

In Your Own Skin

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Ancient Witness: Micah 6:6-8

I want to start with part of a great poem by May Sarton this morning:

*Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces.*

The journey toward one's true self can take "time, many years and places." So much of our lives we wear masks, "other people's faces." We lose track of who we are, and many of us spend the rest of our lives trying to discover our true identity, our true self.

I think that this is the essential religious task—to become ourselves. Yet how difficult this can be! It often means being "dissolved and shaken" and requires sometimes painful stripping away the layers of ego and false identity. And taking the perilous journey toward one's true self and true calling requires courage and passion.

Thomas Merton, that great spiritual writer, wrote about the primary spiritual task as becoming who we truly are. "Every one of us is shadowed by...a false self," he wrote.

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered. Thus I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glories like bandages... (New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 29ff.)

And so the primary spiritual task is to become aware of this false self and to let it go—to drop one's masks—and discover one's true self. Merton wrote that when we find our true self we find God, and when we find God we find our true self.

"The first step toward finding God," he wrote, "is to discover the truth about myself." So to discover God means first to drop our defenses, our illusory self, with true openness and humility. This is why Abraham Heschel, that great Jewish theologian, would say, "The ultimate sin is the refusal of humans to become who we are."

What I want to suggest to you today is that there is an insoluble connection between working to transform the world and discovering and becoming ourselves. The inner journey inward and the journey outward are dependent upon each other.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer puts it this way:

The movements that transform us, our relations, and our world emerge from the lives of people who decide to care for their authentic selfhood...

They decide to live “divided no more.” They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside. They decide to claim authentic selfhood and act it out—and their decisions ripple out to transform the society in which they live, serving the selfhood of millions of others.

In other words, the great prophets are not people who set out to change the world. They are people who decide to become who they are. Changing the world is a side effect. The prophet is someone who acts not to achieve some noble purpose; it is someone who acts because she must. A prophet is simply true to oneself. Without compromise.

This is far easier to talk about than it is to do. Because often the social system threatens punishment if you claim who you are. There are many who are pushed to the margins and who are expected to pretend they're someone they are not. They are expected to accept the role, to be quiet and invisible. Those who dare to step forward to claim more for themselves, to claim equality, respect, or even basic necessities, experience reprisal, loss, even violence. So claiming authentic selfhood can be risky.

But there is another reason this is difficult. Such honesty means that one sees in oneself and others both the good and the bad. Just as it takes courage to stand up to the powers of society and live open, truthful lives, it takes a different kind of courage to see oneself clearly, honestly and without becoming defensive.

The prophet, Micah, answered the question, “What does God require of you?” He said, “To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” On one hand, the basic human calling is to work to transform this world, work for justice, for peace, for the establishment of the reign of God. On the other hand, there is the call to humility, to see oneself with brutal clarity, and to claim in oneself both the good and the bad. There is an insoluble connection between working to transform the world and discovering and becoming ourselves. Do justice and walk humbly. They cannot be separated. And the human vocation, the call of faith, is to do *both*, not just one or the other.

I think that this is an especially important message for those of us in the United Church of Christ. We are a church that is in touch with the call to transform this world and to work for justice. And this is a great thing, one of the reasons why I love this denomination. We are not afraid to challenge the status quo, to advocate for the underdog, to agitate for political and social change for a more humane and compassionate society. This is so missing among the Christian voices today, and I am grateful that we can be a part of God's great work for peace and justice on earth. “But humility,” writes Jim Wallis, “is a difficult virtue for those who are called to a prophetic vocation—people like us.”

Humility is difficult when you're always calling other people—the church, the nation, and the world—to stop doing the things you think are wrong and start doing the things you think are right.

Humility is difficult for the bearers of radical messages.

When we're always calling other people to repent and change, it's not always easy to hear that message for ourselves.

I want to suggest that there is a real and very deep tension between humility and the prophetic vocation. And most prophetic Christians I have known—present company and preacher included—are really not very good at humility...

Just look at the qualities necessary for the prophetic vocation: The capacity to speak clearly, strongly, boldly, decisively, distinctively, and of course, visibly. I would say, from my experience, that none of those qualities lead directly to humility.

Likewise, the call to be and offer an alternative reality, community, vision, lifestyle, etc., requires an energy and confidence that, again, is not necessarily prone to humility.

So—and I will speak strictly for myself here—the call to humility is something that I really need to hear. When we preach for “justice to roll down like waters,” it is very difficult not to fall into being self-righteous. When we become angry at the needless pain and suffering that so many experience, it is easy to slip into a self-righteous indignation.

Most people believe that only perfect people can be prophetic. Only saints can call for justice. But if that were true, the world would be silent. And how tragic that would be. But I know what they mean. How can I have the confidence to speak against abuse, injustice and evil if I don't have my act own together? Sometimes I think that the only way I can have credibility is to be blameless. Perfect. Bullet-proof.

But wanting to appear righteous, pure, blameless, perfect—like some super Christian—is a false self, and it yields a false, shallow confidence. When you think about it, what we are doing is quite audacious; we're offering an alternative Christian perspective. So it is understandable that we would arm ourselves as best we can against any criticism.

But here is another major idea I want to propose: True confidence comes through humility. It comes being comfortable in your own skin. And when we are putting up a front—pretending to be the kindest, smartest, most loving, toughest, most courageous, whatever—we are adopting a mask, a false self, and we are not in our own skin. And this only exacerbates our insecurities. It gives only a false and fleeting confidence.

“The secret of my identity,” wrote Merton, “is hidden in the love and mercy of God.” And we experience this when we are not pretending to be perfect.

An acquaintance recently reminded me of a great line by Anthony de Mello. He was referring to that well-known book that has become part of the American lexicon, *I'm O.K., You're O.K.* He said,

I'm going to write a book someday and the title will be I'm an Ass, You're an Ass. That's the most liberating, wonderful thing in the world, when you openly admit you're an ass. It's wonderful. When people tell me, "You're wrong," I say, "What can you expect of an ass?"

Humility. It is liberating. And it can lead to a true confidence. Here's what I believe: By embracing our imperfections we are then more able to embrace our goodness as well, because we are embracing our true selves. And that requires embracing the whole package, not just part. By accepting our weakness, we can more truly accept our strengths. When we constantly try to hold up this inflated view of ourselves, we cannot claim our true strengths because everything is a "strength."

Some churches ritualize this every Sunday with the Prayer of Confession. But truly accepting our weaknesses cannot be done in a mere 30 seconds a week. At best, it is a reminder that this is a way of living. It needs to be more than words for us to really embrace our shortcomings, failings and imperfections. But when this happens, we can then truly embrace our strengths, claim our goodness and beauty, and be comfortable in our own skin. And this is a liberating and freeing experience.

And by seeing both the good and the bad in ourselves, we can see not just the bad in our would-be opponents. We see the divine image in them, as well. And as Jesus advocated, we can actually have love and compassion for our enemies. And this is the only position in which we can confidently work for justice and transformation in this world. As Richard Rohr said,

Before enlightenment, all fear, judgment, and criticism is stated in the second person: "you are." After enlightenment, all criticism is henceforth stated in the first person: "we are."

Now, do I actually do this personally? Do I claim my true self and embrace the whole me? Do I operate with humility and true confidence, comfortable in my own skin? Love my enemies? Sometimes. That's who I am—and who I'm becoming.