

Persona: The Mask
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Upbeat
v.1, n.2, 1968

People wonder: “Who am I? What am I? How did I come to be? What is the meaning of my life?” No one wonders this more intensely than teen-agers. They look at their face in a mirror and wonder, “What does this face mean?” Can it tell me about the me that I experience beneath my face? What does it tell others about me?” They look at the faces of others. They desire to know, are investigative, aware of shades of difference between beauty and ugliness, sham and sincerity, wholeness and caricature. They tend to be impatient with the bad they see around them.

They differ from the children which they were a few years ago. Children also are eager to learn and soak up data like a sponge; but they are simpler than teens, more forgiving of sham, caricature, transgression, tyranny, and other bad things. They are closer to the Gospel: “If ye love only them which love you, what than have ye? For sinners also do even the same.”

Search, insistence on knowing, is a necessary quality if we are to get somewhere. But emphasized too much, any useful quality can make the whole person become lopsided. Too much insistence is one sure way of not getting there. Think of the fable of the sun and the wind. Which one was able to make the man take off his coat? Think of the saying of the Lord Jesus: “Unless ye turn and become as little children, ye cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Mask and Person Behind the Mask

I want to use the idea of “mask” and “person behind the mask” to help clarify the question of thirst to know, of insistence on investigation, of demand for secrets to be unlocked.

The relation between mask and person is the relation between surface and depth. It also involves the matter of revelation to others vs. concealment from others. A little story will help me proceed:

Peter Abrahams, a black African, has just had a meeting with Richard Wright, the American Negro author: Wright had come to Africa seeking to find out “Who am I? What am I?” The scene is Accra, capital of the Gold Coast, British possession which soon will become Ghana. Wright has just left, an Abrahams is buying a soda from a “mammy trader” or street vendor:

I put down the empty and began to move away.

“You African?” she asked in her hard, cold masculine voice. I stopped, turned, and looked at her face. It was as deadly cold and impersonal as before: not a flicker of feeling in her eyes. Like an African mask, I thought. But unlike Wright, I did not try to

penetrate it; I knew how useless it was to try. She would show feeling if and when she decided, not before.

“Yes,” I said and added, “from the South. Far; far south.” She paused for so long that I began to move again.

“You like here?” Nationalism had obviously touched her. I turned to her.

“No,” I said.

“Why you don’t like.”

I showed her my teeth, African-wise, which is neither smile nor grimace but a blending of the two.

“You like Africa?” I asked.

Now it was her turn to show me her teeth. There was a flicker of feeling in her eyes; when they went dead again. She nodded. I had established my claim. Only outsiders—white people or the Richard Wrights—liked or disliked Africa.

The foregoing concerns itself was revelation or concealment between two humans. What about revelation or concealment between man and God? An American theological student focuses the question well:

“...God does not reveal himself to just anyone, and neither do you...”

It can happen that you love someone, and so reveal yourself to that person, yet that person fails to see. This can happen when God reveals, too, for God loves. The saints repeatedly tell how man cannot find God, but what man can do is prepare himself to see when God reveals. When and how this revelation may happen, no man can foretell. It is freely given, freely accepted. It is nothing like seizing or bargaining or “mechanicalness” or formulas. The Bible is a record of such revelations—God to person, person to person. It is not a treatise of physics or of the natural sciences.

Revelation is Person-to-Person, Reason is Within Oneself

Knowing another is a step toward knowing ourselves. “I know thee, and I know me,” says a beautiful poem of young love.

Many, not following the guidance of the saints, think instead to “investigate” God. They, like Wright in the story above, think that you can provoke the unveiling of a person—in this instance, of God. Because they cannot lift the veil, they are baffled and say, “There is no God,” or “Man can’t know such things,” or even, “God is dead.”

Trusting only sense-data, and failing to enter the dimension of revelation, a self is sealed up in a cocoon. In there, it reasons, requires proof, and goes its solitary way,

seeking, sensing, detecting, (“Hey Mac, get a scintillator—sixty times more sensitive than a Geiger counter!”)

The word proof has a specialized meaning for our “cocooned” ego today. It means that I won’t accept something until it is “demonstrated objectively “ to me with “data.” I never expected to determine the speed of light myself, but I trust the witness of him who apparently has determined it. At least I will examine his data. We trust witnesses of material occurrences which occur person to person: “I in the, and thou in me.” There are times when we (and God) reveal, yet the other person does not see. This is an important limitation to basing everything on “objective data.” Nevertheless, just such a limitation flourishes in our schools, our sciences, our civilization. A co-ed has criticized the mania for “data’ better than I can:

“They (she means data-happy reasoners) are like people who smoke and can’t smell odors that are really there. And so they either ignore the existence of the odor or else reason about what they must smell like.”

There is also a story about a girl who quit a fellow. He would feel her pulse to see if she was responding to him. For him, that was data.

“My man will not be like most of the men around here. He will be my head, my king, the leader of my children. We will be one, flourishing, heart to heart. The heart does not shun data, but gets better data. What most people call data is stuff you can show to someone else even to a creep—‘objective’ data, they say. Reason is a glory, but reasonism is a disease...”

Living Stones—precious beyond price

The Lord Jesus said, “The Kingdom of heaven is within you.” Does this contradict what we have said about revelation being beyond the confines of our own ego, about it being in fellowship and oneness with other egos? The Lord said, in many ways, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another.” The Kingdom of God within us does not mean being parceled up into individual cocoons but being built of “living stones,” which we are—precious beyond price in the Lord’s sight. When we are one of these living stones, then we know to whom we belong and why. Our “mask” is no longer a protective shield but a channel of communication to loved recipients. These recipients are freed, satisfied, by being among us. We don’t “find” happiness by pursuing it. Happiness “finds” us when we turn from insisting on it and following the humble way of the saintly.