

The Costumes We Wear

Let me start by telling you a truth about myself. Now, this may be hard for some of you to accept, so I encourage you to keep an open heart and mind as I reveal this truth to you.

I don't like chocolate.

I know. I know. It's weird. But I thought if I just got that out of the way in my first sermon here, you'd all look past your prejudices and maybe come to trust and accept me in all my non-chocolate liking ways.

And I know I'm not the only one. So, if you like me, don't particularly have a taste for chocolate, please be brave and raise your hand.

(It is so good to not be alone in this)

What's even weirder, for me, is that I've NEVER liked chocolate. And to be honest, I'm not really that into sweets kind of at all. So, as you can imagine, as a kid Halloween was kind of a weird holiday for me. Because I was that strange child who wasn't that excited about candy.

But there was one thing I did get really excited about: Costumes.

Halloween felt like one of the only days of the year where I could actually live out my dreams and I could truly become and be whoever I wanted to be. I mean, what other day of the year do you get to say to your mom or dad "Hey! I want to be a superhero" and they say "Totally. You can totally be superhero!"

Some of my favorite costumes as a kid included: being a care bear, a mechanic, a pilot, and, of course, my most favorite, when I was nine I dressed a Lt. Cm. Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

And I still really distinctly remember how it felt when I saw the look on people's faces when I came to the door as Data. I remember that some people had no idea who I was, despite my far oversized Starfleet Uniform, but when one of the adults DID know who I was, boy, was I excited. A couple of the parents who stayed behind geeked out with me. It was like I was more than just little me, I was representing something that we had in common. For one night, I got to see what it felt like to put on that identity and have other people recognize me as it. I even acted like Data does – he's an android and has no emotions. And I tried to be very emotion-less.

As I got older and stopped going out Trick or Treating for Halloween, there were other opportunities to wear costumes, but it was never quite as exciting as walking around my neighborhood with a good friend pretending to be an astronaut, or batman, or whatever it was I was trying to be.

But the thing is, as I got older, and as we all get older, we don't stop wearing costumes.

I'm wearing a costume right now. Yes, this robe, this tie, it all signifies something about me, an identity. And that identity is minister and student. And you, my internship congregation, by virtue of sitting in these pews today and listening to this sermon, are accepting that as my identity. Partially because I'm standing up here, but partially because of this costume.

Ministers aren't the only ones who wear costumes. There's a reason that many of the things I dress up as a child were professions (mechanic, pilot, astronaut) – many people wear costumes as a part of their jobs. Even if that costume is a suit, or is business casual, in some ways it is still a costume.

This isn't JUST about clothes. I mean, clothing is one part of a costume, no doubt, but it's not only what I mean when I talk about the costumes we wear. Historically costume meant any outfit one wore, such as a swimming costume, but today, according to Wikipedia, "usage of "costume" has become more limited to unusual or out-of-date clothing and to attire intended to evoke a change in identity, such as theatrical, Halloween, and mascot costumes."

You hear that, invoke a change in identity. Such as the identity that we have at our jobs and the identity that we have at home? Or the identity that we have as a parent, a child, a friend? Do those identities come with costumes?

And like Pablo Neruda reminded us in the poem today, sometimes our costumes become so much a part of ourselves that we are indistinguishable from them. He and his suit become one.

And as we become indistinguishable from our costumes, we lose our sense of play, of "trying it out" of costumes that are daring and exciting and new. Our costumes become a front we put up for the world to see.

I was out for a walk the other day and I saw a child, probably around 3 years old wearing a rain jacket. Except, it wasn't any ordinary rain jacket, it was in the style of a fire fighter's uniform. Eventually, somehow, it becomes inappropriate for me to wear that walking down the street.

I was reminded of this last night at the Halloween Potluck, here at the church. A few weeks I had asked Nathan and Heather and the other staff if I should wear a costume.

"Well... I guess SOME adults wear costumes..." It did not make me feel particularly encouraged to wear a costume. But next year, I'm going to! And I encourage you all to do the same.

Now this month's theme is Gospel, the practice of seeking the truth. And I think there is this idea, this very prevalent idea, that when we wear costumes we are obscuring the truth. But friends, I'm not so sure that's always the case. Because sometimes I think costumes can help us find the truth. They are ways of trying on different identities and seeing if they fit. Even for a night. Even for a moment. In some ways, as a kid, being able to be Lt. Cmdr. Data on Halloween was a way of expressing a truth about myself that I wasn't able to express the rest of the year.

And yet. Sometimes, we wear costumes that do obscure our identities – our true selves. For self-preservation. Because we have to for our jobs, or our families, or, or, or...

