

Do You Wear a Mask at Church?

I'm usually not a huge fan of the Open Letter, though I've written one or two before, I find myself wondering why must these letters always be public? Say what you need to say in private and then move along on your merry way. Why the need for an audience?

But ever the hypocrite (aren't we all just a little, if not very well versed in hypocrisy) here I pen/type yet another open letter. The true recipient and any identifying characteristics shall remain anonymous, but the letter itself public, for my own sake, for the sake of accountability. As a not so subtle reminder to me, of self-responsibility, the responsibility of one who so often harps on about organic community and true vulnerability, then not-so-subtly veers off course.

Hey,

I've seen you around at church. Unfortunately until the other day we hadn't had a chance to meet, at least not properly, but I've been watching you. Yep, I know that sounds creepy. But it's not in that creepy stalker way, but with curiosity. I've been reading you, trying to glean images of your story and put them together.

I could be totally wrong, but I think I've managed to view some of the collage that is you...

I can see you've walked a hard road.

I can see your life hasn't been easy.

I can see that you've battled a rage that burns inside you. You've courageously had to learn what to do with that rage so it no longer hurts you, or others.

I can see you've had to fight hard for mental health.

I can see that peace is a feeling that at first felt strange to you. It's becoming more comfortable, but this has taken time.

So I was surprised the other morning, when I finally did have the opportunity to meet you and hear you speak in depth, to find myself sad. During our encounter, I saw very little of the collage that I'd pieced together. And again, I freely and humbly admit that could be because I'm wrong. You may very well be thinking I'm nuts (it wouldn't be too much of a stretch), but still, this sadness lingers. It lingers, I believe, because I feel as though I didn't truly see the real you. And for this I believe it is I who needs to apologize, sincerely.

You have every right to conceal who you are. We all do it to various degrees. There's genuine wisdom in this. Trust is earned, not just freely given, especially to some woman (who at the very least is currently coming across as a little strange!) you don't know from a bar of soap—though hopefully I smell as sweet! (**winks goofily*)

Don't get me wrong, I don't assume that on our first 'official' meeting I would have the privilege of your trust, but I could tell you desperately wanted to give it, not just to me but to others also.

You see, I read you some more once you spoke.

I heard you editing as you carefully constructed sentences that you knew would be well received by our cozy tribe.

I heard you embellish an experience because you thought it was what we wanted to hear.

I heard you share vulnerably about a part of your journey, and I was excited! But the excitement was only momentary; it dissipated as you framed your story. You altered it, depicting it as a lifetime ago, when I could tell it was only yesterday.

I heard you swallow the f-bomb that was hovering on your tongue, and I hoped that you'd held it back only for yourself,

or out of a genuine courtesy or respect for others, not because you felt you'd be rejected by us if it escaped your lips.

Transference? Perhaps.

As I said, I could be wrong...

But here's the thing; so often when we're able to easily read others, it's simply because we're fluent in the non-linguistic behavior of ourselves.

I saw myself in you.

My struggles were/are different, but the editing is the same, the reasons behind it are the same.

They're the same reasons that I went to ridiculous lengths, constructing an elaborate hair covering-clothes changing-teeth cleaning-gum chewing-perfume spraying ritual to hide the fact that although I was a '*super-spiro churchie*,' I smoked for many years.

They're the same reasons that I would hold my breath when I introduced my family to a new person, hoping, praying that they wouldn't be able to read me, my past, my drug history, the fact that my husband wasn't my son's biological dad.

They're the same reasons that six years ago I begged my husband to buy me diamond wedding rings we couldn't afford.

I was in a community of amazing women, women who I admired, women I looked up to. These women didn't swear, didn't smoke. They didn't have shady pasts, at least none they spoke of. These women kept immaculate houses. They cooked amazing meals. They carried themselves with grace and dignity, and I wanted to be just like them!

They adorned themselves with beautiful jewels, jewels that to me reflected that they were loved and appreciated by their spouse.

