

Masks and Ghosts and Gourds and Candy

(What else do we need?)

October 31, 2021

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Good morning and welcome to this good day. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, October 31st and the title of this morning's reflection is Masks and Ghosts and Gourds and Candy—What Else Do We Need? What a beautiful, rainy day that we've been given! May we make the best of it.

Welcome to the dreamers and the seekers of spirit, to the soft-spoken and to singers of life. Welcome to the bold and to the bashful and welcome to the wanderers in the darkness of the night. Welcome to the open ones and to the broken ones among us and bravest welcome to every blissfully imperfect soul who is just like me, blessed and beloved, given in care and compassion for one another, soul-level deep, given...in good times and in tempest, in conflict and consensus...held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds... Let no single heart from out the whole be gone from us, not gone from the widening circles of our affection...but held, whole in beauty, bound by grace and built by love of life and light and laughter. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together."

All souls, indeed. Everyone is welcome here, even the goblins and the ghosts. Do you believe in ghosts? Not everybody does. It's a good question for today. Do you know what day it is today? (The answer to the question might affect what you believe.) Yes, it's Halloween! Today is a special holiday that we used to call All Hallows Eve. In ancient times, people who lived in the area that is now Ireland, the United Kingdom and northern France grew an ancient myth into a holiday. They rang in the brand, new year—not on the first day of January, as has become the modern custom—but on the first day of November.

November 1st was just like new year's day and on new year's eve in ancient times (which was October 31st), it was believed that the magical veil between this world and the great hereafter became extraordinarily thin...so thin, they believed back then, that the normally impenetrable boundary between this world and the next could actually be crossed! It was believed that those who were gone from this world could return to it once again, in ghostly form...as spooky goblins and scary ghost, as dark angels and fiendish witches, as spirits coming back

from the great beyond.

It was an extraordinary time but for some, it was very scary. Many people worried about what the ghosts and goblins might do. So, to protect themselves and to appease those spirits who might come back through the veil, food and drink were left on the front doorsteps of houses in the neighborhood in the hopes that this offering would please the ghosts and to keep them from entering the houses. I think it works—tricking the ghosts by leaving treats on the doorstep. Maybe trick-or-treating came out of this.

We were so afraid of ghosts...afraid enough to offer appeasement. It didn't matter if we believed in them. We gave them food and drink!

And not only did we try to please the ghosts of ancient times, we also tried to hide from them and we were very clever. We didn't hide behind corners. We didn't hide in closets. We didn't crawl under beds or hide behind couches. We hide in plain sight—right out in the open—by dressing up like ghosts and goblins ourselves. Over time (maybe as we grew less afraid of ghosts), our costumes become more varied. We relaxed a bit.

Nowadays, when we celebrate All Hallows Eve—or Halloween, as we have come to call it—we dress up like anything we want. We can dress up like witches or like warlocks, like pirates and buccaneers... We can pretend to be ballerinas or belly-dancers. We can put on the clothes of bureaucrats and businessmen and women. We can be fire-fighters or superheroes or rock stars or artists or fairy princesses. We can dress up like Bugs Bunny. We can dress like Daffy Duck? We can pretend to be an old friend of theirs—the fearsome Tasmanian Devil.

The Tasmanian Devil was a cartoon character on the old Bugs Bunny shows. He was funny but he was fierce at the same time. He was an extraordinary character but for some, he was very scary. Many people worried about what the Tasmanian Devil might do.