The truth is we are always wearing costumes. Always projecting something.

My friends, I have to tell you, that I have a lot of experience with costumes. And not just at Halloween. In some ways I wore a costume for the first 28 years of my life. I am a transgender man. Which means

that when I was born, and the doctor said those words “It’s a girl,” my identity wasn’t set, but rather the costume I was supposed to wear was. And so I did. I accepted the costume of “girl.” I wore dresses and was treated accordingly and nobody knew that there was actually a little boy in there.

Except I knew. On some level, I knew.

I did not know that there was another costume I could wear.

But that’s not quite the whole truth. Because some days, when I was told I could wear a costume, I go to be a little bit more me. I remember the year I dressed as a car mechanic. I had short hair, wore my dad’s work suit, put grease on my face. I relished in the neighbors thinking I was a boy. And when I looked in the mirror I saw a deeper truth that wasn’t about being a mechanic (surely, they are female mechanics), but about gender.

And as scary as it was to actually put on boy’s clothing and dress up, Halloween gave me the chance to experience that in a safe way. To try that identity on.

I feel like it was well said in the television show *Transparent* when the main character Mora, a transgender woman, comes out as transgender to her daughter, who asks “Dad, does this mean you will be dressing up as a woman from now on?”

“No, no,” says Mora, “What is mean is that my whole life I’ve been dressing up as a man.”

It took me until January of 2014 – yes, just last year – to stop dressing up as a woman. I went to Ghana with what’s called a border crossing trip with my school. We were in a small village and the women on the trip, of which I was one by default at the time, were instructed that we needed to wear a skirt everywhere by one of our American guides. I thought this wouldn’t be a problem. I knew I didn’t like wearing skirts, but I figured, whatever, it’s just two weeks, I will get over it. I will adjust.

But the days wore on. And I noticed, there were quite a few women who were NOT wearing skirts, and when I brought this up to the guide he simply said “I’d be more comfortable if you wore a skirt.”

“Well, I’d be more comfortable if I didn’t,” I said.

Nena, an older women in the group came to me afterwards and she said “I love wearing skirts, but I can see that for you, it’s a costume. I wouldn’t want to wear a costume for two weeks.” Her words rang true.

It was not long after that that I realized I couldn’t wear the costume of “woman” anymore.

So I ask you, what costumes are you wearing? Because you are wearing one.

Ask yourself, if your costume serving you or is it holding you back?

In your order of service today, you’ll see a quote from the play *Hamlet*: “To thine own self be true.” And, if you’ve read the play, you might remember character of Polonius, the man whom this famous quote comes from.

But, if you're like me, you read the play in high school and then promptly forgot what happens. So let me catch you up.

Polonius is an advisor to the king, and generally considered to be wrong in every single judgment he makes. A fool, or a take on that idea of "the fool", his statement "To thine own self be true," was not meant to be some sort of "feel good" be true to yourself wisdom, but rather something that shows how annoying and self-centered the character is.

Interesting, isn't it? For the amount of times I have heard this stated in a positive light, I think it's easy to forget the reasoning behind it.

Do you have a personal truth? Forget how it impacts anyone else, be true to yourself!

What does this say of evil? Of truths that do hurt others?

Some might say my truth, being a transgender man, that that is hurtful to others. Many LGBTQ people get that reaction when they come out. Honestly, people said it to ME when I came out. But to that I ask, how?

I think Polonius' words ring true, despite their intention. Shakespeare didn't realize that in this comment he was holding a statement that actually held a nugget of wisdom. If we are wearing a costume to please others, if we are projecting an identity so that it pleases others, we are hurting ourselves.

Now, I know, we are Unitarian Universalists after all, and we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, so if your truth is one of violence against others, if your truth hurts this, our living earth, the one we've promised to cherish, then, well, that truth is not one you should wear as a costume.

But I'm willing to bet that's not your truth.

Here, at this church, we seek truth in LOVE. And if we honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, surely that means we honor the inherent worth and dignity of ourselves as well.

And it means we can honor our truth.

So, I ask you again: What costumes are you wearing?

And why are you wearing them?

Does your costume help make you a little more you? Or are you hiding behind it, because you have to?

Perhaps, perhaps more important than all of this projecting, more important than the costumes you wear in the outside world are the ones you wear for yourself.

What I chose what identity to express to the outside world every morning, when I put on my costume and my mask, I am doing it for you, yes, but I'm also doing it so that I can better be myself.

So this is my prayer for you. That you wear the costume that most reflects your truth. Even if it's just on Halloween.

May it be so. Amen.