

Freedom in Vulnerability

By Willa Fahrbach

When did we stop screaming? We used to beat our fists on the floor, shriek until everyone heard us, and sob until our eyes were red. As children, when we felt things, we didn't tuck those feelings away. No, everything we felt was on display and everything we saw we announced, no matter the reactions we might receive. "I don't like that lady," we might say, scowling viciously at the passerby who'd slighted our fairy costume with some patronizing comment, a person who was very likely still in hearing range. Back in the temper tantrum days, masks were for robbers with sacks over their shoulders, and we weren't robbers. We were ourselves.

I can't remember the first time I started slipping on a mask in the morning, wearing it more comfortably than my own skin. Maybe fourth grade? Maybe before then. Often, my mask is one of joy, betraying no inner conflict to the outer world. I feel selfish if I'm unhappy around other people, if I let my mask drop. There's a pushing persistence that my wretchedness is for myself, that even if I talk incessantly the whole day long, my sorrow should at least be kept silent. And though it sometimes feels like lying, like I'm obscuring my own identity, the mask is comfortable. It gives me a hiding place.

My mask was woven the most tightly in seventh grade, when my dad was in chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I wore my mask threadbare from the effort of keeping at-home stress from escaping during the school day. "My dad has cancer!" I would announce to acquaintances with a gigantic smile, daring them to laugh, daring them to feel sorry for me. Every morning, my clumsy hands grasped at the air and tugged together the semblance of a mask, which I pasted over my face with painstaking precision. And later, I took the fabric from

my mask and used it to shroud the topic of my dad's cancer in my mind. It wasn't until I went to camp this past summer that I really talked about it—the cancer or the concealed feelings—at all.

Camp Kesem, a nationwide organization that provides summer camp to kids whose parents have or have had cancer, became one of the only places where I could feel myself shrugging off my mask. Last summer, I started out shy: closed off, mask up. It always takes me a bit to warm up to people, especially strangers, so at first I kept myself away. But the “cabin chats,” the long, guided conversations I had with kids my age each night, made it possible for me to pull back the barbed wire I usually wrapped my vulnerability with.

On the third night, we sat in a circle on the hardwood floor. The cabin was shrouded in darkness, the only light being a glow stick we passed around. We were all tense, fidgeting with the uncomfortable fumble of crossing the gap into an uncomfortable topic. Our parents' cancer. But as I spoke into the darkness words I'd never even spoken aloud to myself, I felt a twisting, wrenching feeling in my gut. As I listened to the other kids share feelings I thought were only my own, I could feel the threads of our masks connecting. We talked about the unspoken rule of keeping quiet about cancer, among friends and family back home. A lot of us felt like we were always carrying certain obligations: don't bring it up, don't make people uncomfortable, keep it to yourself. And here we were, breaking all those rules. I imagined that some invisible force, God or other, was tugging on the strings of our masks, pulling them apart, little by little, word by word. This higher power was seeing us without masks, our unconcealed selves, and helping us to reveal those selves to each other.

After that cabin chat, I felt achingly relieved. We were all crying, some of us sobbing, and kind of clutching each other in the middle of the cabin. The eleven of us searched the bathrooms for paper towels since there were no tissues to dry our tears on, we stayed out on the

back deck shivering and whispering, and we tossed cancer jokes back and forth like candy, because we all knew what it felt like. Our masks were completely gone. For the next few days we continued to cry together, cackle together, chase each other in kayaks and with paintballs, and most importantly, talk to each other. Without the barrier of our invisible masks, I learned more about those ten kids in five days than almost anyone I've ever known in my entire life. They really knew me—the real me, weightless with the freedom of vulnerability, dizzy with that freedom.

Eight months later, I can still feel that freedom within reach. I usually put on some kind of mask in the mornings—to conceal my exhaustion or obscure my discomfort with enthusiasm. But I've been trying to wear my mask more consciously. There's a pain in recognizing that you're hiding yourself, frustration in looking out at a group of people and realizing you're not comfortable around them, that you can't seem to let your mask fall away.

But I remind myself that although the mask is of my own making, it's not a true part of me. Sometimes, I reach up and tug holes loose in the fabric. No one has the capacity to be mask-free always, but it's important to find people and places that allow you that freedom. I try asking my friends questions that lift their masks, too. Sometimes, to speak is to start the unraveling of threads, to be the connection. So I've been trying to speak. I don't let myself suffocate the breath from my inner self and I let myself feel safe without a hiding place. I find comfort in vulnerability. And although I haven't been throwing too many temper tantrums lately, sometimes I even scream.