

Disguise: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Disguise.”

Readers Write in the [February 2023](#) issue



(Clockwise from upper left: iStock / Getty images by don white / Pirotechnik / nit0100 / danishkhan)

In response to our request for essays on disguise, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **Splash** and **Sleep**—[read more](#).

I was in line at the liquor store with a bottle of gin in my hand and a former colleague in front of me. Years before, he had been one of my professors. I was wearing my COVID mask; he was not. This gave me the advantage of recognizing him while keeping my identity hidden, and I liked it that way, because the prospect of engaging with him, even via shifty-eyed glances, was exhausting. Everything was exhausting.

Four years earlier, he had been one of several faculty who drafted a letter to the dean accusing me of holding views contrary to the mission of the university. On their urging, the dean refused to renew my teaching contract. Shortly afterward, an article was published on a far-right website attacking me for my feminism, the books I assigned in classes, and my criticisms of the pro-life movement. With the circumstances of my dismissal already in the national news, I was happy to talk to reporters about how my former colleagues had turned on me, deliberately misread me.

One book I had assigned which my attackers took issue with was Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, a novel about a pedophile. I assigned it in tandem with Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, about her experience as a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran during the Iranian Revolution. After the revolution, women who had been free to choose what to do with their bodies were forced into rigid dress codes, and Nafisi was dismissed from her university job for refusing to wear a head covering.

So Nafisi organized a secret book club, where seven of her female students came to her home to discuss forbidden novels, *Lolita* among them. Nafisi and her students talk about how the pedophile in the novel doesn't just rape and abuse his victim, Dolores. He rewrites her story and deprives her even of her name. This, Nafisi says, is what totalitarian regimes do, too. Not only do they coerce and abuse. They rewrite your identity.

The motif of the veil is an important theme in Nafisi's memoir, and the women in her book club have differing views on its significance. Being forced to cover one's face can be oppressive, an obliteration. At the same time, covering one's face can be a marker of religious identity, a sign of participation in community life.

In many cultures, women have found freedom and power in hiddenness, facelessness, disguise. Disguise has allowed us to rewrite our identities on our own terms. Sometimes it has simply allowed us to be left alone.

This was something I came to appreciate in the first year of the pandemic. I was happy to wear a mask not only because of the safety it afforded me and others but also because it gave me a degree of anonymity, which was freeing. It did not take long for mask wearing to become politicized, of course, so wearing a mask became a cultural signifier as well as a disguise. In the grocery store, I could look for other

masked faces and know that here were others who shared at least some of my beliefs and concerns.

Standing behind the professor in the liquor store, I wondered whether he recognized me and pretended not to. Had the people who had gotten me fired thought I would just go away, vanish and be silent, never show up at any communal venue to embarrass them with my ongoing existence? Exhausting though it was to encounter them, often I made no effort to hide or look away. Sometimes I wanted them to see me and remember.

Sometimes, though, it was a relief to be invisible, to step outside the story they had written for me, to be merely the masked woman, residing in a blank space where I could write my own life without their erasures and misinterpretations.

Rebecca Bratten Weiss
Hopedale, OH

As a second grader playing the role of Jesus on the last day of vacation Bible school, my costume and props consisted of a robe, flip-flops, a fake beard, and several strands of thin rope about two feet long, bunched together and duct-taped at one end to make a handle of sorts. This was my whip to drive out the money changers from the temple as I shouted, "It is written that my house shall be called a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves!"

I was a well-mannered, soft-spoken only child whose parents had divorced the prior year. I was also a compassionate kid with a good sense of humor. I don't recall feeling or expressing much hurt or anger about my father leaving my mother and me. Looking back, I wonder if I just held it in, or if I disguised my hurt and anger by being caring and funny. And I wonder if on that Friday morning at South Fork Baptist Church, putting on a costume helped me to drop my disguise. Because I really got into the role of God's furious Son driving out the cheaters. I mean, I really got into it.

I belted out my memorized line between threatening yells and growls, thrashing my whip at the wide-eyed seven-year-old money changers as I knocked over a chair and kicked over a card table littered with fake money. This was not the way we had rehearsed it in class. After my temple tantrum relented and I caught my breath, I remember looking to my teacher for her approval and seeing a stunned expression

instead. She wasn't the only surprised spectator in the pews. The silence lingered a few seconds longer than it should have.

