

Beyond the Mask

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SOME TWENTY YEARS AGO, HURLING TOWARD an appointment, my mood was typical of that turbulent period of my life: angry. A red traffic light gave me another reason to fume. Waves of people crossed in front of me; at first, I surveyed them critically: this one was obese, another bedraggled, that one pushing through the crowd. As I focused on the ocean of humanity, a sensation of expansion took hold of my heart. My thoughts spun around 180 degrees. I was suddenly possessed by an almost physical sensation of overwhelming compassion for these people making their way across the busy intersection, trying to live their lives under difficult circumstances, just like me.

The moment this new thought entered my mind, everything went ablaze. Here was something I had never even imagined: an all-encompassing, fiery light that embodied everyone and everything in the environment, including me. There was no voice, but I knew the light as Love. The building block of all things—the cars, the stores, the birds, the trees, and me—all was Love.

This light that was Love continued to radiate. The sheer ecstasy of it made me weep. I could not say how long the experience lasted, though it felt timeless; then, without warning, a symphony of car horns and a green light greeted my return to the present. Picture having to drive after such a revelation! Yet drive I did, tears of joy still running down my face.

The most amazing event of my life had occurred and I was afraid to speak of it for fear people would think me mad. Seasons changed before I found the courage to share the experience: a very rare glimpse into an invisible world, perhaps more real than the one we walk in. Yet, it can be

seen only for a brief moment, when the veil is lifted, and the privileged viewer experiences the truth beyond that which mundane sense reports.

Perhaps you are wondering how drastically my life must have transformed after that event; it did not. There was no forgetting or doubting what happened. It is simply that we are so attached to things the way they are that even the blinding flash of God waking us from our dream can be ignored in order to go back to the status quo.

As John Donne described it, “I throw my selfe down in my Chamber, and I invite God and his angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his angels, for the noise of a file, for the rattling of a Coach, for the whining of a door.”

Oh, just let me live quietly behind this familiar mask. Yes, I know it is not who I am and that I am suffocating here. Life is sorely lacking and somewhere deep down I know that is not the way it is meant to be or could be, but do not make me take off this comfortable disguise.

Then I would have to be willing to look past the known and confront an enigma I may not be able to handle. This little life behind the mask may not be much, but at least I know what to expect. One can go on like this for years. It is like wandering through a desert and knowing that you have seen water, a resplendent oasis tempting beyond words, yet being afraid to explore far enough to find it again.

There will be days when your thirst forces you to journey. Maybe, despite all the obstacles, you may even catch a flash of that glorious spot and imagine what it would be like to arrive there once more. Before long, the sandstorm of your ego will rise up around you or voices from the

wilderness, of those you left behind, will call you back, their siren song of familiar woe so painfully comforting. You turn back. Still you will not cease from venturing out anew, now that you know it exists.

We enter this world free of camouflage. As we grow up, like actors in a great drama, we find a mask to help us survive despite the pain of the many difficult conditions in our childhood. We can become the family clown, the good girl, the martyr, the scapegoat, the black sheep or any number of roles that are not really us. However, because we felt safe hiding for so long, we tend to keep living out these parts long after the need is gone.

Sometimes these masks are so much a part of us we do not realize we are wearing them. Mine was the Rebel, a smooth fit for all the unexamined rage I liked to project on the world at large; it brought me no peace. We know we are unhappy at finding ourselves in situations that seem like replays of other unacceptable moments, yet we cannot, for the life of us, understand how we have managed to trap ourselves again.

But I was tired of the game and now knew something entirely different was possible. If I was willing to look in the mirror, past the reflection of who I *thought* I was, I would see what needed to be loved: that fragile little kid who never got the support or acceptance from her folks that she craved.

Moving from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood, we often resent our parents, teachers, religious leaders, and the restrictions of society for having made us who we think we are. Yet behind the parts of ourselves and others that we find unlovable is the same beautiful face: Love, temporarily disguised by illusions we have chosen to believe are genuine.

Just like the person who knows he has a safe refuge waiting for him at the end of the day, I knew I could discover my calm center. The key was to base every thought, word, and deed on the understanding that the phenomenon I had experienced truly existed, not only somewhere beyond the everyday world, but also within. It required me to acknowledge this kingdom of Light, of Love in everyone I met, beginning with me.

In the quiet of my heart, I began to find communion with all that is true. I learned to remove my mask by bringing my fears as bait and becoming a patient fisherman in these tranquil waters. Over the years, as I learned to focus gently on the problem I needed help with, an answer would arise and swallow my lure whole. Love provides what we need, if we ask.

I see a woman walking a path toward home. She, and every fellow traveler along the way, is like the terrain: blistered highway, sweet green meadow, lush snake river, winding passes, sculpted rock reaching heavenward. This road also lives inside them; it spirals into the clarity of a conscious mind willing to embrace the mystery: hunchback or halfback, star or stone, beggar or beloved, man or woman—dreaming itself many from the One. ■

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H. S. Olcott

CALENDAR

February 17:

Adyar Day: Henry Steel Olcott, Founder-President of the Theosophical Society, died 1907;

Giordano Bruno died 1600;

C.W. Leadbeater born 1847

Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (CJ), fourth international president, February 17, 1946–February 17, 1953

Nilakanta Sri Ram, fifth international president, February 17, 1953–April 8, 1973