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Smile 4/2020

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As the morning fog burns off giving way to the Sun, the Alemany Farmers Market is filled with masked strangers. In a not so distant past, San Franciscans would revel in the rarity of a balmy spring morning. Today, people hide behind their masks, bandanas, scarves, face shields, even goggles. Clad in new textile skins no one stands out in a crowd anymore. No face is too beautiful or too plain. A trick of nature – and suddenly the world's in niqabs, concealed, six feet apart. There's no idle chatting with a stranger. No smiling.

I was at first resistant to these coverings. At the start of this pandemic, we were told that masks don't work. They signaled greater fear in our unsettling world. They were a blunt reminder of our fallibility as humans, of our interconnection that refused to acquiesce with individual freedoms and instead made our lives hinge on each other's actions. Still, the masks appeared. First on the faces of the elderly, then, under an ordinance, they quickly evolved into something organic – a placeholder for our exterior. We were told to wear them, but now for a different reason: not protect ourselves as much as to protect the others from ourselves.

Smiling is a powerful device in my anti-depression toolkit. After two decades of living with depression, I've acquired many tools. Smiling is the simplest, and it works. When I slump into that sudden desolation in which my life seems to lack purpose, I remind myself to smile. At first, these smiles are forced, but if I keep at it, they become more and more genuine. There are studies that show that smiling can actually fool your brain into feeling happier. I can tell you that from my experience.

About twelve years ago, I was crossing Ventura Boulevard in Sherman Oaks when an SUV slid to a screeching stop. From the driver seat, a woman about my age glared at me – another obstacle in her hurried commute to something very important. If she would have stepped on the brakes a second later, she would have killed me.

During that time I was working my way out of a long depression so what happened next was completely unexpected. Instead of rage that would have been my likely emotion in such a situation, I looked into her eyes and smiled. And she smiled back: a genuine smile. That instant, she felt familiar, as if she was my kin, and I think (or hope) she felt it too. The day I almost got run over my depression lifted.

Today we are concealed by masks and isolation. How will we connect to one another in this new shielded world? Strangers have become more strange. Their exhalations – a possible source of pestilential thorny spheres. We are becoming more depressed, devoid of some important tools for our recovery. If and when there will come a day when we no

longer live in fear of this disease, will masks still be the norm? Will there be strangers smiling at each other the way we did once, when we took it for granted? When we didn't do it enough?

The purpose of a mask is to protect the other. It'll only work if we can stop barreling through our lives like an SUV through a stop sign and recognize each other's humanness. That cognizance can push us into our better selves. In our current reality, even the mask became a symbol of division in our country. "It must be terrible for you to live in such fear," grumbles my 86 year-old father, as I tell him to take out and put on his mask.

But he is wrong. I don't live in fear. I simply want this virus to abate, to limit the possibility of becoming a death sentence for someone, and yes – I care about myself too. I believe in science and in logic and in love. I believe in the freedom of speech and the power of protest, but I also respect ordinances that can save lives. To me, my mask has become to me a symbol of pride. An indication that "I care about you and I care about myself." A symbol of being in this together. And that is my new smile.

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