

Who Was That Masked Man?

By Thomas A. McKean – 08/22/08

A few years ago I had a visitor here at the house. She had never been here before and she looked around to see where I lived. Her eyes landed on the bottom of the bookshelf and kind of stayed there.

The whole shelf was lined with hero novels. Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, X-Men, Fantastic Four, Avengers, Justice League, etc. These weren't graphic novels or comic books, they were actual prose.

Recently when I received my medical records from my years in the hospital, I saw there was a lot of a mention of a hero obsession. Living in a fantasy world and such like that. I read through what these doctors wrote about it and I had to laugh because for all of the psychoanalyzing, they never figured it out. They had theories about it but never truly understood.

I can't fault them or blame them for it, though, because I didn't understand it myself until I answered my visitor's unspoken question. She said nothing, but the look in her eyes was obvious: *Why is a forty something year old reading this kind of stuff?*

Before she could voice the question, I answered it for her:

I can relate to wearing a mask.

I had no idea I had even said it until after it was spoken. Then it was like an epiphany and a question I'd had for over 30 years was finally answered. I like the heroes simply because I can relate to wearing a mask.

My father always enjoyed western movies. He wanted me to watch with him sometimes but I never could because I am just not into that kind of thing. The exception is the Lone Ranger. *I love the Lone Ranger.* I have most of the old radio programs in MP3 format. I have seen the TV show and several of the Lone Ranger cartoons over the years. Here, in this one man, is everything that is *good* about humanity. Even today (or perhaps especially today) in a world of wars and a failing economy and rising prices, he brings hope. He shows us there is good among the evil.

I like him also because of the mask.

We in America have long ago gotten into the habit of criticizing what we don't understand. We tend to be skeptical of anything that is beyond our own immediate experiences.

Those with autism or asperger's walk this earth with a sideways view (sometimes a *delightful* sideways view) of reality. The behaviors and actions are based upon a dysfunction, or perhaps in some cases a heightened function, of the senses.

They do things we do not understand.

Years ago I was in Fox Lake, IL., and I watched as Warren "jiggled" a piece of string in front of his eyes for hours. Literally hours. *What is going on inside his head?* I wondered. I never found an answer.

This behavior, which was quite normal for Warren, would be looked down upon by others who just don't get it. (And I am sure I am preaching to the choir when I say there are many out there who *just - don't - get it.*) Warren was forced to conform to the unwritten standards of society. When he was out in public, no jiggling was allowed. Of course Warren wasn't happy about this.

I don't blame him. I wouldn't be happy about it, either. For all of the Warrens out there, this world is a profoundly confusing place. Is it any wonder he wanted to hide behind a world he created? It was the only thing that made sense to him.

The higher functioning of those with autism have an extra challenge most people do not consider. They have the challenge of not being who they are, but instead being who the rest of us feel they should be. They sacrifice their very selves, just to fit into a mold of society that was never made for them to begin with.

They must learn to suppress certain behaviors while emulating others. I can tell you from personal experience – this is not easy.

Parents rejoice when their children move forward, yet many times this forward moving is emulation. Pretending to be normal.

They wear a mask.

They do it not because they want to, not because they understand what they are doing, but only and simply because it must be done.

What they do is very difficult, would be difficult for anyone, autistic or otherwise, and thus it should be acknowledged and rewarded.