



Allure Article – for Sunday, March 2009

Take Off Your Mask

Are you comfortable looking in the mirror? When you do, what do you see? Is it a friend? Or someone you don't like very much, maybe even someone you are ashamed of? If your answer was self-critical, ask yourself why. What is it that dissatisfies you?

We are embarrassed about our appearance, our personality, our relatives, our income, our social standing, our accent, the shade of our skin, our tribe of origin, our education...you finish your list. Have you considered the ramifications of these self-judgments? Have you really sat with them and let yourself feel their impact on your heart and mind?

I have. At many points in my life insecurity dominated my self-view. During my teenage years I disliked my "big" body. I felt fat, uncomfortable in my own skin. My thoughts were consumed with schemes to change my body so that I could feel better about myself. None of them worked.

When I attended Princeton, I carried my dis-ease with me. I couldn't see myself as a tall, strong athlete. Instead, I interpreted my frame as heavy and clumsy. At Princeton my self-criticism intensified. I felt inferior to my peers—many came from elite families with fabulous wealth while I was from a single-parent home where we had to trust each month that we would meet the bills.

My schoolmates all seemed so intellectual that I questioned whether I had the academic prowess to fit in. These insecurities generated depression. I often shrank from gatherings. If I went, I stayed in the background, smiling but uneasy, afraid that someone would discover my inadequacies. I couldn't fully enjoy my successes on the basketball court or in the classroom because my vision was clouded with self doubt.

Feelings of shame create deep, personal pain that we try to ignore and hide. We don't want anyone else to see us as we fear we are. Shame colors all our relationships. Somehow we have concluded that we are flawed while others are "normal".

So, we make a mask to hide behind, not realizing that we are covering all that is good, beautiful and unique about us. Gradually we build up an artificial identity--maybe by wearing certain fashions, dropping names, driving big cars, by remaining aloof or being the life of the party. As others buy this image, we become more and more invested in maintaining it. We have worked hard to convince other people that we are cool, we are fine, and we are important. Everyone else appears to be doing well. We fear that if they "really knew us" they might laugh, disapprove or even worse, reject us. We become proud of this persona.

We keep up the pretense. We become experts at putting on smiles, even when we're crying inside. The further we go the more terrified we become. We think that if the "truth" about our life is uncovered, our lives will be shattered. Ironically we are already shattered inside. We feel helpless, lost, and unable to put ourselves back together.

This silent suffering is a worldwide epidemic.

What we believe to be our own private and unique misery is actually very common. How sad to feel so alone when the heartaches of the human experience visit us all. Because we hold onto our self-rejection, we inevitably feel unacceptable to others. Many of us know the despair of having judged and sentenced ourselves to the verdict “Not Worthy.”

As we tire with the charade, we turn to addictions. Our anger festers. What is the underlying cause of all this self-hatred and agony? I came to realize that my feelings of inadequacy began because my father abandoned me and deep within I came to believe that this happened because there was something wrong with me.

What caused your negative self-view? Poor self-image develops in a subtle way and often early. For many, it stems from physical, emotional, mental or sexual abuse from family, friends or strangers. We carry these early imprints as secrets and they remain unhealed. We ache inside, wishing we could erase painful memories, yearning for relief from our inner wounds. Paradoxically, the more we push these issues aside, the more power we give them.

The only relief is to return to ourselves. We must begin to look honestly within and ask for Help. When we begin to open up about our story we realize we are not the only ones suffering! I’ve had encounters recently with people who were trapped by shame and pain of the past. One man in particular was unusually embarrassed by his family background and level of education. I saw him as warm, friendly, and articulate but that wasn’t his view. He believed he was a poor communicator, inadequate at making friends. Although he was well-liked, those close to him were frustrated. They couldn’t understand his negativity. What did it matter that his family of origin was poor?

For years he had kept a painful secret: he had been sexually abused as a child. He had told no one because he assumed it had been his fault. His own innocence had never occurred to him. He had suffered intensely for almost two decades, feeling completely alone. He found it difficult to sleep. Pain poisoned every aspect of his life. Finally, after years of silence and growing distress, he confided in someone he trusted and the door to healing opened. Gradually he was able to share his stories with others close to him.

I’m not suggesting that you should blurt out your deepest secrets today. What I am saying is that in private moments with yourself you can take off your mask. Begin to look at yourself. Instead of scrutinizing yourself with judgment why not look at yourself with the compassion of your Source? Admit your fears and insecurities; own your wounds and secrets. Lovingly acknowledge them to yourself and the Divine. This may seem like a tiny step but it is a profoundly powerful move toward personal transformation.

I am sitting in a coffee shop finishing this article, and a man has just walked through the door. Astonishingly the message on his t-shirt reads, “Take your mask off.” Oh how the Universe loves each of us! What we need always appears in the moment.

Start where you are. Imagine this week how different you would feel if you took your mask off, looked in the mirror and opened to the possibility of viewing yourself with loving eyes. What we feel shame

about and are most afraid for others to know is not what makes us different but what binds us together. How it does is our choice. Mute discomfort opened to healing can become compassionate connection.

If you would like to hear more ideas on how to give voice to your experience, please check out my inspirational video clips shown each Friday morning at 7:35 a.m. on Today on STV (on both Silverbird TV and DSTV.) If you can't catch them on TV, you can see them on www.youtube.com . Just search by my name.

Food For Thought

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That is how the light gets in.

By Leonard Cohen, lyrics from his album *The Future*

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Patricia Omoqui is an internationally recognized inspirational speaker, life coach and writer. Patricia's mission in life is to inspire people to move beyond fear so they can reach their full potential.

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