

Bringing Back Sanity

On a recent trip to Jamestown, Colonial Williamsburg, and Yorktown, I at one point met with two female docents who would lead me on a tour. (I am being deliberately vague here, as I don't want anyone to get reprimanded.) At that meeting beside the museum's ticket desk, I asked both women if we could all remove our masks for a few seconds so that I could see the faces of my guides. Later one of the women wrote me an email thanking me for "the face reveal."

My expedition to Virginia's Historic Triangle brought many delights, taught me much I didn't know about our country, and reignited the embers of my patriotism, but one recurrent image brought an almost hourly touch of gloom to my three-day stay: the sight of my fellow citizens in masks, particularly those who wore their face coverings in circumstances where they had as much chance of catching coronavirus as of being struck by lightning on a sunny day.

Here I will not argue the efficacy of masks. Like so much of the information surrounding the coronavirus – the number of deaths and infections, the necessity for our closure of schools and the shutting down of the economy – our experts have corrupted the data. We'll never really know how effective the masks were for our physical health.

But most of us would surely agree that wearing masks damages us psychologically. Masks conceal our personalities. They make it harder to hear those around us – several times I had difficulty understanding the docents as they explained the historic figures and buildings of colonial life – and often masks make it impossible to read the emotions of others. Whether we know it or not, they separate us from our fellow human beings, acting as barriers and increasing our sense of isolation.

With flu season now on the horizon and with governors – like the one we have here in Virginia – seemingly intent on forcing us to wear masks in perpetuum, we may eventually need a “take off the masks” revolution. Until that day arrives, however, some of you who insist on wearing masks beyond the regulations in place can help the rest of us maintain our mental health by taking off those masks whenever you can.

Here are just a few of my Williamsburg examples when mask wearers depressed me. Note that nearly all these examples involve people under thirty years old, the age group least susceptible to death or even illness from the coronavirus.

The man in his twenties who came outside my hotel to walk his dog at 6:30 in the morning. Please, young man, take off the mask.

The students near the College of William and Mary who were running alone in the open air wearing masks. Jogging while covering your mouth and nose is unhealthy, and you look...well, frankly you look ridiculous. Please take off the masks.

To all those students sitting eight feet apart in the Starbucks in the College of William and Mary Bookstore who wore masks between sips of coffee. Please take off the masks.

The masked pre-teen girl who climbed into the car in the empty hotel parking lot with her unmasked mom. Please, kid, do yourself and my eyeballs a favor, and take off the mask.

The masked preschooler walking hand in hand on the Duke of Gloucester Street with her unmasked father. Please, little girl, take off the mask.

And to those docents and employees of Williamsburg who are working outdoors with a rope separating you from the tourists, especially the obese man in colonial dress near the Governor's Palace who was sweating profusely in the heat and having difficulty breathing, please please please ask permission from

your superiors to take off the masks.

For six months now, many of us from around the country have walked into stores, offices, and other public spaces looking like desperadoes or surgeons. Never before in the history of our country, never before in the history of the world, have so many human beings shambled about wearing face coverings that may or may not work.

To see everyone in masks in enclosed public spaces is depressing enough. To see people masked even when the mask is unnecessary and does the wearer more harm than good can sometimes provide a laugh, but more often than not it is one more blow to this observer's spirit.

If you're masked and driving alone in your car with the windows rolled up, if you're masked and walking down an empty sidewalk, if you're masked and playing tennis, please have mercy, take off the mask, and give the rest of us some reassurance that the world hasn't gone entirely mad.

Thank you for not wearing your mask.

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