



Un-masking Our Inner Selves

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If you had visited any country in Asia before 2020, you would have seen people wearing masks--or not. For decades, it's been a personal choice, not based on class or politics or as a subversive message encoded with attitude.

Compare that with Rugged American Individualism, where a piece of fabric affixed to the lower half of one's face--or not--can signify how we interpret our Constitution. The magazine "Psychology Today" calls masks "visible markers of a political divide." It further befuddles when volunteers sewing masks for healthcare workers, family, and friends are applauded, but then we see our leaders refusing to wear a mask--even while touring a mask-manufacturing plant, or visiting infected patients in a hospital clinic. At a local grocery store this week, in the hot spot of West Virginia where masks are recommended but not required, less than half of the shoppers and a few employees wore masks.

We may be resistant to mask-wearing, but that's not what many are rebelling against. It seems that some Americans refuse to let anyone, especially other Americans, tell them what to do, even if it's for their own good or for the good of their country. And rather than setting an example of what a responsible choice looks like, those who are wearing masks are made to feel as if they are over-reacting or neurotic.

Maybe some of the un-masked are just claustrophobic like I am; perhaps they believe themselves too good-looking to cover half their face. But some who go bare-faced may be "Masking," a term from Developmental Psychology, meaning to conceal one's emotions by portraying an opposite emotion. That much I remember from my obsolete BA in Psychology. Masking can hide fear by portraying defiance, but---in this literal case---"unmasking" in the face of an air-borne Pandemic rejects one of the only protections against this threat that we have.

Leave it to another psychologist to give this behavior a name. In 1966, the phrase Psychological Reactance was created by Dr. Jack Brehm, who defined it as "an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat to or loss of their free behaviors... a motivator to restore one's freedom." Some would compare it to the "terrible twos," or acting like James Dean in the movie, "Rebel Without a Cause." But to blame self-destructive immaturity for the resistance to authority will surely get us into trouble when it's our turn to be outraged at what we believe is government over-reach. It can work both ways: The anti-mask protester holding the sign that said, "MY body---my choice" would fit right in at a Pro-Choice demonstration supporting Roe vs. Wade.

Admittedly, it's been confusing from the start; even the CDC did an "about-face" on the benefit of face masks. Plus, there is a proper technique to wearing them that is a hassle. Then there's the hypothesis, as "Business Insider" and "Forbes" reported early on, that wearing a mask doesn't actually protect you from getting the disease; it only protects others from YOU in case you've got it. Given that fact, the slogan on the same anti-masking protester's sign would be

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more accurate if it said, “YOUR body---My choice.” And that would fit right in at a Pro-Life demonstration against Roe vs. Wade.

One thing we do know is that masks are not a fail-safe barrier by themselves. But the other interventions, mandatory stay-at-home orders or locking down commerce, seem even more a “forfeiture of freedom.” And the State Supreme Court of Wisconsin agreed, although those restrictions were clearly intended to protect the entire public.

Even so, the state of Ohio caved to the anti-maskers, as did Stillwater, Oklahoma. We saw a Park Ranger pushed into a lagoon after announcing social distancing rules to visitors, and a cart-pushing grocery shopper wearing a KKK hood. A woman wrote the word “tyranny” across her mask. A shopper shot and killed a store’s security guard who was trying to enforce the store’s masking policy. We watched bare-faced people protesting the masking requirements as an infringement of their civil liberty, shouting their message a mere three inches away from someone else’s face. The weapons they carried while delivering that message can’t be retrofitted with microscopic ammo that could disarm a virus; they are only designed to kill an entire person.

It left me to wonder if any mask is enough protection from people like these.

Once our government spends the public’s money to figure out that a mask can keep us safer from something that could likely kill us, it’s not up to an individual to defy those temporary restrictions based on personal alternative facts and opinions--- unless, they can do it within the privacy of their own homes and bodies. So, like Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey said, “you gotta go out and find something to put on your face.”

I’ll wear the mask, thanks. No big deal.

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