

Unmasking ourselves to face each other



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

We all know we live in controversial times. After all, “controversy” means “disagreement, typically when prolonged, public, and heated.” The word controversy comes from Latin, “turn against.” We live in a time when turning against each other is common and commonly accepted by some people. But why does disagreement have to be “heated” and why do we feel we have to “turn against” the people we disagree with?

Human nature may be one explanation, yet isn't it also our nature to make peace and not turn away or turn against others? “Turn the other cheek” is a well-

known phrase, which is very different from turning against another.

What causes me to face some of these issues is how much the human face is so controversial right now. To mask or not to mask? Though some make this about individual freedom vs. public health, I think that argument covers a deeper truth. The controversy seems to be drawing out – exposing – something about our nature, more than we realize or care to admit.

Carol and I were hiking up Mount Pisgah on a beautiful summer afternoon. Gorgeous wildflowers greeted us along with singing birds, cool, clear streams, old gnarled trees and a rocky, root-laced trail ascending to the peak. Coming from professions where the well-being of others takes precedence, we take the directions of health professionals quite seriously. So, in this time of pandemic, we

wear masks when near others, to protect them first, and ourselves too (in particular, Carol's mother turns 89 this year so her health is important to us. I've had some issues with asthma myself). Needless to say, we think about these things when there is a virus spreading.

With this in mind, each time we approached other hikers on the narrow trail, we masked up. In all the hours we were on the mountain, passing 50 other walkers, we always stepped aside, keeping a safe distance, and we were the only ones to don face coverings when encountering others. We were bothered by this experience, troubled by why people were apparently not taking a health crisis seriously.

From the cars at the trailhead we saw that people were coming from many surrounding states to enjoy the Parkway. It's wonderful to see enthusiasm for the

beauty of nature here in Western North Carolina. Yet it made us wonder how so many people from so many places were not recognizing what they were doing. Did they notice we were doing something – a very simple act – for them, not just for us?

All the way back down the twisting trail we were asking ourselves: “What's going on here?” “Do our fellow hikers think that we're scared and overreacting?” “Are they unveiling their political or religious beliefs?” “Are they so anxious to get out after quarantine that they forget we're not out of the pandemic ‘woods’ yet?”

My parents came to mind. They taught my sister and me that empathy matters. Thoughtfulness, courtesy, respect – these were the qualities of char-

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acter that mattered most. Dad said a grace at every meal that stuck with me: "Let us be ever mindful of the needs of others." Life is not just about me. I should think of others, care about them, and do what I can to help them when the need arises. That's ingrained in me. Now, as a secular freethinker, mindful awareness is even more important as a humanistic guideline, the basis of a secular ethics. In

many ways, it just makes sense, whether in a prayer or personal practice.

I'd like to think being mindful of others is a human value, perhaps even an American value. Now, I'm not so sure. This may be a good opportunity to unmask our true nature.

In college I read a book by a psychologist who explained the word "person" comes from the term "persona" or "mask." Webster's describes the origin of person: "from Latin persona: actor's mask, character in a play ... from Greek prospon: face, mask." How much of the "person" we present to others is a mask?

Are there times when wearing a mask can show the kind of person we actually are?

These definitions and questions intrigue me, especially when faced with our current controversies over wearing face coverings. Since we're already wearing masks of personhood, what help can we find in mindful ethics, principles drawn from our faith traditions or our secular reason?

Another definition of "controversy" is "a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views." Sounds more civil, doesn't it? Not turning against

another person, but discussing different viewpoints.

Facing our masks (while masking our faces) could help us discover more trails to hike along with others. Why let personal protective coverings turn us against one another?

Chris Highland is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.