

The Man in the Cloth Mask: Tales and Reflections

by [Jeff Plude](#) (October 2020)



Four People, Alex Katz, 1953–54

I stopped my car just past the open chainlink gate of the town dump and put on my drab olive cloth mask. I've seen some people wearing their masks even when they're riding in their vehicles, but I'm not one of them.

All masked up, I pulled up to the small shed and paid the guy behind the sliding plexiglass window. There's a sign on it: "NO MASK. NO SERVICE." One time I forgot to put my mask on before I pulled up to the window, but the guy who collects the money said nothing about it. Then I hung a right, drove past the recycling dumpsters, and took a sharp left up the hill.

Just before I reached the garbage receptacle at the top, I decided to take my mask off. There usually aren't many people here on a Thursday late afternoon, though it slipped my mind that it's the last day the dump is open before Labor Day weekend so it's a little busier than usual. And the mask tends to fog up my glasses, even when I'm not lugging a full 30-gallon garbage bag. And it's hot, the last week of summer proper in upstate New York. As I'm taking the mask off, one of the thin elastic bands gets stuck on the left frame arm of my glasses and half pulls them off my face. This happens more than I'd like it to.

Minor annoyances in and of themselves, perhaps. But like garbage left to mount up, they eventually overwhelm your patience and energy like a foul stench does your nose and stomach.

I pulled up to the garbage receptacle. There were two vehicles already there—a pickup truck backed in, front and center, and a silver Kia SUV parked next to it, also backed in but cockeyed a little, at an angle, which made it hard for another vehicle to pull up to the right of it. There was no room on the left, since it's a narrow road up to the top of the small hill.

So I pulled in to the right, straight in, front end forward. I only had one bag, after all, and I'm not much on backing in anywhere, even now when I have a pretty heavy load to lift. The silver Kia SUV still had room to pull forward and out without even turning the steering wheel. Its driver side was next to mine.

As I got out of my car the Kia driver was walking back to his car after having thrown whatever garbage he had into the receptacle. There's a large rectangular container of corrugated metal with open ends you have to walk through to the garbage receptacle, 15 to 20 feet long, and he's at the front edge of it. He had a white mask on, maybe an N95. So I was walking by him, not that close to him at all, at least a few feet away, and as I went by him he stopped, looked at me, and said: "No mask?"

I stopped, turned around—I'm near the front edge of the metal container—and just looked at him. He was shortish and fat, probably around seventy, a decade or more older than me perhaps.

Finally after a few moments I asked him a question of my own: "Are you one of Cuomo's stormtroopers?"

That's what I shouldn't have done. I let him get to me.

But some of us are a little sick right now, not from the coronavirus but of our governor's dictatorial behavior. Last time I checked, he's requiring Americans from two-thirds of the states in the *United States of America*—a couple of hundred million of fellow citizens, in other words—who set foot in New York State for more than half a day to quarantine themselves for two weeks! In effect he's unilaterally banned them from the state. He also has a "multiple-agency task force" of investigators that skulk around bars to find unmasked bartenders . . . and people drinking beer but not eating food ... and shooting pool! The horror!

When I said "stormtroopers," it was hyperbole of course, said in haste and frustration. *Mea culpa*.

"Oh, you're one of those!" the mask enforcer erupted, as I lugged my big dark green bag of garbage through the metal container and heaved it over the half wall into the large receptacle below.

One of the other two guys unloading garbage from their pickup snickered. (One of them was a younger guy and he had a mask on. I'm not sure if the other guy, who was older, had one on.)

The self-appointed mask enforcer was now in his car, and as I was about to get into my Toyota Corolla I was burning. Again I opened my mouth and shouldn't have: "Why don't you go vote for Uncle Joe?" I asked rhetorically. "You've got about the same mentality."

"Uncle Joe," of course, is Joe Biden (because of his penchant for gaffes and which I usually use only privately). Just the week before, Biden had said in his presidential nomination speech at the Democratic National Convention that if elected he would (if he could) make masks mandatory nationwide, presumably indefinitely. Perhaps the 2020 election is a sort of referendum on the mask, which is the prime symbol to me of Big Governor.

