

## Masks

In ancient Greek drama, the actors didn't dress up in costume the way actors do today. Rather, they used a mask on a stick. If they were playing a happy role then they would lift the happy mask up. If they were playing a sad role, then they would lift the sad mask up. The use of the mask enabled the audience to follow the plot with minimal lines.

I think that many times, we see a God in a mask, rather than looking behind the mask to find the reality.

Where do these masks come from? Well, we learn from a very early age - from parents, teachers and friends. We grow up with different people's versions of who God is and what God is like.

Now these different versions might work well in the understanding of the ones who taught us. But that is no guarantee that their understanding of God works for me, or you.

My father would take me and my sisters to church each Sunday, without fail. If we were running late and arrived after the Gospel, Dad would take us home and bring us back to a later service.

There wasn't much love in the God-mask of my Dad. God was a remote. He (definitely a 'he') was a strict and stern punishment giver. Dad referred to it whenever one of the readings backed him up. The trip home after church was inevitably a reflection on the reading or sermon which reinforced Dad's understanding of what God might be like.

I have since come to understand that Dad's mask-of-God reflected Dad's own personality, and was what today might be called a 'projection'!

I wandered away from that god when I was young, while coming unglued from family in sheer self-protection, and when I wandered back, I didn't find him particularly persuasive or appealing, although I did my dutiful best to please him. There didn't seem to be much juice in our relationship.

Perhaps I needed to find a different god, I thought, and turned to my circle of Christian friends. The god my friends wanted me to see was the god they prayed to every time they hammered in a nail, the god who actually 'does' answer prayer, if you pray hard enough and just right and don't doubt even for a nanosecond. This was a god of boundless enthusiasm, a god of dazzling high-resolution clarity, as witnessed by his Scriptures, which were to be taken literally (something which, despite a huge difficulty, I forced myself to accept).

I guess my problem has always been that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't prevent myself **thinking and arguing** with myself. My head insisted on noticing that this god couldn't deal with the Problem of Evil no matter which way I approached it. People pray like crazy all the time and things still don't turn out well. Just as my Dad's god stayed remote and above the fray, this god seemed pretty capricious, even cruel. "Be careful what you pray for" turned out to be true.

I think I warmed to my Mum's god-mask. Mum was a nursing sister, and in charge of a

geriatric ward in Grafton Base Hospital - long before nursing homes and hospices. I found her kneeling beside her bed one morning praying. I was embarrassed. She told me that if she didn't begin the day on her knees and end it similarly, she would find it difficult to get through a day. Her god-mask was smiling, warm and inviting, loving to hold, and a searcher for the lost.

I found this God to be especially inviting on a personal level.

Although I'm pretty good at Godtalk, that's just my theological streak. In terms of personal relationship, not so much. Mum introduced me to an understanding of God which has stood me in good stead for the rest of my life.

We all tend to glue our parents' masks onto the face of God; double the trouble when the masks are of a highly successful person. Quadruple the problem when there's violence around.

My tutors and friends at Theological College taught me that I could peel away masks from the face of God, first my Dad's version, then my friends'. They had, in real love, tried to help me find God by handing me the versions that worked for them. But I had to find God for myself -- a God of **my** understanding.

I learned to ask "What would a God look like who was worthy of my worship?" It is an appalling thought when it first appears. Who are we to determine what God is like? God is God is God; it's not up to us to determine what God looks like.

But I began to realize something: obviously no version of God is completely right because none of us can walk all the way around God. But a particular aspect of God may be more immediately meaningful. For a person deep into social justice, for example, God's voice might be a clarion call. For a mystic, the Cloud of Unknowing; for a cosmologist, the First Cause -- I don't know. I'm sure there are dozens of examples.

So, understanding that my own perception of my personal Higher Power is going to be pretty limited, because I am pretty limited, what could God's face look like?

I think it would look like the face of a parent bending down to a newborn child. A face full of wonderment and gentleness and intimate, exquisite love that had nothing to do with anything the child had done, merely with the child for the child's own sake and because of the relationship between the two. A love bent on nurturing and protecting, but also liberating and enabling (in the good sense).

That could be a start.

God knows I'll get it wrong, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that we seem to be on different speaking terms these days.