I too was surprised and a bit embarrassed. I also felt something I suspect was a measure of catharsis: the relief of dropping my mask for a moment and releasing my own anger about the injustice in my house.

Ramon Presson
Thompson's Station, TN

"More rice?" the elderly woman asked. Her kind eyes crinkled as she peered up at me, her rice-encrusted paddle poised above the steaming cooker. "You're the pastor's daughter, aren't you?"

I forced a thin-lipped smile as my face burned. I nodded, and she piled more jasmine rice on my plate. I murmured my thanks and veered away from the luncheon line, beelining for an empty table in the corner of the fellowship hall. The pastor's daughter. I jabbed my fork into the stir-fry.

My father, a Chinese seminary professor, preached at various churches. Everywhere we traveled, across seas and states, my siblings and I dealt with the pressures of being the preacher's kids, the golden children of the church. What masks do we expect them to wear?

There was our father, who consistently studied God's word and lived it out. And there was us, his young children, shyly absorbing compliments on his sermons and praise for our good behavior. If only they knew how much I talked back to my mom at home. If only they saw my kid brother's temper or my younger sister's anxiety. It was all a facade.

Whenever I head home from college, I'm still known as the pastor's kid. Back in the shadow of my father's reputation, church people ask for my input, or they ask me to serve as an example for their kids, some of whom are only a few months younger than I am. Again, I feel pressured to put on the mask, to seem wiser than I feel.

"Would you pray for us?" one of the ministers asked me at the luncheon after service. Then, unnecessarily, she turned to the guest pastor. "Anastasia is one of the pastor's children. She's very good."

The guest pastor noticed my discomfort. He gestured to the other young people sitting around the table. “All these kids,” he said, “are very good.”

In my experience of Chinese culture, honor in the family is as important as well-behaved children. Traditional Chinese parents often motivate their children by comparing them with others who seem, on the surface, more accomplished—or, in this case, better behaved. Every academic decathlon and piano recital is held up as an example. It can be even worse in the church. Holiness can be a performance, too.

I once visited a Chinese-speaking church where the pastor used his own daughter’s disobedience as a sermon illustration. “Just this past week,” he said from behind the pulpit, “I was furious at her because she annoyed me so much.” The girl was sitting next to me, but the situation didn’t seem to faze her. She looked resigned.

Her father wasn’t finished. “When was the last time you all apologized to your parents?” Then he paused and directed his gaze at me and my siblings. “I’m sure you kids never have to, because you’re so well-behaved.” He shot his own daughter a meaningful look.

When I visit Chinese-speaking churches with my dad, I meet other preacher’s kids, and almost immediately, I think about how unlike them I am. I study their personalities and analyze their interactions. Do they talk about the world, or do they quote the Bible with every breath? Because I grew up being constantly compared to others, I find myself projecting those same expectations on other PKs. I also expect them to wear a mask.

The pressures are real, and they are constant. Sure, some of us take on the responsibilities of teaching and leading our congregations, but others step away from the church altogether. The mask can disguise us, or it can shape our features. God knows there is only so much a facade can hide.

Anastasia Tie
Tracy, CA

From Frederick Buechner, **The Hungering Dark**:

We wear masks, and with practice we do it better and better, and they serve us well—except that it gets very lonely inside the mask, because inside the mask that each of us wears there is a person who both longs to be known and fears to be known.

At 19, while in the army, I went on a robbery spree. People, businesses—if I thought you had enough money to be worth the trouble, you would become my victim. One day, riding through San Antonio, I noticed a resort hotel that seemed to have only one employee working the counter. The office next to the cash register had a glass door. I could see the safe.

I walked into the place acting as if I'd had a little too much to drink. I approached the counter and slurred, "Can I get a room for two days?" An older woman looked up, smiling, and said, "Sure baby. Will it just be you?" I responded with a nod while she told me about breakfast and checkout times. When she looked back up, I was holding a pistol to her face. Soberly, I stated, "I need all the cash from the drawers, all the money you make change with, then I need you to open the safe."