And that was it. The mask enforcer took off fast and raced down the hill.

I drove down the hill myself over to the dumpsters where the recycling is collected. I drove by a pickup truck with an older man and woman in it, and they did not have masks on either. As I opened my back passenger door to take out the two recycling bins, I could see through the gap between the dumpsters that the silver Kia SUV was going fast on the far side of the shed on the way out but then wheeled around and pulled up to the plexiglass window.

So the mask enforcer was reporting me.

I emptied my recycling, which took all of a couple of minutes. As I walked to the front of the dumpsters to see the signs that said which one was for the cardboard and paper and which one was for the plastic and cans and bottles, I was now facing the entrance with a clear view of the shed. By this time the silver Kia SUV was pulling away from it and swung around on the far side of the shed again. He was finally leaving after having done his duty and snitched on me.

But just before he drove out of the open chainlink gate he slowed down, now a safe distance away from me, rolled his window down, and yelled to me: "Hey ass-!" and stuck his septuagenarian arm high into the air out of his window with his middle finger straight up.

I said nothing this time, already regretting my error. I am an evangelical Christian. It was not my finest minute (or two).

My wife and I only recently started going to church services again since the Big Lockdown.

Our church at first "met" online. We tried to watch a live stream of the service once but it just made things worse, in our opinion, highlighting the fact that we weren't there to hear each other sing, to encourage and talk to each other, even to hug and shake hands and smile and all those things we did in the old world a little more than a few months ago.

Then our church started actually meeting in-person again. But a second service was added to the usual one and we now had to "register," since the seats had to be spread six feet apart between families and there wasn't enough room to accommodate all two hundred and fifty or so congregants at one time. And everyone had to wear masks too. My wife and I didn't

want to register, thinking there was something not quite right about doing that, needing admission like to some worldly event. All are free to come to Christ to worship him, to hear his Word, and to fellowship with each other. And how can you sing with a mask on? Why did we even need one if we were seated six feet apart? You can take your mask off in a restaurant while you're seated. Why not in church? Unless Governor Cuomo isn't merely trying to "flatten the curve," but to flatten something much bigger than the state, something much bigger than the Roman Empire even, something without physical weapons but with potent spiritual ones—omnipotent even.

If that weren't enough, church emails about upcoming sermon topics now end with a big logo of a mask and gently chide: "PLEASE LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AND WEAR YOUR MASK." (It seems like everywhere I turn I see slogans and commands to wear a mask. My favorite was on a portable LED sign and had a little subversive wit to it: "WEAR THE DAMN MASK!")

So our church's take on all this is exactly what the world in general is saying. A world that, as Christians we're supposed to be "in" but not "of."

I attribute this to our church's new email format, courtesy of Mailchimp, the popular email marketing service and platform. We have a new pastor, who is not quite thirty years old and recently out of seminary. Our former pastor, who led our church for twenty-five years, long before my wife and I started attending, was said to be a conspiracy theorist (or, as I prefer, factualist). Just as Revelation clearly lays out.

With all due respect to whoever at our church chose this logo and agrees with its message, I think that wearing a mask has little if anything to do with loving your neighbor. I suspect it has more to do with ravening wolves in sheep's clothing, as Jesus so trenchantly put it, at least the people decreeing it ex cathedra.

Finally, after five months away, my wife and I returned to church in person to worship our Lord. But, as I said, we were supposed to wear our masks while singing! Which is impossible, of course. At a Catholic funeral service recently a priest acknowledged as much to the mourners, advising us to hum into our masks, which I think is absurd and pathetic.

At our church we were trying to sing the song "Raise a Hallelujah." The three-piece ensemble—an acoustic guitar, an electric piano, and a singer—led us unmasked from the stage. They all sang into their mics:

Sing a little louder (In the presence of my enemies)
Sing a little louder (Louder than the unbelief)
Sing a little louder (My weapon is a melody)

But your voice can't be much of a weapon when it's muffled. So I pulled my mask down below my lips so that I could clearly sing.

I looked around at the hundred or so of my brothers and sisters in Christ; a few others—not many—were doing the same as I was. But most sang into their masks dutifully, to the governor at least, but wrongly, I believe, to the Governor of All Things. If you can call that even singing.

