas Holmes that encapsulate what Halloween is to me.

He writes:

All Hallowed Eve:

before All Saints Day comes,  
before we recognize the holy among us,  
in the dark before I myself am taken up in glory,  
I have permission to dress up in my deepest fear,  
my greatest hope, my truest self.  
I am a dragon, a dead man, a princess.  
But of course beneath the costume I am actually  
a king, a zombie, a magician,  
an alien, a prostitute,  
a child.

This one night, this Hallowed Evening,  
we all are evened out:  
everybody's a true soul wrapped up in illusions,  
disguised in fears and fantasies—  
we're all beauty queens and monsters—  
and for once everybody knows it  
and we're OK with that,  
because we know within we're humans all alike.

This is so we know that on all other days  
all who come to us and we as well  
can be ourselves  
and be accepted at stranger's doors  
and be given delights.

How would life be different if we all felt that we had permission to be our true selves?  
To dress up as our deepest fears? To accept and honor the truth that we are all  
humans alike? And to both accept and be accepted in all spaces, at strangers' doors,  
and to be offered hospitality, to be given good things, even when the face we are  
showing is monstrous?

Because we are all beauty queens and monsters. This is the time when we are all  
evened out. This is the freedom and joy that Halloween brings.

And as the darkness grows longer and the periods of sunlight lessen those shadows  
wrap around us like a cloak of courage. We expose glimpses of ourselves in the  
flickering light of a jack o lantern and the bright circles of a porch light, inviting us in with  
the promise of welcome and sweet treats.

And it all comes back to trust. Can we trust enough to show both our hopes and our fears? Can we make this community a place where every part of ourselves is welcomed with open arms?

Brene Brown talks a lot about trust and vulnerability. Two heads to the same coin in many ways. And she does make a distinction that vulnerability and trust are not oversharing. Baring your deepest secrets to someone that you have not built trust with isn't creating connection, it's actually damaging it. Before we can be truly honest with one another we need there to be trust.

Trust is the first step to building faith. The first step to creating beloved community. And there has been a lot of trust lost in the past two and a half years. We are all learning again, together, how to trust one another with our health, with our safety, with our hearts. And showing our whole selves can feel scary when we don't have that foundation of trust there to gently hold us, to encourage us to be brave.

How do we get to a place where these masks that we wear can feel easily interchangeable? How do we create the assurance that whichever aspect of yourself you are showing we will love and accept you? Even if it's the one that breaks our hearts to see it?

And once we make it that far, once we can find courage to share all of the facets and identities of our true selves, then can we slowly let the masks slip down? Can we open ourselves up to the divine connection that exists between us all? To the reality of our shared humanity, brilliant and broken at the same time?

Because the truth is that every part of me is also a part of you. And every costume that I put on reflects, not just my soul, but your soul as well. We want you to come, come, whoever you are.

As the veil thins and the year dies let the space between us wane as well. Ebbing and fading to transparency, allowing us to see one another clearly, and be seen.

Steve Garnas Holmes also calls "Halloween a day when we get it right. He says Strangers come to us, beautiful, scary, odd, ugly, and we accept them all without question, compliment them, treat them kindly, and give them good things. Why don't we live like that?"

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