

# Masking My Insecurities

Rieve Laurence Randall

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I have been wearing a mask my entire life. We are quite good friends, actually, and our arrangement is as simple as the protection he provides me. I ignore him at home, where his safety is not even an inkling in the back of my tranquil mind. And then, when my heart begins to race at the idea of talking too loud, speaking for myself, or trying to stand out, I put him on. There he remains, with me until no one is around and the malodorous scent of judgment has left the room. Then, and only then, can I take him off. In March of 2020 my friend appeared to me in the form of tangible blue fabric, beginning a new chapter in my life that has changed me forever.

During the peak of COVID-19, I felt surrounded by division. But as I looked around me at the colorful masks and anxious faces, I began to see that we also had something that united us: determination. None of us knew when, but it was undeniable that we would get through this - and we did. The number of infections shrunk to the point where my dad, an accomplished physical therapist, wouldn't come home nearly as exhausted as before, the events of the day having previously left him with little enthusiasm for evenings spent with the family. There were social changes, too. Grandparents were finally able to hold the delicate little grandchild that hadn't looked this adorable over the many zoom calls from their tiny hospital bed. Like the rest of the world, I was thrilled.

Many people have claimed that COVID-19 created an unintentional study on society. If this is true, I would argue that my household made a fine Petri Dish. We were about the most skeptical family in our small town. As a healthcare specialist, it became my dad's duty to keep those at his facility safe. We promised to help him with this endeavor by distancing ourselves from everyone around us. It sounds hard, but isolation didn't seem all that bad as long as everyone else was doing it. But the unseen evil pounced soon enough. The growing onslaught of depression was a disease in and of itself. Finding my way through the suffocating haze and battling those bland emotions I felt was about as easy as taking off my mask.

When COVID-19 became rampant, I envisioned this image depicting COVID-19 as a fire-breathing dragon. There was a knight beside the beast, holding a syringe in one hand and a shield with the emblem of a mask in the other. It sounds like the corniest thing in the world, like a column in the comic section of a newspaper that you don't even bother reading. For me, it accurately describes my anxieties and my defense against them. But what if the dragon stands for something else? If one were to replace the knight's syringe with a pill of serotonin, there could arise an argument that the dragon symbolizes depression. And that depression engulfed me in suffocating flames.

My mask makes sure no one catches a glimpse of my forced smile behind the wall of blue fabric. It gives me something to hide behind, an extra layer of protection from the

less-than-pleasant experiences of high school. It hasn't been easy to continue to wear my mask in an environment that doesn't see its need. Our school was one of the first in the state to re-open during the pandemic. Distance learning wasn't desirable, but neither were the many consequences I felt would arise after this decision. Thankfully, an option was still in place for people like me who wished to stay in the confines of home. My mom, however, was not as fortunate. As a teacher she could not choose to make sure she and her family were safe. It was ironic, really: a science teacher being told to ignore the very subject she teaches in order to satisfy the wants of others. The school gave her two options: go to work in an unsafe environment, or don't work there at all. I was furious. Insignificant as we were, all my mom could do was request N95 masks and pray for the best.

After masks were made optional in the Spring of 2022, my maskless friends gave me confused expressions as if I had grown a third eye overnight, and some teachers had the nerve to make fun of masking policies as if I was not sitting three desks away from them. Now if someone asks me why my face is covered, I come up with an answer that will create the least amount of questions: "I have a compromised immune system," or "My dad works with old people." It's just easier that way.

The idea of letting go of my mask scares me more than I like to admit. And no - it isn't just the idea of contracting a deadly virus and not knowing what it could do in the future that frightens me. What keeps me up at night and torments me throughout

the day is the persistent thought that if I stop wearing a mask, I will lose the one thing that shields my social insecurities. The battle I am fighting isn't going to be won with policies or CDC recommendations.

I think about the possibility of unmasking every day, but it feels like a joke. I refuse to imagine life without the protection it offers. Many people have asked me when I think I will stop wearing a mask and come to terms with the immunity that three booster shots already give me. Usually I shrug my shoulders and sigh. But every once in a while, if you catch me in a good mood, I might just be honest with you. Because if you really think about it, we all wear masks. We are all trying to hide something.

“My mask?” I ask. “Which one?”