

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #8:  
Masks  
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

JUNE 26, 2020 — In this dispatch, I want to write about masks — not the masks we are asked to wear now for the protection of others and ourselves. No, the masks I want to explore in this dispatch are those we wore long before COVID-19 became part of our lexicon. Those include the masks we know we are wearing and those we are not even conscious of donning.

But first a story.

After a successful battle against breast cancer, my friend Cara almost hoped for a second bout with the disease so she could fight *right*. It's true. She doesn't feel like she led the good fight as those who are ill are often called to do. For her, fighting cancer was hard. She was often sick, and not particularly pleasant to be around.

"I wasn't being noble enough," she says. "I was in pain, and I could not provide the show." When she speaks of the *show*, she is speaking of the mask that she felt she was expected to wear. That is the mask that inspires in the face of all odds. It is the mask that we who are not in the fight of our lives hold up as an example of what someone fighting cancer needs to do.

For Cara, the story was different. When faced with something like cancer, "we get through as we get through" — at least, she did, even when the approach may not merit a gold star in behavior. Never mind. Cara won the war.

Still, I find it sad to think that this dear woman, a close friend, could muse even for a nanosecond for a re-run of cancer because she didn't get it right the first time around.

In his essay, "A Poet's Advice to Students," E. E. Cummings writes: "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."<sup>1</sup>

Author Jen Hatmaker in *Fierce, Free, Fire: The Guide to Being Glorious You* takes this further as she explores how becoming who we are is the only way to live fully.

"Who you are matters," she writes. "Your soul is cause for great delight. There is freedom in this discovery and absolute liberation in its ownership. *When who you are on the inside matches the outside, you are ready for everything else.*"<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

Hatmaker goes on to write: "We must show up truthfully, because it is in the diversity of our souls this world receives all it needs."<sup>3</sup>

Think of that: it is through the "diversity of our souls" that the world gets what it needs. That diversity includes those unique characteristics that make us who we are. That means it also

includes our woundedness, our brokenness, including the limitations put upon us by illness or age.

“Central to the agenda of the second half of life is the recovery of permission to really own your own life: to truly feel what you feel, desire what you desire, and to pursue whatever your soul wants you to pursue. For most people, that permission is still very conditional and very remote, and you can’t get it from someone else. It takes a realization: I have to seize my life because it is short — and I’m here to place my energies where my values really are,” says James Hollis, the Jungian psychoanalyst and author whose latest book is *Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we need to bring forth ourselves behind the masks. That is the self, the soul, “... wanting to enter the world through [us,] what is seeking expression through [us.]”<sup>5</sup>

But how are we to allow this soul to come through, to match our outside with our inside, as Hatmaker calls us to do, when pieces within either side don’t mesh into a consistent whole? Or, when one side — or both — call for a mask?

Looking at my own life, I see times when I am gracious and understanding in my actions with others. Is that truly who I am, or who I was socialized to be? Or, and I know this is cynical, am I that way to get something in return? Then I look at those times when I am curt or thoughtlessly blunt. Is that me? Or, is that simply some inconsiderate behavior rooted in old wounds that needs to be cleared out like the weeds in my flower beds, so the true loving side of me can flourish?

And what about those times, such as when I was in the grocery store the other day, when I can see that my behavior was a bit judgmental. I questioned a clerk about the usefulness of a mask that was so thin it only covered the mouth of another clerk. What I wanted to think was educational was actually self-righteous. Is that who I really am, self-righteous and judgmental? Yep. At times, I am. But does that mean that part of me that acts kind, sensitive and loving is not true? Nah. That side is also true. I am both. And what am I do with that? These two sides of me that don’t quite fit together.

Perhaps this is not quite the mess I think. And here is where an examination of the masks we wear can be helpful.

Yes, it is hard for others to see us for who we are, for ourselves to even know, if we are constantly wearing a mask. That doesn’t mean masks are always problematic. No. Sometimes we must wear masks for protection. We all know there are times when expressing our true feelings may not be safe or wise. Then there are those times we simply wear them to grease societal gears. That is when we adopt certain socially acceptable behaviors, for example, to smile when being introduced to a friend of a friend or a family member of a colleague. It simply is the gracious thing to do, so we put on the mask of the social self. But if we are ever to be close to others, we need to drop that persona to reveal our private selves. Otherwise others can never truly love us because they can never truly know us.

Perhaps the masks that are most troublesome are those that we tell other people they must wear, taking the choice out of their hands. That is how someone winds up feeling like my friend, Cara, who thinks she did not fight cancer right.

As for the masks that we ourselves choose to wear, the question we need to ask: are they authentic? Are they faithful to who we know ourselves to be? Are they true to the moment? Perhaps then any mask we may wear will be the right one and our outsides will match our insides. Any masks that do otherwise we can leave behind.

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Cummings, "A Poet's Advice to Students," *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1965), 363.

<sup>2</sup> Jen Hatmaker, *Fierce Free Fire: The Guide to Being Glorious You* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Hatmaker, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Kiesling, "Personal Accountability in Chaos: An Interview with James Hollis, PhD," *Spirituality & Health*. July/August 2020, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Kiesling, 50.