The Tasmanian Devil was actually kind of cute...when he wasn't whizzing, wild and whirling around the world. He came and went like thunder. He was his own, little, marsupial tornado in the cartoon world. He left danger, devastation and destruction in his wake. He ate everything. There was a list and Bugs Bunny noticed it. Bugs was reading through a brochure entitled "What To See in Beautiful TASMANIA" and in it, there was a warning. It read:

BEWARE of the TASMANIAN DEVIL, a vicious, ravenous brute with powerful jaws... [He] Eats Aardvarks, Ants, Bears, Boars, Cats, Bats, Dogs,

Hogs, Buffalo, Bison, Eagles, Elks, Elephants, Antelopes, Pheasants, Ferrets, Giraffes, Gazelles, Stoats, Goats, Shoats, Ostriches, Oxen, Lions, Jackels, Moose, Mice, Moles, Snipes, Muskrats, Minks, Dingoes, Zebras, Foxes, Boxes, Octopus, Unicorns, Vixen, Vultures, Pigeons, Penguins, People, Quails, Raven, Roosters and even Rhincicorusus. [He eats] Squids, Salamanders, Warthogs, Yaks, Gnus, Newts, Walrus, Wolves, Wildebeasts...and especially RABBITS.

I wonder how the fearsome Tasmanian Devil would have felt about drinks? I wonder if he would have like to drink hot chocolate?

So, beware. Indeed, beware. It's good there was a written warning but there was another one as well. In Bugs' day, when the people saw the Tasmanian Devil approaching, the reaction was always the same. Someone would exclaim, 'sounding the alarm' by shouting, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" And without fail, the people would respond by saying, "Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

If you knew about the near and present dangers of the Tasmanian Devil, you would have already done the same. So, clearly, I will have to teach you how to do it. Are you ready? It's fairly easy. First, there is the sounding of the alarm. I will call. I will cry out, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" The response is simple. It is simply this: You say, "Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!" It's call-and-response. It's easy but I think that we should practice so we're prepared. I say, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" And you say, "Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

Are you ready? Here we go. I say, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" And you say...

"Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

I say, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" And you say...

"Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

I say, "The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!" And you say...

"Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

There it is. I think we've got it. Now, we know how to keep ourselves safe from the fearsome cartoon character. As for the real Tasmanian devil, the one who wears no mask... That's a very different story.

In real life, the one we call the Tasmanian devil is poorly named. This particularly member of the global, living family is "a carnivorous marsupial of the family Dasyuridae. Until recently, it was only found on the island state of Tasmania, but it has been reintroduced to New South Wales in mainland Australia, with a small breeding population."¹ Its

scientific name is *Sarcophilus harrisii* and its conservation status is “Endangered.” They are distant cousins of the Australian kangaroo. Contrary to how we have named them, they’re actually kind of cute.

In an Animal Logic documentary entitled *Tasmanian Devils Have No Right Being This Cute*, Danielle DeFoe explains that...

Deep, on one of the most remote islands on the planet lives a creature so evil-sounding that when Westerners first heard it howling through the night, the only name that they could come up with was, the Devil. They look like a bear mixed with a dog with the pouch of a koala.²

This is why I love this costume. Truth be told, I’ve always wanted a pouch. So it is that I have dressed myself up at the Tasmanian Devil. Yet, as the documentary further explains,

The name is a bit of a misnomer, to be honest, because [those] little guys are all about the bluff. [They] can put on quite a display. They will open their jaws wide and snarl and grunt and make all kinds of noises [but] they are not as aggressive as their haunting howl might lead you to believe...

They are powerful and fierce, to be sure. They got one of the strongest bites in the world but also they have a playful and gentle side as well. They are complex animal. There are many component parts. Many ingredients. It takes real time to get to know them. For behind the scary masks that they wear, they are as complex as any of us—full of contradiction and subtlety.

It’s so interesting, the many and varied masks we wear these days—the medical masks, the patterns, the signs, the slogans, the colors, the styles... And behind our masks, there is such complexity. What makes us up? What constitutes? What makes us who we are?

Some of us might say that the recipe is rather simple—as simple, let’s say as the recipe for hot chocolate:

- Cocoa powder (unsweetened)
- Granulated sugar
- Semisweet or bittersweet chocolate
- Milk
- Vanilla extract

These are the right ingredients but how shall we gather them together? What are the proper measures? What’s the mix? We all know, it’s not the ingredients alone that make the magic. It’s how we bring them all together that does the trick and makes the treat. It’s how we gather together the ingredients. It’s how we gather together. How we gather.