After the service we all streamed out the back doors—we weren't allowed to go out the front doors as usual—into the parking lot. The sun was high in the sky. Some of us unmasked, shook hands, chatted.

The judge, who was instructing us twenty-three grand jurors about our duties and rights, finally had had enough. He pulled his pitch black mask down off his mouth. "Excuse me folks," he apologized. "It won't stay on."

Every Tuesday for five weeks we all reported for jury

duty. We weren't allowed to meet in the courtroom upstairs like a regular grand jury, but we were relegated to the jury assembly room on the first floor, where jurors are chosen from a pool of those summoned.

Usually filled with chairs, the room now had only twenty or so chairs spaced six feet apart and a few others for the witnesses and at tables for the foreman and secretary and for the court reporter.

One morning an older juror who was bald with white hair on the sides was pacing around. He liked to talk, liked to ask the witnesses questions—he even argued a little with one of the assistant district attorneys after one of the cases. It was about 9:20 a.m. and there were only a few of us there. We all had masks on; we were all required to wear masks as soon as we entered the building. He went up to an older woman with long gray hair who was sitting not far from me (she also liked to ask questions) and said: “Do you know where everyone is?”

She jumped out of her seat! I was a little surprised and impressed—I'm not sure I could react that fast, and I'm still in pretty good shape (a former wrestler). “You're supposed to stay six feet away,” she shot back. She backed up a few feet, like he had a knife.

He was taken aback. “I'm sorry. I didn't think of that.” He paused: “I know you probably don't know the answer to this,” he continued, trying to recover, “but shouldn't the room be full?”

We heard a number of cases, perhaps a dozen or more. If you can call it hearing. It was hard for me to hear some of the witnesses testify through their masks, and it was clearly hard for many of them to speak. Except for some of them who work in law enforcement, they were not used to speaking in an official public venue and projecting their voices the way the ADAs were.

Of course it was also hard to see their faces except their eyes, which seemed to float disembodied above their necks. Now, instead of being fooled by metaphoric masks, we have to deal with the real kind. As one high school boy reportedly said in a virtual meeting before returning to school, we all look like terrorists. The group, according to the educator who told me this, was not amused.

It had been six months since I'd been *inside* the public library. But we had to drive to a branch that is twice the distance from the one we usually go to. At our regular branch patrons are only allowed to go inside for three hours in the morning on weekdays. Otherwise you have to reserve a book online or on the phone ahead of time and wait in a line of cars to pull up to one of five spaces, call the library number, and wait for one of the masked library workers to bring the reserved items out to you in a paper shopping bag.

This same branch, however, has some books outside you can browse—with your mask on. And not only with a mask on, but a *real* mask: A sign specified that no “neck gaiters” or bandannas were allowed. I wonder what the librarians would say if you wore one of those full-face rubber masks you see at Halloween, say one of Dr. Fauci? One of the books I saw was titled *The Man in the Iron Mask*. For some reason *The Man in the Cloth Mask* just doesn't have the same ring to it.

But this afternoon my wife and I were at the less paranoid branch. Still, only a half hour of browsing is allowed. I had five books to check out when our time was up. All masked up I walked to the counter and said to the librarian behind it a hearty “Hello.” So I thought.

“What?” she said.

“I said hello.”

“Oh, hello . . . I just don’t hear anything through the mask. I just don’t. I can guess.”

After five months my wife and I finally visited our favorite restaurant-brewpub. I asked the young waitress how she was doing wearing the mask. She said it was especially hard because she had asthma. She had to take breaks.

Back at the restaurant-pub a month later, we were sitting at a table in sight of the big-screen TV up over the empty bar, relaxing and sipping a craft beer and eating. All without masks, of course, except for the trips to the bathroom. A local TV news reporter was on location and she was all masked up, though there wasn’t another soul in sight and with presumably only the cameraman nearby.

At one point a graphic flashed on the screen: New York state’s coronavirus infection rate was 0.98 percent.

