

Week 16: The Fear (and Joy) of Removing the Masks We Wear

“Daddy, will other kids get more candy because their costumes are scarier?”

We are minutes away from taking to the streets for the annual Halloween ritual. My daughter is standing in front of me, dressed in white from head to toe, holding above her a transparent umbrella with homemade eyes taped to it and purple and pink streamers hanging from it. She’s a jellyfish with shimmering tentacles. And she’s not one bit scary. But I don’t have to think twice before smiling and answering. “No, Sweetie, with trick-or-treating, all you have to do is show up, and everybody who shows up gets exactly the same amount of candy. No matter how big or how little, no matter how young or how old, and no matter how scary or not scary you are.” She smiles and skips away, tentacles flowing behind her.

I smile, too, because all of a sudden I like Halloween a lot more.

Especially when I imagine my daughter six weeks later learning a very different holiday lesson about what she has to do to receive good things. Most of us know the lines by heart: “You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I’m telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town. He’s making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice. He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake. Santa Clause is coming to town.”

Yikes.

We teach our kids the most loving of their mythical guardians will punish them if they feel or express their sadness. And we teach them the gifts of the season aren’t really gifts—they’re payment for acting the way we want them to act. We teach them, even as kids, to work hard for their holiday bonus. Of course, it’s just a song, and we don’t really penalize our kids for bad behavior with fewer Christmas gifts. The truth is, the song is probably a better representation of how we act the *rest* of the year. How many times and in how many subtle ways are we always sending each other this message: you have to *be* more and *do* more if you want good things from me?

I smile, as my daughter skips away because, in comparison, the implicit message of Halloween is quite lovely: “Come as you are. There are plenty of good things to go around. No matter who you are, no matter how you look, and no matter how you perform. Everyone is identically loveable in our eyes.”

And I smile even bigger thirty minutes later, when I see my son and daughter have abandoned their costumes altogether. My son’s terrifying Zombie pirate mask—already soaked on the inside with sweat and condensation—has been torn off and stuffed in his bag of candy. My daughter’s jellyfish umbrella—adorable but

not terribly pragmatic—is in her mother’s hand. Now, he looks like an ordinary boy in torn clothes, and she looks like an ordinary girl in white clothes.

And, yet, *they’re still receiving the same amount of candy.*

I smile because my kids have simply done away with the formality. In doorway after doorway, kind souls are not giving out candy because of the quality of the costumes; they’re giving it out because they know what exists *underneath* the costume. They see the lovely little one beneath the layers and are sending a clear message: thanks for showing up, you matter, you are valuable, and you are all equally beloved.

In other words, Halloween is a night full of *grace*.

Grace is what happens when someone or Someone sees through our many masks, recognizing and celebrating the innocent little one that still resides beneath all of our disguises. Grace is the presence that announces: underneath all your layers, there is a true self buried, and it is beautiful and beloved. Grace is the assurance that everyone is of equal value and equally worthy, so all you have to do to be loved is show up.

Of course, there are places in the world where we need to do more than just show up. For instance, in school, we need to study and learn, and at work, we need to perform and produce. And, of course, we should be graded and paid differently based upon our performance.

But maybe, just maybe, we already have *plenty* of places like that in the world.

Maybe we don’t need to create any more of those places in our homes and our friendships and our communities and our holiday rituals. Maybe we need more places like the streets of my neighborhood on Halloween night—places where you’re loved just for showing up and seen for the lovely thing underneath your layers. And if you choose to take off your mask?

More power to you.