This is just miraculous to me—how we are the ingredients coming together in proper measures...each to the best of our gift. The great question of the hero's journey is hard upon us. It's ever present but it's especially meaningful these. The question is this: Where do your gifts, your talents meet the world's most urgent needs? Answering this question, this is how we discover the best recipe.

Challenging times bring this out in us. I am moved by the gifts of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances [...] and I am moved by the gifts of extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances...and by how challenging times brings out the best in all of us.

I can hear my own self-doubt correcting me, as if with one eyebrow arched and questioning, "Leon, you are too idealistic, my friend. It is more correct to say that you are moved by how challenging times brings out the best in some of us, not all. Not hardly." My own self-doubt rails against the optimist in me, rails against what stays forever hopeful in me. But I'm not fool enough to think that my self-doubt is always right. My self-doubt plays the Devil's advocate, against what's best in me. My own self-doubt plays the Tasmanian Devil's advocate. I can't keep it in check. It breaks its chain and then, runs free. And so, of course, I make the public warning. I say, "My own Tasmanian Devil's advocate is on the loose!!" And you say, "Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!" I ring the bell! I shout from the mountaintop! I sound the alarm for all to hear. I say, "My own Tasmanian Devil's advocate is on the loose!!" And you say, "Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!"

I'm not afraid of doubt. In my journey into Unitarian Universalism, I have learned to cherish it but I believe that faith, not doubt, should win the day this time. I really do believe that challenging times bring out the best in us. I can temper that. I can soften it—but only by a little—by saying that challenging times may not always bring out our best but, surely, they can. Challenging times can bring out the best in all of us. I believe in that possibility. I do not foreclose on it. I'm just not built that way. Hope is written into my genes. It's in my DNA.

Are you this way? Are you an optimist? Is hopefulness baked into you—body, mind and soul? Have you ever wondered why it is that you are the way you are? Do you believe that things like hope and optimism are genetic determined? ...that we inherit them somehow...like we do green eyes and brown skin, like strong bones or curly hair or freckles? Do you think that a positive outlook on life is biologically determined? ...that it's in the genes? ...that it's written into our DNA? Or can we

acquire it somehow? Can we ick it? Can we choose? Can we wear it like a Halloween mask...until it becomes a part of who we are?

In 2007, I listened to the interview of a physician and a genetic scientist named Craig Venter. Dr. Venter was a driving force behind the Genome Project, the mapping of human genetic possibility. It was an enormous endeavor and by 2007, effectively speaking, the finish line had been crossed. Dr. Venter published his book, A Life Decoded—My Genome: My Life. In it, he talks about what motivated him. He writes,

For many years, I have been trying to make sense and meaning out of the lives I saw destroyed or maimed due to government policies that involved us in the war in Vietnam. I have struggled to understand the deaths of two men who were briefly in my care, an eighteen-year-old who should not have been alive at all as a result of his wounds and a thirty-five-year-old who should have survived but gave up. [end quote]

The thirty-five-year-old had been wounded. He had been shot. He was injured but not critically. The eighteen-year-old, on the other hand, had thrown himself on an explosive device in order to save the lives of those around him. The eighteen-year-old had not planned on sacrificing himself. He was neither martyr nor hero. He did not even consider himself to be particularly courageous. But when the moment gripped him, he found himself flying through the air, throwing himself in front of others and absorbing the shock and shrapnel so that others could live. He had not planned on being a hero but he was one anyway...and he was at peace with his choices. He was happy, even though his prognosis was grim.

The thirty-five-year-old, on the other hand, was sick with angst and worry. He could do little more than cry and complain, indulging all of his deepest fears. And although his wound did not threaten his life, he did not survive it.