This woman looked not at me but through me. She smiled and said, "Why, child?"

I demanded that she get moving, and she complied without any further protest. After getting all the cash I demanded, I pointed toward the safe, and she explained that she didn't have access to the office nor the safe. I was frustrated, yet for some reason I believed her. As I was backing away to leave, the woman raised her hand as if to grasp me and said, "Young man, may I please pray for you?"

I stopped in my tracks. Had she hit a button and was trying to delay me? But I said, "Yes ma'am." She prayed for me while I stood holding a bag of money and a pistol at my side pointed toward her. She was calmer than me through it all. She prayed for my forgiveness and that I might one day forgive myself. She prayed that God would give me all that I may need in life. I left there with money but also with unease.

A week later, I was caught in the midst of another robbery and charged with the other robberies that could be linked to me. One aggravated robbery in Texas means serving 5 to 99 years. I know people who received 35 years for one robbery, and I was facing seven charges. One of the state's witnesses was the woman from the

hotel. She took the stand and explained what had transpired that night. When she looked at me, I felt as if I were being stripped to my core. She asked the judge for leniency, saying that I was troubled and needed help.

I received only 28 years for my crimes. I served almost 20. Some disguises can be ripped off in an instant, but mine took years to unravel. In prison, it often felt like a disguise was essential to my survival. But God was not deterred by those circumstances. What did that woman see when she looked at me? What prompted her to pray for me and to speak up for me when she could have condemned me? I believe she saw the praying child my mother raised me to be; she saw hurts and pains that I couldn't explain. Who gave her the eyes to see through disguises like mine?

James Enoch Banks
San Antonio, TX

My fitness tracker flagged clustered heart rate elevations that surprised me. Although medically insignificant, they marked the occasional Sunday mornings that I preached to my new congregation. I immediately remembered the way my heart had pounded in the early months of my medical residency. What would continuous heart rate monitoring have shown then?

As a new physician, I had been miserably frightened by the unknown challenges I faced and the mistakes I might make. The miracle of those days was that I looked calm. I did not intentionally create a disguise. I was always surprised when people made reference to it, as if it reflected my true self. In reality, morning after morning, I ducked into a bathroom to cry. My pulse was rapid. My mouth was dry. Anxiety was the word I chose then to depict my emotional state. In retrospect, abject fear is the more accurate descriptor.

The disguise of calmness felt like a foreign appendage that had been grafted onto me. I was slow to recognize its advantages for medical practice. Yet, it helped as I learned to matter-of-factly ask sensitive or potentially embarrassing questions. I could better elicit cooperation from people who were scared or in pain. I was able to deliver bad news as gently as possible.

Rather than abandon the disguise, eventually I saw that my challenge was to live into it. What I could offer in the face of medical uncertainty was this: listening carefully, establishing priorities, seeking out additional information, reacting in a medically sound and caring manner, and reevaluating in a timeframe appropriate for the circumstance.

For some problems, what I could offer would never be enough. Accepting that reality was and is a process. However, bringing those around me into my routine helped constrain the free-floating angst of others, allowing all of us to become more attentive to the tasks—and the people—at hand. Later in my career a senior colleague told me that the day-to-day tenor of our 60-person unit was calmer for my having joined it.

As I looked toward retirement, my denomination commissioned me as a preaching elder to provide pulpit supply to area churches, and postretirement, I was hired part-time to assist an interim minister. But seeing my heart rate pattern gave me pause. The position asked that I use relational and intellectual skills long fine-tuned in medicine to a different end. Did the increased heart rate mean that I was still my unnerved, insecure self, certain only of my uncertainty? Had I really lived into my calm disguise?

Neither anxiety nor the body's reactions to it, such as an increased heart rate, are by definition pathologic. Rather, anxiety primes the body for response. A mildly anxious edge optimizes execution of all sorts of tasks. The body's reaction is the same for related emotions experienced positively, such as anticipation and excitement. Joyfully, I concluded that I was experiencing both anticipation and excitement with my new position, not the destructive anxiety that had so profoundly shaped my early years of medicine.

Disguises seem disingenuous. In service to authenticity, we may want to rid ourselves of them as quickly as possible. However, my disguise of calmness has been a gift, providing protection and direction. It has been a formative force, such that my disguise is now mostly indistinguishable from my reality. I am thankful.

