

When You Look Scary

It happened five days ago. It was shocking, mind-boggling, and completely unexpected. It shook my little world.

I woke up in the morning as always and rolled out of bed. Yawning, I noticed my face felt oddly stiff ... like I was wearing a mask.

I reached up and touched my cheek. What in the world? I *was* wearing a mask. Or at least it felt like one. My skin felt completely foreign to my touch—grainy and dry and thick as all get-out. I could feel my fingertips probing my face but it didn't feel right at all, like on the inside it was still me but on the outside I was petting a python who'd just had lunch. Rushing to the bathroom mirror, I stood there staring but not comprehending. Is that really me staring back? GASP!

My entire face was grotesquely swollen; huge fluid-filled bags beneath my skin pulled my eyelids downward and pushed my cheeks upward so that my eyes were reduced to slits. My cheeks had puffed up right into my line of vision so that I had to tilt my chin down to see over them. I looked like the human version of a Shar-pei.

My spouse nearly dropped his teeth when saw me. "Have you been robbing beehives again?" he asked, trying to make sense of the mess that was my face. The only possible explanation I could come up with was a new moisturizer I'd tried the day before. It must be some sort of contact dermatitis, an allergic reaction, I reasoned. So how long until it goes away?

Unfortunately, the answer was elusive. In the following days, I remained fully inflated, enduring the gawks and stares of neighbors, loved ones and co-workers with as much grace and humor as I could muster. But then it was Sunday, and I feared that the 2- and 3-year-olds at church for whom I'm the Bible Story Lady would get one look at my face and run screaming out

the door.

So that morning I introduced myself as Miss Piggy instead of Miss Debbie and assured them it was still me under all that extra face. That today there was just more of me to love. And sure enough, love me they did. The little darlings accepted me completely, rolls, furrows and all.

It got me to thinking. How do people with permanent physical disabilities continually cope on an infinite day-after-day-after-day basis?

Buell Smith came immediately to mind. When I was a little girl, Buell was a friend of my grandparents and was inflicted with some sort of purple-ish golf-ball sized tumor that hung in a skin sack over the right corner of his top lip. I vividly recall staring mesmerized at poor Buell as he pushed the thing out of the way to fork Granny's lemon cake into his mouth. I stared, that is, until I felt *The Look* from Mama. You know—that death ray that told you in no uncertain terms that you were being inexcusably RUDE and if you don't stop it right now, you likely won't be able to sit down for a week.

But the thing I remember most about Buell was his deep, melodic laugh. And he laughed all the time. Even as a kid, I wondered how someone with a giant meatball hanging on his face could be so jolly. Buell was entirely likable, fun and seemed perfectly happy within his own skin. Even the extra parts. I once offered to help him out and cut that wiggly thing off with my blunt-nosed craft scissors, but he just laughed his hearty laugh and said he wished it was that easy. Along came *The Look* from Mama again so I dropped that line of conversation pretty fast.

And then there's my friend Rob. Rob is the nicest, funniest, most outgoing man you could ever meet. He has highly visible leadership positions in his city government and church, tons of friends and the most beautiful model-esque wife you can

imagine. And Rob has Turret's Syndrome.

I recall being distracted by Rob's constant facial tic and head twitch when I first met him 30 years ago, but soon it disappeared. To me, anyway. When I began to know and love him, I truly didn't notice it anymore. In fact, someone recently asked me if he still had the facial tic and I had to answer that I honestly didn't know.

The answer, it turns out, is yes, the tic is still there, but because Rob doesn't pay it heed or allow it to hinder him in any way, no one else does either.

So in the glacial-paced days since my facial fiasco, I've pondered a lot about everyday heroes like Buell and Rob and how they live full, rich, wonderful lives despite physical obstacles. How they choose to be filled to the brim with Papa God's unconditional love and intentionally let it overflow to those around them.

Regardless.

They inspire me—and you too, I hope, if you ever wake up with a cauliflower's face—to live out loud 1 Thessalonians 3:12: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all men, even as we do for you.”

Won't you share with me: What everyday hero in your little world splashes Papa's love onto you?

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