

It was a small one bedroom, one bath camp on Hobbs Pond in Hope Maine. There were 5 children and 4 adults in this little camp adventure about once a year when my family of origin would accept my maternal Aunt and Uncle's invitation to their camp. There are lots of stories I could share about these times, like who got to sleep on the couch and who had to sleep on the floor or the special shrimp that I waited all year to have or how my uncle drove his boat way too fast for any of us who weren't already sturdy on water skis. These aren't the stories I'm going to share, however. The story I'd like to share is one that goes something like this. As a rambunctious group, we waited around somewhat impatiently for breakfast. Breakfast was some special something that smelled really good way before we got a chance to eat it.

We carefully took our turns in the morning getting ready for the day with my Aunt in the line up somewhere. I'm sure it didn't really take my Aunt Helen very long to prepare for the day but it seemed like forever that she was in the bathroom because, as we were told, "she had to put her face on." What this eventually came to mean to me was that she was doing something magical in that bathroom that not only prepared her for engaging in the day but also made her up with required makeup. Now I don't have anything against make up, but as a child, I wondered about this ritual quite bit. My own mother had a ritual all her own, but it only included lipstick which she continued to wear almost to her last days. In some ways, to me, my Aunt Helen's make up seemed like a mask.

Sometimes I wondered how breakfast would taste if Auntie Helen didn't sit down to eat it with her "face on," or what might be different about the day. Would there be glitches or some other unfortunate event. If she were alive today, I might now ask her what it was like for her to learn about wearing makeup, who taught her and how did she feel when she wore it. Were there days she didn't actually want to take the time to put on make-up but did anyway?

Masks can be part of ritual, either cultural, religious, and celebratory. Masks can be art expressions and can symbolize how we engage in the world both personally and professionally.

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1. The first face, you show to the world.

2. The second face, you show to your close friends and your family.
3. The third face, you never show anyone which is the truest reflection of who you are. ¹

How many masks do you have? Do you know where they came from? There are masks that we recognize and masks we discover through our own process of transformation.

My process of un-layering some of my masks included discovery and transformation on my path to ministry. There were several hoops to travel on the way to Unitarian Universalist ministry. As there are for ministry in many faith traditions. The requirements seemed to run parallel to each other.

¹ Mind and Body Works, <https://mindandbodyworks.com/the-masks-we-wear/>, accessed 12/11/21.

There were the academic basic requirements and the Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Fellowship Committee requirements.

The Board of Trustees and the Committee on Shared Ministry can tell you a little bit about these requirements that continue on and on as they recently completed a several page document which was sent to the Unitarian Universalist Association speaking to my ministry here at Allen Avenue.

In an effort to begin my path to ministry while working as long as I could as a clinical social worker, I decided to start my Clinical Pastoral Care training before entering seminary. It was an extended program offered at Maine Medical Center from March 2014 to July 2014, wrapping up just 2 months prior to my transition to entering the Master's of Divinity program at Andover Newton Theological School.

I was looking forward to the Maine Medical CPE adventure right up until I realized a couple of things. One, I was in class with folks who could quote and integrate Christian and Jewish scripture in their theological reflections which I could not do despite having attended the Episcopal church most of my childhood and youth and two, we were required to make cold calls to patients.

The mask that became familiar (and some of you might be familiar with it too) is the imposter syndrome mask, the one filled with self-doubt. It was nearly paralyzing until I realized that instead of starting with an empty bag of skills, I was starting with a bag that had a few skills already in it. At least this realization freed me up to knock on those first hospital room doors and show up when paged to an emergency on overnights.

I attended classes in a mixed group with beginners like myself and those who were finishing up their last of 4 units of CPE. The clinical pastoral Care Unit included more than visiting and theological reflection using “scripture” and I use that term loosely since eventually after understanding what theological reflection was, I had the freedom to use music, poetry, and prose and one of my favorite children’s books, the velveteen rabbit. Together, explored topics like forgiveness, grace and hope. There were visit verbatims passed in weekly which I was familiar with from social work except we called them process recordings in social work. I would write up a complete visit including my self-observations and details of the interchange. And my supervisor would respond and invite me into a dialog to explore and learn through.

One of my objectives in cpe was to be able to articulate to the UU credentialing committee my call to ministry and have a greater sense of ministerial authority. Not the I'm in charge sort of authority but the kind where if I can be present in the role of minister, others perhaps will be able to be present with me.

Week after week, I would meet with the Rev. Kitty Garlid, the program's director. In one way or another the conversation we would eventually bump into one of my masks. Sometimes it would be the mask of distance, "They want to know who you are?" she would say. This didn't mean spill my guts to patients and staff at Maine Medical but be more open, emotionally available. It meant a different kind of presence than I had previously been trained in.

Sometimes it would be an imposter syndrome mask that I would bump into wondering “who am I to do this work?”

My masks were created through life experiences in my family, in the context of my identity, my religion and messages that one way or another came through loud and clear. While others were like coping mechanisms, defending me against vulnerability.

Are there any masks that you find yourself leaning into when you feel exhausted, unprepared, maybe even defensive? Are there masks that you’ve picked up to protect yourself from messages that have been delivered that taught you, you were not enough, you did not learn the right way, feel the right way, move your body in ways that was expected, that you were the “wrong gender,” loved the wrong person?

What experiences puzzled together to create your masks? Do you know when you put one on? And if you do, what does it mean?

My colleague, the Rev. Aaron Stockwell, offered an observation the other day in one of our online minister conversations on Facebook. One that he called a maintenance required alert. I thought it was a great metaphor to consider as we talk about masks. Can the masks we wear be a maintenance required warning signal? What does our faith call us to be aware of? Are we wearing masks like I described in my experiences of CPE, that hold us back from doing the work of justice, keep us from living into the principles of our faith or embodying love.

Are there masks of cynicism and hopelessness that we wear when we're worn out and is this a spiritual maintenance required? Perhaps as we live into what it means to be whole together with our strengths and vulnerabilities, we can lay down our masks together. Together, let's create an environment, a community, where we can lay down our masks and flourish together. As Unitarian Universalists we have our own version of spiritual maintenance.

Together we can build a community where we can be vulnerable enough to lay down our masks. Safe enough to recognize that we are enough. A community that challenges us to grow beyond the comfortable, and one that frees us for joy. By considering how we live in community together, how we treat each other, speak to each other, how we take a breath

before responding instead of reacting and pausing long enough to take responsibility for our own actions and feelings... perhaps these are some of the building blocks to living into our covenant together.

And it was in the office at Maine Medical with the Rev. Kitty Garlid when I asked “Who am I to do this work?” Her response was “Who are you, not to do this work?”

And I say to you: “who are you, not to do the work of our faith?” Together, we can live into the vision and mission of Allen Avenue UU Church. Unitarian Universalism calls us to show up, to engage in transformation, to acknowledge that we are not perfect, it calls us to try and try again.

James Luther Adams once said, Church is the place where you practice what it means to be human.

May this community be the place where we get to show up in our full humanity and practice what it means to be human together.