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Behind The Mask

By Melissa Johnson

Never for the sake of peace and quiet deny your own experience or conviction. ~Dag Hammarskjold

In the 4th grade, I went to school dressed as a cardinal-not the second-in-command of the Roman Catholic Church kind, but the North American Finch variety (cardinalis cardinalis); the state bird of Virginia. My mother helped me with the costume, which consisted of an oversized red sweatshirt, brown tights and a felt hood bearing the cardinal's crowned peak. With nose painted black and fake bird feet strapped to my shoes, I boarded the bus with enthusiasm and pride. I returned that afternoon with trophy in hand-first place prize for "Best Virginia Day Costume."

Later, in the 5th grade, I became a Dogwood tree. For this, my mother and I gathered flowering branches from the large Dogwood in our front yard, which I strapped proudly to my arms, legs and head, representing our State's most cherished flower. Again, I took the prize.

By the time I reached the 6th grade, I was slightly conscientious about my look. To accommodate my more sophisticated tastes, I left behind my "childish" wildlife representations and dressed as the Governor's wife-complete with my grandmother's fox stole, pillbox hat and heavily tailored, stunning silk suit; a mini-Jackie O in the making. I don't recall if I took the prize that year, but something tells me that I probably did.

Yet it wasn't always about the prize for me. You bet I loved a good trophy-still do. But mostly, I was driven by the freedom of expression, connecting with that part of myself that lived in my imagination; always entertaining, always creating, always considering the next great idea. Back then, I didn't care what the other kids thought. It never even occurred to me that I was one of only a handful of children wearing a crazy costume to school. I was living my creative truth.

But by the time I started high school I had lost contact with my most authentic self. Instead, burdened with thoughts of fitting in, I learned to wear a different kind of costume-one that would help me to blend in with my surroundings, chameleon-like, so that I wouldn't be thought weird or different.

We've all done it at some time: Feigning interest in things that we're not really interested in just to be accepted by others, part of the crowd; withholding our opinions for fear of sounding foolish or ill-informed; hiding our true feelings because we don't want to rock the boat or acknowledge the uncomfortable truth; holding back vital parts of who we are that might be met with disapproval by others.

Sure, I have always been an independent sort, more of a lion than a lamb. But my desire to be liked by others led me to connect with the externals of life-putting more emphasis on what others thought or said or did-conforming, rather than connecting with my personal truth. This was especially true in my early *(Continued on next page.)*

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relationships where I found myself carried along on someone else's agenda; wondering why, at times, I felt so frustrated and unfulfilled.

Old habits die-hard. What started as an unconscious pattern took years for me to recognize as a destructive force in my relationships. One of my earliest lessons came from an unlikely source. He was one of those pit bull lawyers that people fear in the courtroom; a senior partner in the law firm where I worked. One day, a few weeks into my illustrious legal career, he called me into his office and, glaring at me from across his desk, growled, "Do you know why you got this job?"

"Because you thought I would make a good lawyer?" I responded, more of a question than an answer. "Lawyers are a dime a dozen," he barked, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "You weren't hired because you came to us with an Ivy League education or even a recommendation from someone we know; you were hired because you're smart and people like you. But I'm here to tell you, if everyone likes you then you probably aren't doing your job!" I just sat there like a deer caught in the headlights before he shooed me off, saying, "Now get back to work!"

As I walked back to my office, bewildered, it dawned on me that never before had I considered it okay for people not to like me. In fact, for much of my life I had really tried to please others so that they would like me. Something about his advice made me mildly uncomfortable, like not knowing what to do with my hands. But in his own special way, he turned on a light for me that day-gruff as it was-and gave me permission to be more authentic with myself, to detach from the opinions of others and just be me. In that moment I reconnected with my Crazy-Costume-Wearing-Cardinal-Dogwood Tree-Governor's Wife-Free-Spirited-Self.

Authenticity demands that we get real; gently reminding us that the masks we wear will determine much about the substance and quality of our lives. When we hide our personal truth-for whatever reason-we disconnect further from what's real and true within us. Then we may find that, while we attract people and experiences that match our false Self, we've done little to honor our authentic truth, keeping us evermore removed from our core desires and greatest potential in life.

Remember this liberating truth: Authenticity is next to perfection; little if anything can shake its foundation. Now I ask you-what masks are you wearing?

Melissa is a writer, photographer, artist and lawyer. Read more on her blog at www.HeartLaw.blogspot.com, or visit her website at www.MelissaEJohnson.com.

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