Now, I don't think that it's valuable to draw the obvious conclusion—that our attitudes, predispositions and outlooks of life can affect our health. We don't need Dr. Venter's example. We already know that this is true. It is important, however, to ask ourselves a better question: Do we believe that our attitudes, predispositions and outlooks of life are baked into us. Are they predestined? Are they genetically determined by our original recipes...or do we have agency? Is there a choice before us in determining who we are and who we can be?

We are in the midst of a global crisis that is desperate to imagine how it might soon end. This end is not on the near horizon. It's out past the outer edge of our senses but we call it closer somehow. All of us call—each to our gift. All of us call it closer when our hearts are in the right place, when we are true to them and when we remember ourselves...re-mem-bering ourselves and slowly, safely re-becoming a community together, both again and for the first time under heaven. We call it closer when we bring ourselves together in just the right way, balancing the bitter and the sweet.

Deanna Jones of the Thompson Center told me about one of the Center's activities, mid-pandemic. The activity involved the COVID-safe delivery of hot chocolate to calmly waiting elders of this community who had driven into the Thompson Center to pick up their meals. No doubt, the hot chocolate was made with care. The hot chocolate was like an extra bonus.

No doubt, the recipe was carefully followed—the bringing together of the cocoa powder and the granulated sugar, the chocolate and the milk, the vanilla extract—but there was much more in the cup than these ingredients. This is not what they got. They got something different that was just as warm and just as sweet and just as rich and just as delicious but it wasn't hot chocolate. They received the hope made real by a healthy community—a hope made real in the kitchen of the Thompson and made real on the hearth of the caring soul of all of us, a hope kept warm in the hands of the volunteers who made the curbside deliveries, a hope nurtured by the tender leadership of caring for one another. This really fortifies us. It sustains us. It strengthens us somehow.

If we find ourselves wounded and worried like the thirty-five-year-old, shot through and broken by the anxieties of life, how can we still learn the wisdom of hot chocolate? How do we bring ourselves together in a way that makes life delicious? And if we find ourselves as heroes, like the self-sacrificing eighteen-year-old, protecting others at our his expense, we can go ahead and learn the very same things. I see both of these people inside of me. I have both masks. I wear both masks. When I'm grounded, I pick which one I wear to fit the occasion. And that's the point. We get to decide. There is a line of poetry that reads,

Any time we choose, we can learn to strike a balance
We can use what tools we have; our treasure, time and talents

To hush the wolves within us;
wolves of kindness, wolves of greed
The wolf who is triumphant is the wolf we choose to feed
Kindness is food basic to the soul

Who knew that when you bring it all together—the cocoa, the sugar, the chocolate, milk and the vanilla extract—who knew that it tastes like kindness once its warmed over fire.

So, what mask do you wear? Are you hopeful? Or optimistic? Both of these? Or neither? How would you describe yourself right now? And what do you strive to become in the future? Cornel West like questions like these. He speaks out about them. He does not describe himself as an optimist, in challenging times, he remains a prisoner of hope. He says,

Hope is not the same as optimism. Hope cuts against the grain. Hope is participatory. Optimism looks at the evidence to see whether [the evidence] allows us to infer that we can do ‘x’ or ‘y.’ Hope says, ‘I don’t care. I’m gonna do it anyway.’”

Some say that it matters what does and what does not get baked into us birth? And, just to play Tasmanian Devil’s advocate, other say that it doesn’t really matter at all, that it’s who we choose to be that really matters. What do we think? What’s true for us? What masks will we choose to wear on this mysterious Halloween? And more importantly, how will we nurture ourselves as we live behind them? To the fierce and powerful Tasmanian devil and angels that live inside us all, may we find joy this Halloween.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

“The Tasmanian Devil is on the loose!!” That’s the call. The response is simple. It is simply this: “Run! Run! Run for your lives!!!!”

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tasmanian_devil

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KS5qqhwya4>