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COACHING

WHO ARE YOU BEHIND THE MASK?

Are you brave enough to stand up and totally, nakedly be yourself? Or do you put on a mask to get through your life? Maybe you have several masks: choosing to wear different ones depending on your role in life in that moment.

What do I mean exactly by a mask? I'm not talking about fancy-dress masks – although there is a connection. When we don a fancy-dress mask we are pretending to be someone else. When we wear our masks in everyday life, we are also being someone we are not. Our mask is the face of the person we show to the outside world. It is our protective armour. And so often it is a far cry from who we know ourselves to be on the inside. Today's tip is looking at this idea in more detail and seeing what it might be like to take off our masks.

The New-Age-Guy Mask

Men are expected to want to do well at work, be the main bread winner (usually!), be tough and decisive, and protect their family. Nothing new about these ideas, but on top of this men are now also expected to be 'sensitive', do more parenting, be talented lovers, be the 'nice' guy at work and show they care for the world. TV and films show unrealistic scenarios of this new-age-guy, yet the way this is shown makes it look so real that any man not living up to this model, is thought to be less of a man. Balancing the natural macho elements with the more feminine caring side is not easy – so pretending it is, is a common mask that men wear.

The SuperWoman Mask

This is a mask I know so very well. It's worn by many women who are trying to do everything: be a mum, do most of the household chores, hold down a job, care for the wider family, and of course be a great lover – because in the films it works out like that—doesn't it? Seriously though, it's equally hard for women as it is for men. We are supposed to be to juggle everything and not have a hair out of place. And when we can't—because who can?— then many women put on the SuperWoman mask hoping the outside world will not see the flaws on the inside. For women, especially those in business, it's also about balancing their natural caring and nurturing side with the more masculine action/focus energy that work frequently requires.

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Why do we do wear masks?

Mostly it's because we're scared. Our parents, teachers, culture, society and the media provide us with a narrow band of 'acceptable' ways of being. When we feel who we are on the inside – this less-than-perfect self – doesn't match-up to this ideal, we think that we need to conform to the norm. So we put on our mask to be the person we think we should be. Showing-up in the world with all of our flaws on show is a terrifying thought. We believe (wrongly – but more on that later) that if we come out from behind our masks then we will no longer be liked, loved, well-thought-of, or in some cases, feel safe. The idea of losing these precious things is what keeps our masks firmly in place. Lets look at that some more.

How much does it cost us?

The energy in keeping up the charade is huge. We have to be ever mindful of what is on show to the world – woe betide anyone who dares to show they are not the ideal person they are portraying! Yet, we can't keep up this pretence all of the time. It's just too draining. When we take off our mask to the people we trust, they may accept us for who we are, or recoil on seeing the truth. If they recoil, it's often a reaction that stems from their own mask. They are not able (or perhaps ready) to take off their own mask. Instinctively we know this, so taking off your mask is a risk because rejection is not something that most people are comfortable with.

There is another cost to wearing our masks. If we conform to the way we think should be, our natural diversity is stifled. Our creativity and wonderful different solutions to life stay hidden behind our masks. This cost is one I feel is the biggest shame. How amazing it would be to live in a world where diversity, flaws, creativity, strength and vulnerability were not only accepted, but truly welcomed for it would change our world.

Taking off the mask

When I am coaching, this issue of who people think they are portraying and the person they feel they are on the inside frequently crops up. In relationships, people often get themselves into really tangled messes because they are trying so hard to be someone they are not. Often people know and see it's down to this larger than life image they are portraying, but they don't know how to let go of what they have created.

For most people taking off their mask is not easy – it is in fact scary. But when you weigh up

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how much it's costing you, wouldn't it be great not to have worry about being this alter ego and instead just be you? So how do you start?

First of all know you don't have to go from fully masked, to totally nakedly you in one fell swoop. Taking off one or parts of a mask bit-by-bit is usually more manageable – for both you and for the people close to you.

Know too that far more of the real you is on show than you think. Consider this. When you look at the people in your life, do you see their masks? Do you see the gap between what they are telling you about themselves and what you instinctively know about them? I'm sure you do. They see your gaps too.

When I thought I had every hair in place as a single parent with my Super Woman mask firmly clamped on, several people saw and shared with me that they saw stress and sadness in my life. Interestingly this was not told to me by my close friends or family – but rather people on the fringes of my life. If they saw it, for sure people closer to me saw it too. My own journey of de-masking is still a work in progress, but these days I know I show up if not totally naked, then far more of the real me than ever before – and that makes my life simpler and closer to the joyous life I want to have. If you are in a place where your mask is slowly killing the real you, then I really want to help you get to a better place too.

One of the techniques I use is to help people understand the process of change. I see that there are 4 main stages – and I identify them as:

- Awareness
- Action (and failure): The New Years Resolution Syndrome
- Motivating Results
- Unconsciously Competent

So, the first step is awareness. Start being aware of when you are not being yourself – what is the mask you are wearing? What is it the fear is stopping you being your real self? The loss of a relationship, job, money or security? Give this mask a name. How often do you wear it? Are the times when it's OK to not wear it? If you have moments when you don't wear it, what does that feel like?

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The awareness stage can take from minutes to years. Being aware and being ready to take action rarely occur at the same time. But for any change to take place you have to be aware that a change in the way you behave and act is a desirable. You have to see and know what it is you are wanting to change.

Stage 2 is the most difficult. In this stage people are aware that they want to change, but the new way is often outside of their comfort zone. Initial new actions is alien, so people often revert back to their old ways, and at this point, they usually beat themselves up: "I'm useless", "I can't do it", "I have no willpower" and so on. Instead of realizing we are creatures of habit – very few people are comfortable with change. Slipping back into our old ways – in this case, wearing your old mask – will undoubtedly happen. So if it does, then just acknowledge it. Forgive yourself and then have another bash at living your life without it. Perseverance is the key to getting through this stage.

When you get to Stage 3 in any change process, it is much easier because you start to see the benefits. In de-masking you'll begin to see how much easier life is without having to pretend to be someone that you're not. Know that you can still slip back when you get to Stage 3 – but you're less likely to do so, because there is growing evidence of the new and better way for you to lean on.

Stage 4 is when the transformation is complete. This new way of being is akin to driving your car. You don't consciously think about all of the things you do, it's automatic. It's now the way you behave and show up in the world.

If I were to end this tip on a mischievous note, I would add that when you get to Stage 4, it's time to go back to Stage 1! For like an onion we have many layers and what we thought was the end point is often just the beginning. Please don't be disheartened though – every layer you remove takes you closer to a simpler, more harmonious, happier life – and I want that for every one of you reading this.

If you are ready to work on taking off your mask and would like some help to reveal your wondrous real self, do call or email me to book a complimentary coaching session. And finally, as always I love to hear from you and I welcome your thoughts and comments on today's tip of wearing and taking off your masks.

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