According to Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, about 200,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus (and that data is anything but clear cut, I think, given the current autocratic atmosphere); even so the university reports that the mortality rate is under 3 percent. What’s more, some doctors have maintained that masks do little if anything to prevent infection (I recall one who is an experienced physician and graduate of Yale medical school). Probably many other doctors are understandably wary of saying what they really think or know about the futility of masks, especially the nonsurgical face coverings that are ubiquitous. They fear getting digitally torn to pieces and having their careers if not their lives canceled by the social media vigilantes and their powerful puppeteers.

Another young waitress, a college student studying to be a social worker, told us that she’s grateful to be back to work but that every day it seems like they’re required to do

something else to stay out of the clutches of Governor Cuomo's "multiple-agency task force." She said a popular local pub was shut down by the state that weekend, and the owner made a statement complaining that, basically, there was no due process. You are guilty because the governor and his "task force" said you are.

She said that sometimes after her workday is over and she takes her mask off she still feels like she has it on.

It reminds me of an old *Twilight Zone* episode I saw when I was a kid called "The Masks": A rich old man requests that his daughter and her husband and their two children to join him as he lies on his deathbed and to put on masks made by an old Cajun (it's Mardi Gras) that portray their most prominent ugly trait. They must keep them on until midnight in order to receive their inheritances. When he finally takes his last breath and they unmask, they find, to their horror, that their face is now frozen in the expression of the mask!

If that were to happen to us with our masks, I suppose our faces would be blank.

Of course, as a friend of mine said months ago, this all feels like a science-fiction movie.

This was especially brought home to me during a recent day-trip to Manchester, Vermont, a quaint New England village my wife and I have visited for many years. It was a mild sunny Saturday afternoon as we strolled down the sidewalk into the center of town. A moderate number of people were out and about; we saw many out-of-state license plates; one of the vehicles parked along the curb was a Rolls Royce.

As we moseyed in the other direction past the Orvis megastore, the sidewalk became slabs of off-white, subtly streaked marble embedded flush in the grass. Even though we

were outside, we were among the very few not wearing masks. People stared at us. As we passed by, several, including one young couple, moved off the marble walkway a few feet away from us into the grass. One older gent, with a hiker's staff and shorts, cap, backpack, and mask, stopped completely, moved into the grass, turned his back to us, and waited till we were no longer a so-called threat.

Nancy Pelosi was recently captured on video unmasked while getting her hair done at a salon in San Francisco. She sort of denied it, claiming she was "set up." A century ago during the Spanish flu pandemic the mayor of San Francisco was likewise caught in a photo at a boxing match without his mask on. After an outcry he duly fined himself.

Back then, in fact, San Francisco was a veritable epicenter of mask resistance. When city residents were ordered to wear masks in public in late October 1918, it was framed as being patriotic by protecting American soldiers on their way to fight in World War I. A violator could ultimately be fined or jailed. By late November the war had ended, the virus had subsided, and the Bay Area ditched its masks for good.

Or so they thought. In January 1919 the flu came back. The city quickly reinstated the mask mandate. But enough was enough: the Anti-Mask League was quickly formed, and several thousand residents, including physicians and even a member of the board of supervisors, attended a meeting. Just like today, the debate revolved around questions about scientific data and civil liberties. But that's where the similarities end. A week later, by February 1, 1919, the mask mandate was rescinded.

Those were the days! It's hard to imagine now that there ever was such a time.

On my next regular visit to the dump, it was just a regular old Thursday late afternoon. I pulled up to the plexiglass window with my drab olive cloth mask on. The same guy in the shed took my money and said thanks and I pulled forward. I was relieved. I didn't know what to expect from the mask enforcer's complaint about me.

I drove up the hill and pulled in. There was one other car in front of me. The guy got out of his car, a white Volkswagen, before I did. He was about the same age as the mask enforcer. He eyed me warily as I lifted my garbage out of the trunk. He was unmasked. I was too.

One day soon I hope to put that scrap of drab olive cloth in the big dark green bag where it belongs—in the garbage.

In short, my view is that if you want to wear a mask, by all means wear one wherever you want—in your own house if you want to. But for the rest of us, I think a modest dose of caution, like washing your hands regularly, is enough. For me the best “mask” of all, as a believer, is persistent and sincere prayer to the Great Physician.

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