

The face of reality

"I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another." - William Shakespeare

If you put 200 people, diverse in as many ways as possible, in a theatre and then project the world going by in real time, no doubt these 200 folks will have 200 different opinions, reactions, observations, judgments, or takes on what they're viewing. Why?

As these folks sit and watch, the guide that informs their reactions and responses is known as their "internal map of reality." While "Reality" is what is passing by on the screen, most everyone is seeing that reality from their own "inside reality" – their beliefs, assumptions, perceptions and misperceptions, premises, "stories" they've created, world views, paradigms and whatever other terms one wants to use to describe their individual, personal database contained in each person's brain. No two people are "hardwired" the same; thus, their views about life and living are products of their respective life experiences, beginning at birth.

So, then, what is "real" reality and what is the reality that is "created" by the viewer's interpretation of what they're experiencing? The answer to this question can help us understand why we experience so much conflict in dealing not only with ourselves but with one another at work, at home, at play – in relationship.

In Zen and Buddhism, a "koan" is a challenging question or statement that urges one to engage in reflection, leading to a higher state of understanding or awareness. There is a Zen koan, or saying, that says: "Show me your original face before you were born." A variation of this koan says, "Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born."

The notion underneath this koan is to ask us to stretch – in a way that allows us to access our True, Real and Authentic Self – the self we are/were before we were born. In this process, we transcend our "database" of thoughts, concepts, beliefs, etc., and move to a place of no-mind – where we can experience Reality as it truly is, experience our self as we truly are. Our true face before we were born is actually who we were (and still are!) before we were shaped and crafted by our "life experience."

"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true." - Nathaniel Hawthorne

The koan is not meant to cause a reactive: "Hey, how can I have a face, or exist, before I was born?" or "Hey, I don't believe in evolution." It *is* a question of "Who am I without my set of beliefs or my image of myself or my identity that I have adopted for myself?"

In the process of reflecting on the koan, we can begin to see how we've become addicted to "my reality," – my beliefs, assumptions, theories, perceptions, perspectives, etc. Deep reflection can also support us to flow in a space of no-mind, an "original space" of mental quietude, unencumbered and not jerked around by our thoughts and thought patterns.

The point is that when we become more natural and internally quiet, and we are able to let go, we can better interact with others, not as a robotic, human collection of beliefs, opinions, or assumptions, etc., but as one who is open, curious, and accepting in the way we act and in the way we experience the world.

"False face must hide what the false heart doth know." - William Shakespeare

We gave (and give) birth to our self every time we draw a conclusion about "who I am." Each time we make a decision about our self – "I'm not good with people," "I'm a great manager," "I have problems with difficult people," "I'm not very smart," – we create our identity, our subjective "face and move farther away from our "original face."

But we all have an "original face" – who each of us was before we identified with anything. And, we can return to our original face, the place of inner peace and well-being if we learn to let go of our "false face." Our "original face" is not only devoid of the superficial elements of make-up or Botox, but the "false face" of beliefs and assumptions about who we think we are, most often, beliefs that really don't serve us and cause us pain and suffering.

When we don't take the people, events and circumstances of our world "personally," we can move into a place of deep relaxation and peace – our "original face." Here, we can watch the projection of the world go by right in front of us at work, at home, at play and in relationship without the need to become reactive. Rather, our experience is one without tension, pretension, fakeness, or phoniness – none of the "shoulds" or "ought tos" telling us how to be or what to do.

"Don't laugh at a youth for his affectations; he is only trying on one face after another to find his own." - Logan Pearsall Smith

So, what is it that initially takes us away from our "original face?" In a word, survival. First, as young children our survival – physical, emotional, mental, psychological, spiritual – depended on our unconsciously taking on others' beliefs as to how we should behave. If we behaved accordingly, we "survived". If not, we lost out on love, recognition, approval and for some, safety and security. As we developed, we took on more and more beliefs, assumptions and ways of doing and being that we felt would help us "survive" – at work, at home, at play and in relationship.

Now, as adults, we no longer have access to our "original face." We wear masks, and have various personas we take off and put on daily so we can "survive." Having lost our "original face," we've become unconsciously controlled by our ego mind as reflected by our inability to just let the world pass by as we sit in that theatre. Rather, we have the unconscious need to be reactive, judgmental, opinionated, and "right." We put our best face forward, to survive. We hold on to all our faces so we have them just in case.

"Solitude: sweet absence of faces." - Milan Kundera

When we let go of our false faces, let go of our need to "survive," let go of our survival scripts, habitual and patterned ways of thinking, doing and being, and allow ourselves to sink into and penetrate deeply into our core Self, we set ourselves free – free to allow our "original face" – free from self-limiting, self-defeating, and self-sabotaging thoughts, beliefs, "stories" and identifications. In this place we can sit in the theatre of life and experience the world – at work, at home, at play and in relationship – without needing to take it "personally."

Our "original face" is what supports us to see the freshness of life, in every moment, free of conflict and the need to be judgmental, confrontational, combative or controlling.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- When was the last time you experienced your "original face?"
- Aside from physical elements such as make-up, surgery, or hair dye, etc., what mental, emotional or attitudinal elements obscure your original face?
- Do you tend to take people, events or circumstances "personally?" If so, why do you think that is?
- What words or phrases do you use to define "life?"

- Do any of your words or phrases point to some aspect of "survival?"
- Do you recall behaving in ways you didn't want, as a child, just to get your parents' or primary caregiver's attention, love, acceptance or approval? Do you behave in those ways now to get others' acceptance and approval?
- If you were sitting in that theatre, would you be able to simply watch, witness and observe without feeling the need to judge, critique or inject your \$.02? Be honest. How about in your everyday world?
- In addition to your closet of clothes, do you have a closet of faces and personas you take out and put on for different events, circumstances and people? Why is that?
- Would folks describe you as authentic? How do you know? Would you ask them? If not, why not?
- What was being authentic like for you when you were growing up? Were you able to have your "original face?" Were you encouraged to have your "original face?"
- Can you envision a world where everyone wore their "original face?"

"There are people who think that everything one does with a serious face is sensible." - Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

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