

“What’s In Your Closet: Naming and Claiming Your Secret Self”
Alex (Judith Alexandra) Miller
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When I was newly out as a lesbian I said one night to my first girlfriend: “Oh! I feel like running through the streets with banners!” Ever the realist, she intoned: “You might start by introducing me to your friends.”

Lesson taken: tell the truth in all the little occasions of ordinary life; day by common day, be yourself. In the words of Robert Linssen:

*Let us be simple and true in our gestures, in our words,
and simple and true in our minds. Above all, let us be
ourselves.*

But is that a *single* self? Or does each of us carry in a composite, an array of true selves. At some point you—or someone else—or life itself perhaps—chose *which* you is going to answer role call most days of your life.

In Greek theater the “Persona” was a mask worn by actors to indicate the role they played. In Jungian psychology it refers to the “character” that is *our public face*, the self we present to the world when our name is called. The Persona is a convenience in that it permits us to have social interaction that is sufficiently personal, while at the same time keeping private what is appropriately private. Most of our associations with other people don’t benefit from—still less do they require—a detailed, complex knowledge of who we are. I’m sure we’ve all been embarrassed from time to time by somebody’ else’s “TMI.”

Like masks, our public identities are largely formulaic, often based on our role(s) in society. The personal details that we choose to add to the formula reveal only what we want others to see of us—often our own ideal for ourselves.

*“In a certain sense all this is real,” Jung says, “yet in
relation to the essential individuality of the person
concerned, it is only a secondary reality”*

Now, I’m not talking about a mask in the sense of a “false face.” No, rather than a deception to *hide* behind, I’m talking about a mask that reveals and gives expression to the WHOM who stands before us. Anthropologically, in *many* cultures both primitive and sophisticated, the mask stands as a true representation of the self, or perhaps more

importantly, the *nature* of the self. One's mask was to be treated with the same respect owed to one's *person*—hence the term "persona."

Again, the important thing to remember about the persona is, that its *reality* is *partial*—it's who we are, but it's only a *part* of who we are. And this implies that there are all kinds of other characters waiting in the wings of our personal stages, each with its own "face."

At my "clothing ceremony," (the ritual donning of the nun's robe and veil) the Dominican Friar presiding quipped: " Did you ever notice? Whenever mother church asks us to do something really hard, she gives us new clothes!" And even a new name, he may have added. I for my part love all the rituals that we humans have created to honor the fact that an individual can reach down into himself and find such *NEWNESS* that he seems to be a different person.

But with the clothes again, this is the same principle at work in our society when we give uniforms to judges and police officers and firefighters and train conductors and bell hops. This way, instead of just facemasks, we use a full set of clothing, a *costume* if you will, to signal who's who and what her business is here.

What Jung wants us to remember is that the Persona can become less a convenience and more a *trap*—if we identify so much with our public face that the deeper aspects of the real self are neglected—or worse, forgotten altogether.

Friday night I saw for the first time an episode of the TV drama, "Grey's Anatomy." (Being newly single can take you to some straaange places!) Anyway, on the show, a gifted young surgeon has sustained some injury to his hands and fears that his slow rehabilitation will never be complete. Anguished, he holds up his strong, beautiful fingers to his lover and insists, "These are who I **am**."

Meanwhile, in another area of the hospital, the wife of a man whose face has been severely burned, is persistent, even quietly desperate, to explain to the doctors that her husband's face **must** be fixed. Over and above any consideration for his basic survival and the care this required in the moment, again and again she enjoins, "*You have to fix his **face**—he's a salesman. It's a **good** face—he's a salesman.*"

Like the psychological persona, another of Carl Jung's significant contributions to psychological thought in his time was his perception that mental or psychological development does not end with childhood,

but is ongoing throughout the lifespan. We take that for granted now, but in his time it was a novel perspective. He did illuminate, however, a notable difference between child development and adult development. While child development is about differentiation—learning to distinguish one thing from another—adult growth has to do with integration, finding the connections between things, seeing how things fit together, how they interact, how they contribute to a whole. Jung started with the belief that a human being *is* inwardly whole, but saw that most of us have lost touch with important parts of ourselves. The developmental task he assigns to adults is to reach those lost or neglected parts of ourselves and reintegrate them. According to Jung, this integration is the goal of life. He called it INDIVIDUATION: *the process of coming to know all the parts of oneself, and learning to give them harmonious expression.* A twist perhaps on Oscar Wilde's wry observation:

