

Carl's Conundrum: Hair, Masks, and Connection

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone... 1 Tim 2.1

When I look in the mirror, I see someone surprisingly hairy. I am concerned about the ears, nose, and eyebrows, and the white fuzz that covers the back of my neck like moss on an old tree. I normally visit a trusted individual to clip the mess into submission but now there is this nuisance pandemic. After six weeks of lockdown I went online and ordered a do-it-yourself barber kit. It sits, unused, beside me. I summon the spirit of my barber and she laughs. I pick up the machine with shiny blades and many attachments. I put it down again.

Jean, who has spent a good part of her life in Africa, helping women have babies more safely, writes, "I'll never forget when one of my Ugandan friends told me that she would much rather go to bed hungry and know that she had something nice to wear in the morning than to eat and have nothing attractive to wear the next day."¹ To be attractive is more important than food.

It must be the first time in history that people are demonstrating at Queen's Park for haircuts. They may become sick and die two weeks later, but at least they will look attractive at their funerals.

This tonsorial fast is in the service of protecting the herd. It makes people mad, who can't see beyond their mirrors, or who don't believe what they can't see. But that's nothing compared with the fury that comes from a request to cover up the face.

Julie makes face masks and has donated over 2000.² She gave me two – "one for your wife". Mine is tan with lions. Marg's is royal purple. Even the N95 can't keep the virus from entering your body but any mask slows it down. Infection requires a certain number of virus particles in a

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/jean.c.froese>

² <https://www.facebook.com/julette.carpenter>

certain amount of time, and depends on many things, including your health, how close you are to an infected person, for how long, whether you wash your hands and whether you put any barriers between the two of you. Homemade masks are helpful. They protect others from your germs. They're a sign of respect. Masks are particularly important in large urban centres, where social distancing is difficult. The idea is not exactly catching on.

I tried wearing mine, found it difficult to breathe, and my glasses fogged up. There is an urban myth that masks will deprive you of oxygen. It's not true. But it feels like it. Masks take getting used to. But it's more than that. I don't see many people wearing masks. Maybe they had the same initial reaction, and thought they couldn't breathe. Maybe they think masks look silly. I've heard some say that masks are a sign of fear. And people are becoming angry about being told to wear masks in stores down south.

It's not a trivial thing to wear a mask. It's inherently threatening. You can't see my face. As I approach you I am looking anxiously at your covered face to see if you will accept me, and I can't tell. You are looking to see whether I come in peace, and you don't know. Faces share information. They help us determine safety. They help us connect. Masks interfere. Wearing a mask is risky. It takes courage.

Masks and messy hair point to our shared community values. We want to protect one another from an invisible enemy. We heed the advice of the wise who tell us what we can do to protect ourselves. It's unusual and counterintuitive: we save ourselves by separating from one another. We know it's a good thing.

But covering up and isolating is painful. When you look at yourself in the mirror and sigh, look at another masked person and feel anxious, or are asked to wear a mask, and feel annoyed, think of the shared values. Transcend facial connection to save lives. Think of higher things. And offer prayer for each other, so that we can stay connected, until we can meet again, face to face. And hopefully, with less hair.