

“Masks and Monsters”

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My very, very favorite Halloween costume of all time
was the year I was six and I got to be Cinderella!
My amazing mom made me a homemade costume.
I had this little shirt that we made off-white
so it would look kind of grungy,
and my skirt was all ragged and patched,
and I had this cute little lace-up vest that looked *very* fairy-tale-ish.
I had a plastic pumpkin for trick-or-treating,
which of course was *perfect* for Cinderella—
the whole pumpkin connection was very cool.
And we dangled little plastic rats and fuzzy fake mice from the
pumpkin to represent the little creatures that the fairy godmother
turned into horses and coachmen and such.
Now, Cinderella was my absolute favorite fairy tale
because I *loved* to imagine myself as the beautiful, *virtuous*,
put-upon servant girl who was destined for way better things.
I was an older sister,
and like many older children
I felt some pressure to be very grown up and responsible.
With my Cinderella fantasy, I got to say to myself,
yeah, OK, you’re the responsible older kid,
you’ve got a lot on your shoulders,
but one day you are going to be wearing a fabulous ball gown
and you are going to get to be queen and tell everyone what to do,
and it will *all be worth it!*

Dressing up for Halloween
gives us a chance to express ourselves
with a little more freedom than we usually have.

When we dress up,
we get to show the world a secret side of us—
our dreams, our fantasies.
It's like we all get to play Walter Mitty for a day.
He's the guy we heard about in our second reading.
He's this poor sad sack of a guy,
not very successful in the eyes of the world,
but in his imagination he's a hero!
He goes through life imagining himself as a fearless fighter pilot,
a dashing district attorney,
a successful surgeon.¹

I think we all resonate with that story at least a little.
Even if you *are* a fighter pilot or a lawyer or a doctor,
all of us can identify with that feeling
that there's more to us than life lets us show.
As we grow up, some of us get very good at conforming ourselves to
the way other people tell us we're supposed to be—at least on the
outside.

When we're little babies, we let it all hang out.
We just naturally express our needs and our feelings.
If we're hungry, we just cry!
But as we grow older, it gets more complicated.
We learn that grownups want us to wait and be patient if we're hungry.
We learn we're not supposed to ruin our appetite before dinner,
even if we're hungry *now!*
We learn there are rules for everything,
and ways we're supposed to be,
and ways we're *not* supposed to be.
There are emotions it's OK to feel and express,
like love and happiness.
And maybe there are emotions it's not so OK to express,

¹ James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," online at
<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Cafe/6821/thurber.html>.

like anger and sadness.

Maybe we learn it's not even OK to *feel* those emotions,
and because we're still little
and we depend on the grownups to take care of us,
we try to get it right,
so sometimes we even stop being aware of how we feel!²

Vast stretches of who we are
start to go underground
because it's not safe for them to be out in public.
And we only let those parts of ourselves out in oblique ways,
glimpsed round a corner, as it were.
Our dreams and fantasies are one way.
Artists have another way through their art.
Dressing up for Halloween is another,
and in that sense this very playful holiday
is actually very serious business.

We wear masks and costumes to express who we might like to be,
or to reveal a part of ourselves we usually keep secret.
But still we fear that people will judge those parts of us.
We fear people will look at us
and see a bad, scary monster.

This is the core moment in the song I sang for you earlier.³
On the surface it's about a scary witch, right?
But more deeply,
everything in that story hangs on a moment when one person saw
deeply into another person and reacted with fear and judgment instead
of acceptance.

Let me tell you my expanded version of this story:

² See Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want* (New York: Owl Books, 2001).

³ "Waldesgesprach" [Dialogue in the Woods] (text: Joseph v. Eichendorff; music: Robert Schumann).

It's twilight in the woods.
It's been a chilly day, and it's getting colder as night falls.
A knight is wandering through the woods.
It's an eerie time, neither day nor night.
Something skitters across his path; he jumps,
his heart beats wildly;
He takes a breath and laughs nervously.
"Just a squirrel," he thinks.
From far away he hears the sound of a hunting horn,
muffled by the mist in the air.
His eye is drawn by movement—
another person in the woods, a lady on a horse,
wandering slowly, all alone.
What's this?
He approaches,
and when he gets closer, he sees that she is beautiful!

He speaks: "It's already late, it's already cold,
Why do you ride lonely through the wood?
The forest is large, you are alone,
You lovely creature, I'll take you home."

She speaks; her voice is soft:
"Great is the cunning and deceit of men;
With sorrow my heart has been broken.
I hear the hunter's horn blowing here and yon;
Oh, flee! Flee! You do not know who I am!"

Who is this lady, and why is she so sad?
He has to know.
It's irresistible.
She is so beautiful.
The knight stares at her.
Who is she?
She looks so hopeful,

she looks right at him, searching him,
like she's really checking him out.
This is getting better and better!
He says to himself,
“She’s so well-dressed, and her horse too—she must be rich!
And she is really gorgeous!”