*“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.
Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”*

Jung was at pains to convince us that we may even go beyond a simple integration of what is complementary; we may achieve a level of existence where even opposites are reconciled, as they are transcended. Such was the vision perhaps of the mystic Juliana of Norwich when she “reported”:

*“All will be well and all will be well, and all manner of
thing will be well.”*

This is your life, then: an ongoing process of growing up in all ways, even to the perfect fullness of the true Self.

Another mystic, the German Dominican Meister Eckhart, tells us:

*“We know so many things, but we don't know ourselves!
A human being has so many skins inside, covering the
depths of the heart. Why, [as many as] thirty or forty
skins or hides [can] cover the soul, [each] as thick and
hard as [that of] an ox or a bear.”*

While Jung had this idea that each individual has a specific nature and a calling suited to it, I want to extend that—to suggest that even behind every one of our masks, beneath each layer of thirty or forty skins, there may be a specific nature and a calling; and I suggest that it's possible to recognize and fulfill many of them. If you leave too much of yourself undone, you're going to miss out on a lot of what can

make you feel really “alive and well.” And if you’re *not* feeling so well—or even barely alive—it may be a symptom of a lie you’re telling yourself about yourself. That’s what Jung calls neurotic—“*When you are not quite at one with yourself. . . .*”

Telling the truth of yourself—first to you and then to others—is what “coming out” is. I wish I could hand out to everyone here today a T-Shirt that I saw advertised online. It read: “*Find out who you are and do it on purpose.*”

The expression, “in the closet” can mean living in shadow, behind closed doors where light cannot reach. *Shadow* is the name Jung gave to the part of personality that is largely unseen, and unknown to us. It is in “darkness” simply because it is most deeply unconscious. *We* are “in the dark” about it.

This may include things about yourself that you’re not proud of, qualities you deny or disown—or secretly prefer to “blame” on someone else; but it also includes positive characteristics that are simply unrecognized or underdeveloped. So the Shadow is also the repository of abilities, creative instincts, and valuable qualities that lie hidden, waiting to be found and brought to light. August Wilson gives these wonderful words to one of his characters:

*“Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish [the darkness] with illumination and **forgiveness**. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing.”*

How can you find what is real and true of you? There may be a hundred signals of that: yearnings, fantasies, fascinations and “hobbies”; childhood dreams and grown-up fears; ambitions that you project onto others—often your children or your life partner. You may find clues in people you envy and people you disapprove of; in what you try to escape from and what you imagine to flee to.

Pay close attention to these things and others like them; attend with all your senses and inner senses; read the letters you write to yourself in dreams while sleeping, and heed the messages of your creative imagination while awake—perhaps in meditation or visualization or simple daydreams. “Keep on building those castles in the sky,” as the old popular song says. By means like these you will find yourself—and your self. . . and your self. . . and your self.

But what will you **do** with what you discover? There's the heart of the quest. There's an old hymn that sounds to me like the song of someone who has taken up this challenge — a hero's song:

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

How much will you dare in order to "out" one or more of your hidden characters?

Are you a clown and nobody knows it because you've always been too "dignified"? Bust out! *I did.*

Are you a romantic to rival even Lord Byron himself—but you've always considered it important to be reasonable and sober?
Fuhgettaboudit! Wear pink, swoon, sigh.

Are you a smiling "softie" who considers "being nice" a prime virtue? (Thanks to your mother, probably) Bitch **out**—feel the power!

But uh-oh—here's a biggie: you're modest and demure and always seen as a perfect lady. Go *on*, girrrl! Let that red dress hoochie-mama outta there!

I tease you with exaggerations, but you get the idea. What's good is sometimes questionable, and what's wrong is sometimes just right. Integrate. Transcend. Get up from there, open the door, and come **out!**

SONG: There's a song in my heart, it's been singing all my life.
 There's a voice in my body that is true.
 There is so much wisdom inside of me,
 Gonna open up and let it come into the light,
 Gonna open up and let it through.