I wanted them to know my husband loved and appreciated me

also. It didn't matter to me when I was in that mindset that he already showed it in a myriad of non-material ways, in ways that to him were far more genuine and authentic than a glittering ring. I wanted him to prove he was willing to show it symbolically, to 'spoil' his wife. I wanted for him to finally gift me with the rings we couldn't afford back at the start of our adventure together. Never mind that he was under duress, and never mind that we still couldn't afford them. The heart ego, wants what the heart ego wants!

So off we marched (I marched, he reluctantly followed) to a jeweller who was offering a '12 month no deposit payment plan' for a genuine diamond ring. Because, plans like this are always a great idea, and never end in disaster for people already under huge financial strain! (*rolls eyes at own selfish stupidity).

And these are only the tip of the iceberg. This masquerade went on and on, until finally my feet were sore from the dance, and I buckled under the weight of the mask.

So I get it. They manifest differently these silly, true-self-concealment behaviors, but the desired outcome is the same.

You wanted approval. You were in the company of people you saw as 'holy' and 'together'. I say this not with any amount of piousness, but as part of my apology. Truly. Because I'm not together! None of us in that room were!

I'm so far from holy in the sense that I know you were thinking: I'm so flawed. I'm so messed up. I do not have my life perfectly together. Today I cried because my life felt so very out of control.

I felt so very out of control.

I think I've just stopped talking about it openly. Of late I've become comfortable concealing. It wasn't a cognitive choice. It's just become easier that way.

Easier to appear strong.
Composed.
Together.
Whole.

Sometimes it's easier to walk alone.

Community is hard work.

Yet I'm all about community ... For you, that is.

I'm all about bearing one another's burdens, until of course it's *my* burdens, in that case I'm A-OK carrying them all by myself, thank you very much! No help needed here, I'm moving along. My baggage is more fragile than yours. Labelled: *'Handle With Care'* you see, and who would be more careful than me?

But hey, I'll happily assist you with your baggage, here let me take that for you!

That's not very fair, huh?

That kind of concealment doesn't allow for true relationship. It doesn't allow others to feel comfortable in sharing their stuff, the gunk that they're scared other's will see.

So, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry I haven't had the courage of late to be real.

I'm sorry that I've become comfortable with being seen as 'having it all together'.

I'm sorry that I gave off the impression that you couldn't handle my baggage and wouldn't want to.

I'm sorry that I edited my true heart emissions, and in doing so helped to create an environment that made you feel as though you too had to edit.

I'm sorry for not dropping the s-bomb that was lingering on my lips, simply because I was afraid others may be disappointed in me.

I'm sorry that I didn't remember what it was like to be a newbie on the 'church scene'. I'm sorry that it feels like a 'church scene', as if we must change sets between acts! I'm

sorry that I've let church lingo, or 'christianese' seep into my vocabulary. This is not who I am, and it's not who I want to become.

I love and value diversity.

I love that we all have a story and our journey to this point has taken different paths.

I love that the people whom Jesus loves are quirky. None of us was ever created to be mere carbon copies of what we think righteousness looks like! I want to remember this truth in every waking second.

I want to hear your story if you'll trust me enough to tell it.

I want share your journey, if you'll trust me enough to join you on it.

And, I want to share mine.

Here I extend my hand, the hand I ridiculously adorned in wedding rings that I no longer even like, rings that couldn't reflect my personality any differently if they tried, and I offer this fumbling, foolish hand to you in genuine friendship.

This friendship, if you choose to accept it, will be based on authenticity, vulnerability and respect for all that makes us unique.

I'll lead the way, and you share only if and when you're ready. Take your time.

I promise to remember my wanna-be days and the yucky feelings that were induced when I chose to be a fraud to myself. Let's see if we can try again. Next time we meet up, I'll leave my mask at the door, my editing tools too. I'll let you see the real me, warts, stupid-diamond decisions and all.

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