Then, my God! He remembers the old stories
of a witch who lives in these woods.
She’s supposed to be unearthly beautiful on the outside,
but evil and cold on the inside.
And who else would be out here so late, all alone?
My God, it must be the witch!
He staggers back,
his hand goes up to ward her off!
“I know you now,” he cries,
and there is fear and revulsion in his voice.
“God help me! You’re that witch! Get away from me!”

For an instant everything stops.
She gasps.
She puts her hand to her heart
as if she’s been stabbed.
Her eyes are so sad;
they’re impossibly sad.
For a moment she had thought this one might be different.
She’s so tired of all this,
she’s so very tired of all these men staring at her and pawing at her,
and recoiling, running away as soon as they begin to glimpse in her eyes
something other than insipid sweetness and loveliness.
For just an instant she had thought, maybe—
maybe this is the one who will truly see *me*.
She’s so tired of this endless game.
She doesn’t want to be the witch any more.
But they don’t want her to be anything but this pretty little plaything.

She's trapped too.
And it makes her so tired
and so *angry*.
She feels the anger building up,
and it's so strong she can't keep it in.
She tried to warn him,
she always warns them,
but they never listen!

Her eyes close for a moment.
"Here we go again," she thinks.
When she opens her eyes again, they are changed.
She stares at him with hard eyes,
cold eyes.
"Yeah, you know me," she says.
"I'm the witch.
See that big scary castle up there?
That's my house.
It's already late, it's already cold;
you're never getting out of this wood."⁴

She turns away without another word.
The fog swirls in.
When she gets home, she weeps and rages.
"I don't want to be the sorceress any more," she cries.
"I just want someone to love me and not run away!"

Couldn't this story end differently?
Are the knight and the sorceress really doomed
to wander the woods forever?

This should matter to us,

⁴ The spoken parts are from Joseph v. Eichendorff, "Waldesgesprach" [Dialogue in the Woods], loosely translated.

because all of us play the part of the knight in our own lives.
This poor knight, he sees this beautiful lady
and thinks, wow, maybe I can have her—
maybe she can be mine!
But he's not prepared for her to be as complicated as she is.
He freaks out when this lovely young thing turns out to be very
powerful and very needy.
This is not an uncommon experience!
In the deepest level of our being, we all want our desires to be gratified
by someone who can love us infinitely
and never have any needs or wants of their own.
When the people we love turn out to have their *own* needs,
it can be very disturbing.
Sometimes we feel irrationally betrayed.
And if all of us play the role of the knight,
we are all the witch too!
We all have a yearning to be fully known and accepted.
We all have this longing to bring those hidden parts of ourselves
to the surface.
From painful experience,
we fear being judged and criticized and laughed at.
Sometimes this makes us lash out in self-defense.
Sometimes it makes us so angry,
it's a good thing we *don't* have supernatural powers to hurt people.
But still we yearn to feel safe enough to be fully ourselves.
For many of us, this is a journey that takes our entire lives.

May Sarton has a poem that reads in part:

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces...⁵

⁵ May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself."

How many of us have worn other people's faces?
In my own generation,
I know so many people from college
who went to law school or medical school
because it's what their parents wanted them to do.
I think of the women of my mother's generation
who struggled to bring their whole selves to the world
at a time when there were very few career paths easily open to women.
And the men who were told their job was to go to work every day
and provide for their families,
certainly not to stay home with their children,
and certainly not to get emotional
and, God forbid, cry when they were sad.
All of us have worn other people's faces;
all of us have struggled to bring our whole selves to the table of life.
And the secret trick is,
if we are very patient, we can help each other get there.

I imagine a different ending to the story of the knight and the witch.
Imagine the forest, leaves dropping one by one,
the air chilly and damp.
Sounds are muffled in the mist.
The beautiful woman wanders through the woods.
A knight approaches.
He speaks: "Hi there!
Are you OK all by yourself here in the woods?
Do you need anything?
Can I help?"

The lady speaks: "No, thanks, I'm fine."

The knight speaks: "I hope I won't offend you,
but you don't *look* fine. Are you sure you're OK?"

The lady looks him up and down.
He looks really nice.
She doesn't want him to get hurt. She's got to warn him off.
She speaks: "Well, if you must know,
here's the deal: I'm the witch of the wood
and I turn guys like you into Swiss cheese.
You should get out of here while you still have the chance!"

The knight's a little startled, actually he's a little freaked out,
but she looks really nice.
Something in her eyes makes him take a chance.
He speaks: "Wow, so you're a witch, huh?
I've always wondered what it would be like to do spells and stuff.
Is it fun?"

The lady speaks: "Oh, it was fun at the beginning, I guess.
Now I'm kind of sick of the whole thing.
I don't know...lately I've been kind of thinking about a career change.
It gets old."
She's surprised at herself—she's never told anyone that before.

The knight speaks: "You know, it's getting kind of chilly here in the
woods. Do you want to grab a coffee somewhere and warm up a little?"
He smiles.
She smiles back.

And why shouldn't this story be true?

May it be so for all of us.
Amen and blessed be.