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A problem I have encountered with some religious folk is a forced happiness or masks of love. Peeking out from underneath the masks is a awkward anxiety. The unease I feel when I am with them makes me want to make my way to the closest door. But this is not (just?) a finger pointing exercise, because I am identifying an element of myself in them. The dis-ease i now very well. It was my normal state for years. It comes from constantly guarding the boundaries of the self. Alert for any situation that might lead to dissatisfactory emotion or feeling. The attempt to control is always insufficient, because one cannot "control" human experience. Emotions and feelings are not amenable to such manipulation of self will. Our attempts at manipulation lead to pain and suffering.

As an evangelical I was uncomfortable with my weaknesses. I sensed my failings yet still wanted to present a mask that matched the selfless love of Christ. The desire to be seen as one willing to give up self for the good of another lead me into troubled ground. I recognize my story more in straight women or gay men I know than in straight men. I confused self negation with compassion. My first partner was quite good at using this bemusement for his advantage in our relationship. Whenever he felt me pulling away, he would use the trump card of my Christianity and its call to selfless love. Pushing my spiritual button for many years was key to keeping me in a dysfunctional relationship and in a cycle of self-harm that I am only now beginning to unravel.

I ignored my own internal self flagation. Thinking all I needed was a good relationship. When I finally did successfully end my first partnership, I rushed into another without dealing with minefield that was my own psych. All of my problems with relationship number 2 can be clearly tied to my inability to take off the masks I carried around with me (good guy, good husband, good dad, concerned citizen, etc) and honestly deal with the real me beneath them. I projected my own issues onto her and walled my heart from any penetration by potential incoming human connect.

One of the benefits of mindfulness meditation, is the way the masks become visible, definable, and removable. As I sit with my own mind, the way my self constructs became objects which I observed was clear. I was able to pull back the masks, so that I could see the eye holes I looked out at the world through. I turned them around and placed them on the table in front of me. My observer self is separate from these thought constructs. I could see them as my way to define my core in ways that projected the person I desired to be. Once the masks were on the table, then all the labor of painting and maintaining them in the face of the world as it is became clear. They ceased being hard, distinct, permanent things and looked more like masks made of sand. The water of life continually washing away any futile attempt I made to firm up the forms. How tiring. How exhausting. How futile. How anxiety provoking.

Yes that is anxiety I felt. I know that any moment, the ocean waves were coming to undermine my carefully managed sand mask. Mindfulness meditation allows me to sit and watch as the water comes in washes away the work, recedes leaving nothing of my attempts to firm up my self. I observe and then see that what is not washed away is the ability to be aware of the waves themselves much like the beach itself was still there once the tide comes and goes. Once I stopped fighting the waves and let them be, I could let the tide come in, goes out and the beach is still there. I survived the waves of life not by building indestructible masks of self, but by letting the defenses go and surrendering to the motion of the waves themselves. knowing that when the waves recede the beach is still there.

I had the capacity to relax and let the tide come and come out and leave me unharmed on the beach. I was too busy building my "indestructible self" to notice. My anxiety and dissatisfaction was caused by my ignoring my innate capacities. The emptiness I sought to cover over was not a function of an adequately constructed self, but the futility of building one in the first place. By relaxing my separate self activity, my awareness of my connection to others naturally arises. My interconnection with others and all living things is directly experienced as I relax my attention from self focused boundary building. The direct experience of interconnection allows compassion to naturally arise. Compassion is not a mask to wear that over time one yields to the outer form, but a direct inner experience of an unbounded heart and mind itself.

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