Lou C. Smith
Slingerlands, NY

Every year for four years or so, I wore the same Halloween costume for trick-or-treating, one of those nylon jumpsuits that tied in the back like a hospital gown and a plastic mask with elastic straps. This one was a skeleton. The jumpsuit was black, and the bones printed on it glowed in the dark.

I could wear the same costume because between the ages of five and eight I did not grow one inch, did not gain one pound. Being ill with tonsillitis and recurrent ear infections will do that to a kid. Since my parents didn't have much money, they sent me out every year in the skeleton that still fit.

We lived in a rural area of central Pennsylvania, so going door-to-door begging candy was not an option. My parents took me in the car. Families lived near one another clannishly, so at the end of the dirt lanes where I was usually dropped, I'd wind up at the home of some kin.

The tradition in this area was to guess who was behind the mask. If they couldn't guess and had to give up, you got the treat. The trick was being disguised well enough as to not be known.

But really, how could anyone not know who I was, wearing the same costume, year after year—especially since it was mostly grandparents, uncles, and aunts who were doing the guessing? If they had played it straight, I would have come home five straight years sweaty and angry with an empty candy sack. But they didn't play it straight.

I remember going to the home of one particular aunt and uncle. They were typically the first stop on the trick-or-treat circuit, so that the visit could be made before they were both too inebriated. The lane leading to their door went up a slope my uncle paved with uncrushed slate he dug from an abandoned quarry. It would be slippery, especially when wet, and walking up it in the dark had you worn out before you knocked on the door—especially if you were a seven-year-old kid whose body was barely able to maintain itself against repeated infections.

My aunt always answered the door into their tiny kitchen and called for my uncle, and he would put down his beer and come to see who it was. They would get right up in my mask and look at my eyes as if they were struggling to figure out who was inside the glow-in-the-dark skeleton. My aunt would theatrically declare that she could not identify this little trick-or-treater—Whoever could it be? Eventually she would surrender the game, and I would be happy to remove my suffocating skull

face, take a breath of the cigarette smoke-filled air.

The routine played out another half dozen or so times on Halloween night, my candy sack growing happily heavier. Each time, the relatives would act like they had not seen the skeleton the previous two or three years, had not seen the black beanie or the too-small child within. And each time I left feeling oddly guilty, a small, sickly fraud in a glow-in-the-dark disguise.

Only when I was much older did I come to see a greater significance of that silly charade. I was learning an invaluable lesson from my rural, blue-collar relatives, an age-old strategy of lower-middle-class folks: dissembling is often the only way of getting what you need or want from those who have it.

Brand Eaton
Mechanicsburg, PA

Four years ago, I lost all my hair. I had been fighting it for a few years. All treatment proved useless. Then suddenly it all disappeared. Picture a bowling ball with wiry steel wool-looking strands around the nape. I have no eyebrows or eyelashes. Legs and armpits? No need to shave.

The doctor diagnosed me with alopecia areata, an autoimmune condition with no cure. Otherwise, I am perfectly healthy. It stinks anyway. I became obsessed, terrified of looking in the mirror every morning. I considered becoming a total recluse. I thought I would never preach or lead worship again. Who would want to look at me?

I bought a wig at a thrift store. Chemo patients often try them out but soon donate them away. They tend to be hot and itchy. Soon I bought two, then three. Now I own a different wig for most occasions.

When asked to serve as a bridge pastor for a four-month term, I was hesitant. If I go in my disguise, will people whisper, wonder, gossip about me? Will I be a distraction from the gospel message? Can a preacher in disguise still be authentic?

I have come to believe the fake hair, eyebrows, makeup, and bold glasses I wear allow me to get past myself, my inhibitions, and my insecurities. I realized this is not much different than what happened when I dressed in liturgical alb and clerics. They

too are a form of disguise. They allowed me to forget about style or runs in my stockings. They allowed me to be free to pastor and free to give the gospel all of my energy.

So, I'll keep my disguise and also keep my motto for preaching: no pride, no shame.

Deborah Rahn Clemens

Dingmans Ferry, PA